



SPECIAL REPORT

WHICH BRANDS TO BUY

Which brands should you buy? And which should you avoid? Thanks to the 5,000 participants in PC Pro's annual reliability and service survey, we have the answers across 13 different categories

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Best PC Brand Chillblast

RECOMMENDED ACER, PC SPECIALIST



We've said it many times before, but if you have a good idea of what PC specification you want then it makes sense to buy British. Or to put it another way: "[This is the] second PC I've bought from Chillblast, and I'm still using the first one," wrote Graham Moore. "When I rang for help in ordering the right spec, they put me on to the guy who actually designed the system. You

couldn't do that in PC World!" No surprise, then, that 19 out of 20 Chillblast customers would buy from the company again.

Frankly, though, we were a little surprised to see that Acer produced such a strong result. This is nothing against Acer: it's just that international companies usually fare poorly in the desktop PC section of our Awards, yet this time 96% of Acer's PC buyers would stick with the company. Reading through the comments, it became clear that Acer's space-saving PCs were the

biggest contributor to its success, with Richard Edwards saying he had bought three: "Two are Core i5, one i7, and they are excellent small footprint computers."

Kudos also to PC Specialist, which won its Recommended gong in recognition of its support and the speed of its products. Customers say they arrive quickly too: "Incredibly quick build time, testing and despatch," wrote Matthew Austin. "Less than a week from ordering it was in my hands ready to go."

It's also good to see Asus and Scan pushing the others hard, but Apple, Dell and Lenovo will be disappointed with their showings. It's value for money that drags Apple down – "overpriced and underspec'ed" wrote Richard Prescott – along with only eight in ten people willing to buy again. But not everyone felt that way. "Change from Apple?" wrote Dennis Sare. "You must be joking."



	Customer support	Reliability	Value for money	Speed	Buy again?	Overall
Chillblast	93%	94%	89%	92%	95%	92%
PC Specialist	90%	88%	87%	90%	87%	89%
Acer ¹	86%	92%	88%	85%	96%	89%
Asus ¹	82%	90%	83%	86%	90%	86%
Scan	83%	86%	81%	85%	88%	85%
HP	78%	85%	83%	77%	92%	83%
Apple ¹	81%	83%	63%	81%	79%	78%
Dell	71%	81%	75%	75%	85%	78%
Lenovo	68%	76%	76%	68%	78%	73%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Laptop Brand Asus

RECOMMENDED APPLE, MICROSOFT



Is Asus set to become as strong a brand for laptops as it is for motherboards? Signs are certainly promising. This is the second year in a row it's won our Best Laptop Brand award, showing that last year's breakthrough result was no fluke. "ZenBooks have been



great machines for many years and this UX330UA with an 8th generation Intel CPU is just superb," wrote William Dow.

Apple retains its runner-up medal from last year, but Microsoft has a bigger reason to be cheerful with its first such award. Its gamble on the Surface range appears to be paying off, with stronger scores for performance than any other manufacturer – and it's only a fraction behind Apple for reliability too. "I absolutely love my Surface Pro," said John Clarke. "Everything just works!"

There's good news all round too. Even though Lenovo comes bottom of the table, its scores have improved since last year – it's just that everyone else's have, too. For the first time we can recall, everyone scored 80% overall or higher.

	Customer support	Reliability	Value	Battery life	Performance	Overall
Asus	77%	88%	87%	73%	85%	84%
Apple	87%	90%	64%	85%	84%	83%
Microsoft	81%	89%	68%	78%	90%	83%
Dell	77%	84%	78%	77%	82%	82%
Acer	76%	85%	84%	76%	77%	81%
Toshiba	81%	83%	84%	69%	79%	81%
HP	76%	84%	80%	74%	77%	80%
Lenovo	74%	84%	82%	73%	78%	80%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Tablet Brand Apple

RECOMMENDED HUAWEI, MICROSOFT, SAMSUNG



Just as Apple retains its stranglehold on the PC Pro A List as our top choice for tablets, so it does among our readers. "I bought an iPad Pro and it is brilliant," said Sue Bayliss. "Not normally an Apple fan but this is good."



Apple doesn't have things all its own way. Huawei wins a Recommended award in this category for the first time, Samsung continues its fine form (see p52 for our review of its new Galaxy Tab S4), and Microsoft notably gained a better score than Apple for its choice of accessories (81% to 78%). "Fastest tablet I have ever owned," wrote John Edwards of his Surface tablet, "and probably the fastest computer I have owned."

Judging by the results for Acer and Linx, people tend to regret buying cheaper Android tablets. You're probably better off saving up for a Huawei or Samsung device – or buying an iPad second-hand.

	Battery life	Reliability	Ease of use	Speed	Customer support	Overall
Apple	86%	93%	91%	89%	78%	87%
Huawei ¹	89%	91%	91%	85%	71%	85%
Microsoft	75%	88%	89%	86%	75%	83%
Samsung	83%	88%	89%	81%	70%	83%
Amazon	82%	87%	83%	74%	76%	81%
Asus ¹	73%	86%	90%	83%	65%	80%
Lenovo	84%	86%	87%	78%	64%	79%
Linx ¹	86%	78%	86%	65%	61%	75%
Acer ¹	75%	74%	78%	58%	62%	70%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best NAS Brand Synology



NAS boxes used to be just that: a place to cram in hard disks, with a basic operating system offering basic functions. It's a sign of the



technology's maturity that Synology's software, DSM 6.2, also wins our Business Software of the Year award (see p38). Forget Mastercard: this is your flexible friend.

"I seem to buy nothing but Synology NAS drives now and with good reason," said *PC Pro* subscriber Stuart Ellis. "They are well-featured and fast and I can manage all of my customers' units from anywhere. Great devices."

QNAP is hot on Synology's heels, and judging from our readers' responses it just needs to work on ease of setup. "The setup procedures could be a damned sight clearer," wrote Terry Hornsby of his QNAP drive. "It says set up a system volume, doesn't explain how. It took me three attempts to create a volume that could be resized and supported snapshots."

For Western Digital, reliability and features appear to be the crucial areas for improvement. "Some days we see it and some we don't," wrote Nigel Algar.

	Speed	Reliability	Features	Value	Overall
Synology	88%	93%	91%	85%	89%
QNAP	86%	88%	90%	80%	86%
Western Digital	85%	86%	82%	86%	86%
Netgear ¹	77%	84%	81%	79%	83%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Monitor Brand Asus, Samsung



You only need to look at the swathes of green in the table below to realise how high the standard of monitors is – almost everyone who took part in our survey was pleased with the quality of their monitor and would buy from the same brand again.



As such, it took something a little special to lift Asus and Samsung above the rest. For Asus, it was a mix of image quality and brand loyalty. "Expensive, but the best monitor I have ever owned," wrote Matthew Farr.

Samsung customers were equally buoyant. "This is the second Samsung monitor I've had and I've been really impressed," said Michael Tott. "[I] won't be buying a monitor from another company." Now that's loyalty.



	Image quality	Reliability	Value	Customer support	Overall
Asus	93%	93%	86%	80%	90%
Samsung	93%	95%	88%	81%	90%
BenQ	92%	92%	90%	78%	89%
AOC	90%	94%	90%	76%	89%
Iiyama	90%	93%	89%	76%	89%
Dell	92%	93%	82%	78%	89%
Acer	91%	91%	88%	73%	88%
LG	89%	91%	87%	75%	87%
Philips ¹	92%	90%	87%	63%	86%
HP	87%	91%	81%	75%	85%
Lenovo ¹	84%	88%	88%	69%	85%

Best Router Brand DrayTek

RECOMMENDED ASUS, TP-LINK



DrayTek, just like Zen Internet, is one of the perennial winners in the *PC Pro* Excellence Awards. So why are our readers such fans? "Expensive," wrote Peter Ward, "but fantastic features, especially its VPN abilities."



Asus is another former winner of our this award, and its strong showing for speed and reliability helped it win a Recommended gong this year. "It's fast and stable," said Anthony du Toit. "What more could you want?" Kudos, too, to TP-Link, which proved a popular replacement for all those low-scoring ISP-supplied routers. "So much better than my ISP's router," wrote Derek Machin, "which I gave up on after lots of hassle."

	Speed	Range	Reliability	Customer Support	Overall
DrayTek	96%	89%	94%	90%	92%
Asus	92%	87%	89%	71%	86%
TP-Link	89%	84%	88%	74%	86%
Netgear	92%	88%	88%	75%	85%
D-Link ¹	89%	88%	84%	79%	85%
Virgin Media	88%	79%	79%	72%	80%
BT Home Hub	82%	79%	79%	69%	78%
TalkTalk ¹	76%	78%	78%	63%	76%
Sky ¹	77%	67%	76%	74%	72%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Printer Brand Brother



Brother sees its third successive year at the summit of the printer world, scoring highly in every single category – indeed, compare it to any other brand on these



pages and it would be a contender. Its print quality and reliability set the bar high for the rest of the manufacturers, with 96% of its customers happy to buy this brand again. David Jones typified our readers' feelings: "Excellent printer," he wrote, "never lets me down."

HP takes second place, with most of its customers proving loyal. Indeed, out of the 385 people who bought its printers, 360 said they would buy from HP again. So what can it improve to catch up with Brother? Top of the list is customer support: "Difficult or impossible to talk to if you have a problem," said Richard Price.

Across the board, only Brother customers appear to be fully satisfied with value for money, which includes running costs. Ink costs in particular continue to be a source of frustration. HP and Epson have introduced subscription plans to solve this, but these aren't universally praised. "I love [HP's] Instant Ink scheme," said Brenden Turner, but Alexander Lambton wasn't so impressed. "I purchased the printer and they forced me into a payment plan. I refused to continue it and they locked me out of the printer."

	Print quality	Reliability	Value	Speed	Customer Support	Overall
Brother	94%	93%	91%	91%	88%	92%
HP	89%	86%	82%	83%	75%	85%
Epson	89%	87%	81%	80%	69%	83%
Canon	89%	86%	77%	77%	69%	82%
Samsung	90%	85%	84%	86%	62%	82%

Best Online Retailer Scan

RECOMMENDED AMAZON, JOHN LEWIS, NOVATECH, PC SPECIALIST



Safe to say that Scan has some loyal customers. "Full marks to Scan, they have never let me down in all the years that I have been dealing with them," wrote Stephen Tansley. "Based on past experiences, I will always order from Scan, even if there is a slightly cheaper option," pitched in loyal customer Ross D Armstrong. "They never disappoint and I wholeheartedly recommend them to anyone who will listen."

SCAN

This level of fervour pushed Scan beyond the reach of the chasing pack, and with names that include both Amazon and John Lewis that's quite an achievement. "Amazon sets the standard for other retailers to follow," said Graham Steel. Gary Barnett agrees. "Even though Amazon is also a portal for other vendors to sell their goods, Amazon's customer service is something a lot of other companies need to emulate."

Amazon might have done even better but for one issue: "Its packaging of hard drives is a disgrace," wrote David Armstrong. "It delivered one drive with just the address label directly on the electrostatic bag."

That's not a practice we'd expect to see from our more specialist award winners, namely Novatech and PC Specialist. "Novatech's customer support is excellent," wrote Nigel Marchant, adding that it includes live technical advice. "[It's an] excellent local company providing top class service."

This sentiment was echoed from PC Specialist customer Eileen Wallis. "Outstanding customer service," she said. "[They're] always available by phone or email, and very competent and helpful."

	Customer service	Delivery	Customer support	Overall satisfaction	Overall
Scan	92%	92%	91%	93%	92%
John Lewis	92%	91%	89%	93%	91%
Novatech	92%	92%	88%	93%	91%
PC Specialist	92%	88%	89%	93%	91%
Amazon	90%	93%	88%	91%	91%
Printerland	92%	91%	85%	92%	90%
CCLonline.co.uk	91%	88%	87%	90%	89%
Overclockers UK	88%	88%	87%	88%	88%
Apple	88%	87%	87%	89%	87%
Aria	87%	89%	85%	88%	87%
Ebuyer	87%	87%	83%	88%	86%
BT Shop ¹	86%	87%	82%	86%	85%
Argos	86%	87%	81%	86%	85%
7dayshop	90%	84%	77%	89%	85%
Very	86%	87%	81%	83%	84%
Tesco	86%	84%	79%	85%	84%
Laptopsdirect.co.uk	83%	84%	79%	84%	82%
Overclock.co.uk	84%	80%	81%	83%	82%
Dell	82%	82%	81%	83%	82%
Ebay	83%	80%	77%	84%	81%
Currys	81%	82%	78%	83%	81%
Box	80%	82%	75%	83%	80%
PC World	79%	80%	75%	79%	78%

¹ BT Shop includes results for both BT Shop and dabs.com

Best Web Host 1&1 Internet UK

RECOMMENDED FASTHOSTS



This has been a phenomenal year for 1&1 Internet UK. We can only assume that it's been working hard on its customer service, because last year's 67% satisfaction rate has jumped to 78%, and it's also seen big improvements for reliability and speed. That means, for the first time, 1&1 takes the top prize.

"I have used [1&1] for many years and found them professional and reliable," said PC Pro subscriber Michael Chappell. "Even when I managed to delete a whole database they were quick in getting it restored." Not everyone was so glowing in their description of customer support ("Support is not great but then again I haven't needed much," wrote Paul Crossley), but notably 1&1 topped the charts here.

It's also notable that runner-up Fasthosts is owned by the same German company that operates 1&1 – that is, United Internet – and that tie-up is reflected in similar results across the board. With a greater focus on businesses and cloud services, Fasthosts is still run as its own brand, though.

Finally, no other company came close to the two German-owned brands. While Zen Internet has traditionally done well here, not enough of its web hosting customers responded to our survey.



	Customer support	Reliability	Speed	Value	Overall
1&1 Internet UK	78%	88%	85%	77%	84%
Fasthosts ¹	77%	88%	81%	77%	81%
123-reg.co.uk ¹	69%	81%	76%	72%	76%
GoDaddy ¹	71%	75%	73%	66%	73%
BT ¹	67%	71%	68%	58%	65%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Cloud Storage Google Drive

RECOMMENDED DROPBOX



Bearing in mind that cloud storage is one of those things you only notice if things go wrong, kudos to both Google Drive and Dropbox for their consistently high scores.

Last year, they shared top honours, but 2018's survey saw Google edge ahead by the tiniest of margins. What pushed it over the line? It wasn't speed – Amazon S3 takes top spot here – but the large number of people who would recommend the service. Most of us use more than one cloud storage service, so we asked which of the services you use that you'd most recommend; just look at the contrast between Google Drive and Dropbox at the top, and the likes of Amazon Cloud Drive and iDrive towards the bottom.

Our final note concerns OneDrive. While this service is hardly tearing up trees in fourth place, that's a big improvement from last year where it came second from bottom. Judging from our readers' experiences, it's seen a speed boost and is now significantly easier to use. Could it beat Google and Dropbox next year?

	Speed	Ease of use	Most recommended ¹	Overall
Google Drive	86%	86%	74%	82%
Dropbox	85%	86%	71%	81%
Amazon S3	89%	78%	67%	78%
OneDrive	83%	82%	67%	77%
Mega	84%	84%	63%	77%
iCloud	82%	78%	61%	74%
Amazon Cloud Drive	84%	81%	49%	71%
iDrive	76%	78%	59%	71%

¹ People were asked which, of all the cloud services they had tried, they would most recommend.



Best Mobile Data Giffgaff

RECOMMENDED TESCO MOBILE



We reveal the UK's best broadband ISP on p43, but for many people mobile data coverage is even more vital. As with last year, it's the "virtual" networks that win. Despite piggybacking on O2's network – in fact, it's owned by O2 – Giffgaff outscores the "real" network in every key area. Likewise Tesco Mobile, which also uses the O2 network. Why the difference? Because we ask how satisfied people are; the fact they're paying less for Giffgaff than O2 may well influence their views.

giffgaff

	Coverage	4G coverage	Speed	Customer service	Value	Overall
Giffgaff	85%	74%	81%	82%	93%	85%
Tesco Mobile	81%	72%	79%	86%	86%	83%
iD Mobile ¹	81%	75%	76%	78%	88%	81%
Three	74%	67%	78%	71%	79%	76%
BT Mobile	77%	72%	78%	72%	78%	76%
EE	78%	72%	82%	69%	69%	75%
Virgin Media	78%	69%	78%	66%	74%	75%
O2	78%	72%	76%	71%	65%	74%
Vodafone	77%	72%	77%	67%	65%	73%
TalkTalk ¹	74%	55%	69%	60%	77%	68%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

Best Phone Brand Google

RECOMMENDED ONEPLUS



Since dropping the Nexus brand phones and switching to the high-end Pixel, Google has gone from strength to strength in our polls. While the exceptional camera quality score in the table below is noteworthy, we couldn't even squeeze in its best result: 100% of Pixel owners would buy the same brand again.



	Battery life	Reliability	Speed	Customer support	Camera quality	Overall
Google	85%	93%	95%	82%	93%	92%
OnePlus	89%	92%	95%	74%	84%	89%
Huawei	88%	93%	89%	68%	85%	87%
Samsung	79%	90%	88%	73%	87%	86%
Nokia ¹	84%	91%	84%	82%	78%	86%
Apple	73%	90%	87%	74%	85%	84%
Xiaomi ¹	86%	93%	88%	69%	72%	84%
Motorola	82%	89%	86%	67%	81%	84%
Lenovo ¹	84%	87%	81%	74%	78%	83%
Sony	77%	85%	83%	67%	83%	81%
HTC ¹	65%	89%	82%	77%	86%	80%
LG ¹	70%	83%	82%	65%	73%	77%

¹ The sample size was between 25 and 50, so we have less confidence in the results

HOW YOU DECIDE THE WINNERS

PC Pro doesn't decide the winners of the Technology Excellence Awards: you do. Each year, thousands of readers take part in a comprehensive three-month survey. We ask how satisfied you are with the quality of prints, reliability of your broadband, battery life of your laptop – and collate the figures to create the percentage scores you see in the tables.

The maximum score a company can receive is 100%, where a reader declares themselves "very satisfied" with, say, customer support for their desktop PC. If they merely select satisfied, that's 80%. And so on, until they reach "very dissatisfied", which is 0%. So a score of 90% could be 30 people saying very satisfied (100%) and 30 satisfied (80%).

Previously, we've only published scores where we have feedback from at least 50 buyers of a brand. However, this year we have included scores where between 25 and 50 people have

responded. The scores are still representative, but – from a statistical point of view – we can't have the same level of confidence in the results.

We also use methods to protect

against "stuffing" – that is, where a manufacturer may try to bias results by encouraging only positive feedback. As a result, we believe the scores you see are ones you can trust.



11 reasons to switch ISP right now

Not satisfied with your broadband provider? Itching to get away? Here are 11 reasons to jump ship

1 They keep putting the price up

Yes, we're looking at you BT. BT has put up the price of its broadband twice in 2018 and five times in the past four years. Of course, it's far from alone. Other providers routinely increase their prices – often using BT's own price rises as a smokescreen. Ofcom, meanwhile, will claim competition has never been healthier.

BT's constant price hikes would be more palatable if it offered the service to match. Our survey places the country's biggest broadband provider at rock bottom in the table (see p43).

The good news is that any mid-contract price rise gives you a get-out-of-jail-free card. You have 30 days from the time they write to you to inform you of the price increase to leave without penalty. You'll still need to give 30 days' notice – or 14 days if you're jumping ship to another provider right away – but you shouldn't be subject to the price increase in the meantime.

The tricky part is that broadband is rarely bought in isolation these days. BT, for example, offers a £5-per-month discount to mobile phone customers if they're BT Broadband subscribers. You can leave the broadband, but if you've still got the best part of two years to run on your mobile contract, you could be penalised by more than £100 for doing so.

In such instances, your best bet might be a friendly chat with the retention department...

2 You can get a cheaper fixed-price deal

If you're sick of providers implementing mid-term price increases, knowing they've probably got you by the cajones anyway, then opt for a fixed-term plan that specifically rules them out.

Recommended award winner Plusnet recently followed TalkTalk's lead by offering a fixed-price contract for 18 months. At the time of writing, Plusnet's Unlimited Fibre Extra broadband plan, for example, offers an 80Mbps/sec down, 20Mbps/sec up fibre-to-the-

cabinet service (with average download speed of 66Mbps/sec) for £29 per month.

Sadly, those prices are only offered to new customers. Existing customers must check the customer portal to find out what bones they're being thrown.

The good news for existing customers? Plusnet promises a personal account review when your contract nears expiry, so you don't get thrust into an expensive standard tariff without warning.

3 There are faster speeds available (in some areas)

You might be looking at your speed test results and feeling pretty pleased with yourself, with 75Mbps/sec bursting through your router. For many people, that is indeed living the dream.

However, it's by no means the ceiling these days. Gigabit speeds are now within the reach of some people – although not yet from the mainstream providers.

Thinkbroadband runs highly detailed monthly speed tests, which show that it's customers of the lesser-known, regionalised providers that are getting the fastest speeds in Britain today.

The top 10% of customers on Hyperoptic's gigabit fibre connections, for example, see speeds of 621Mbps/sec down and 576Mbps/sec up. Community Fibre's top 10% are getting 486Mbps/sec down and a staggering 824Mbps/sec up.

It's customers of the lesser-known, regionalised providers that are getting the fastest speeds in Britain today

When it comes to the mainstream providers, the fastest connection available is from Virgin Media. The top 10% of customers on Virgin's Vivid 350 plan are seeing 357Mbps/sec down but only 22Mbps/sec up – almost 40 times slower than Community Fibre's upload speeds and a symptom of the DOCSIS technology deployed by Virgin.

4 You don't need that TV bundle any more

One of the big reasons people stick with their broadband provider is that they get it as

part of a package. This is particularly the case for Sky and Virgin customers. But do you really need that TV bundle in the Netflix age?

Virgin recently upset customers when it failed to reach a deal with UKTV, resulting in ten channels – including Dave and Gold – being dropped from the service. Did the price drop? Heck no.

Sky still has the carrot of Premier League football and other premium channels to handcuff customers, but all of Sky's output can be streamed via other services. Sky's own Now TV offers all the sports channels, Sky Atlantic and access to its movie archive – without contract and often at prices far cheaper than a Sky satellite package. You can stream the service from any broadband provider and a multitude of devices.

In other words, the TV bundle isn't the ball and chain it once was. A recent Ofcom report found the number of UK subscriptions to television streaming services such as Netflix had overtaken those to traditional pay television for the first

time. The days of being a social pariah because you haven't got satellite or cable are long gone.

5 You're bored of bad bundled routers

To be fair, the standard of routers supplied by the big boys has improved markedly over the years. Most aren't the "throw it straight in the cupboard under the stairs" piece of landfill they were five or ten years ago. That said, they're still not great.

AVM's FritzBox routers have, on the other hand, always been well received by the PC Pro's Reviews team, both for their turn of speed and

their breadth of features. AVM also won a recommended award in the Best Router category of our own awards last year, but didn't have enough respondents to make the cut in this year's gongs.

Zen Internet – our overall broadband winner since time began – supplies FritzBox routers with many of its tariffs. Bundled equipment doesn't have to be bad.

6 You're less likely to get fake support calls

Customers of the big broadband

scams, the irritation of answering the phone calls is a pest in itself.

7 It's not that painful to switch

If it's been a few years since you switched broadband provider, the process isn't as dreadful as it was in the past.

If you're moving from one Openreach provider to another, and you're at the end or nearing the end of a contract, it's straightforward. Simply sign up with your new provider and it should handle the

If it's been a few years since you switched broadband provider, the process isn't as dreadful as it was in the past

providers are probably well used to the "I'm calling from your broadband support team" drill – about six times a week. TalkTalk customers are particularly prone to this menace. Two years ago, three employees who worked for TalkTalk's Indian call-centre contractor were arrested on suspicion of selling TalkTalk customer data.

According to a BBC report, this data was "obtained by a criminal gang, with USB sticks full of data trading hands at parties". It was subsequently used to target TalkTalk customers with fake "we've detected a virus on your computer" scams.

TalkTalk has always insisted this was an industry-wide problem, not confined to one provider.

There may be truth in that, but what can be said with some degree of certainty is that customers of smaller providers such as Zen are much less likely to be targeted by such nonsense, because their call centres are run in-house in the UK and they're a less obvious target for data theft.

And while we don't think it's likely PC Pro readers would fall for such

entire process. The old provider may contact you to confirm you want to switch – and no doubt try to persuade you to stay – but the whole thing should take less than a fortnight and there should be no or minimal downtime.

Things get trickier if you're switching technology, such as moving from ADSL to fibre, or even from fibre-to-the-cabinet (FTTC) to fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP). Or from Virgin's cable to Openreach or vice versa. That kind of switch normally requires an engineer visit, and then you enter the lap of the Appointment Gods.

That said, there are signs of improvement on that front, too. In "early 2019" (Ofcom doesn't like to be specific), an automatic compensation scheme will come into force that will pay out £25 for a missed appointment and £5 for every day a new service is delayed.

No, it's not quite "pack your bags, love, we're off to the Bahamas" money, but it might be sufficient when multiplied across a huge customer base for BT, Sky and co to get

their act together.

8 There's a new provider in your area

The days of the great broadband landgrab are over. Local loop unbundling has come to an end and there aren't a great deal of companies laying new fibre networks, outside of BT. That said, there are pockets of growth.

Regional and community-focused FTTP projects are continuing to thrive. Virgin is still stretching the tentacles of its fibre network, particularly in big cities. And other providers are experimenting with small-scale fibre networks.

How do you know what's available in your region? The SamKnows Broadband checker ([pcpro.link/289sam](https://www.samknows.co.uk/broadband-checker)) is a great place to start. Pop your phone number and postcode into the relevant boxes and it will summarise all the services that reach your doorstep, with the ability to break down results to FTTP, FTTC and cable providers, if necessary. It also shows any wireless providers in your region, if you're still waiting for the trenches to be dug in your street.

9 You can still keep your email address

One reason people are reluctant to move broadband providers is they've had the same ISP-specific email address for years and don't want to go through the rigmarole of updating all their web accounts, friends and associates with a new address. It's a legitimate concern, but one that can be worked around – albeit sometimes at a cost.

BT Premium email, for example, allows former BT customers to retain their BT Broadband email address even after they've jumped ship. The sting in the tail is this costs £7.50 per month, recently hiked from £5 per month. That's a frankly outrageous fee for a basic email service, but if you're desperate to cling to your BT address and equally desperate to leave BT, it's

an option. Even if it's only for a migratory month or two, to buy yourself some time to switch over all your accounts and inform your contacts.

Others are less stingy. Sky basically gives you an email address for life. I recently reactivated my Sky email address despite changing ISP more than five years ago! TalkTalk gives you a year's grace on its email, while Virgin will let you keep using your email for 90 days after you leave.

We'd strongly recommend you either stick to webmail (Gmail, Outlook.com and so on) or register your own domain for email, so that you're not held captive by broadband providers.

10 You don't need the landline phone

Most landline phones get about as much use these days as Bill Cosby's agent. Alas, line rental remains a must-have for most providers, racking up the cost for a service that you might only half-use.

There are providers who will offer broadband only. Virgin Media doesn't insist you take a landline, although if you think that's going to knock the best part of £20 off your bill, think again. The tariffs are around a fiver or so cheaper than comparable speeds including line rental from other providers. Still, that adds up over the course of a year.

Other regional fibre providers such as Relish (London and Wiltshire) are also happy to connect you without a landline phone.

11 Upload speeds are important to you

The broadband industry is obsessed with download speeds. Upload speeds nary warrant a mention in the ads, but they're just as important – if not more important – for some people. If you're a photographer sending gigabytes of photos to clients from home, you don't want them dribbling up the pipe at 5Mbps/sec or 10Mbps/sec.

As we mentioned earlier, Virgin's network technology isn't geared for

uploads and ADSL can be painfully slow on the uplink, especially if you're at the end of an exchange's reach. Other technologies give more weight to the uploads.

The new G.Fast services being rolled out by BT – basically FTTC on steroids – are delivering very decent upload speeds, for instance.

The top 10% of customers on G.Fast lines measured by Think Broadband in July received an average upload speed of 46.8Mbps/sec (and downloads of 198Mbps/sec) since you asked. It's by no means FTTP-grade, but its more than twice as fast as Virgin's fastest lines. ●



Best Broadband ISP Zen Internet

RECOMMENDED PLUSNET

	Customer support	Reliability	Value for money	Speed	Resubscribe?	Overall score
Zen	96%	94%	80%	89%	97%	91%
Plusnet	82%	82%	80%	76%	89%	82%
Virgin Media	69%	81%	61%	87%	87%	77%
EE	68%	76%	71%	64%	70%	70%
Sky	72%	73%	61%	64%	74%	69%
TalkTalk	61%	71%	76%	65%	70%	69%
Vodafone	70%	65%	73%	67%	67%	68%
BT	63%	74%	55%	68%	68%	66%

This month sees the results of our annual PC Pro Excellence Awards survey, based on thousands of votes from British consumers. We ask participants to rate brands for their satisfaction across a number of product types, including broadband. You can see the results for all the other product categories in our feature on p30.

Here, you can see a clear picture for satisfaction across the main broadband suppliers. And in terms of a winner, it couldn't be any clearer: Zen Internet wins hands down, as it has done for years. Why? Its fantastic

customer support is obvious, so kudos to the Rochdale-based team for the care they give to subscribers. Add great speeds and unmatched reliability, and it's a clear winner.

Notably, the only area where it is matched is value for money. Here, Plusnet excels, with only TalkTalk coming close. This, combined with 89% of Plusnet's customers saying they would resubscribe, is the reason it walks away with a Recommended award.

While Virgin Media doesn't walk away with a gong, it came close, with strong scores for

reliability and customer loyalty. And despite coming third from bottom, we should congratulate TalkTalk for turning its scores around: last year, it had an overall satisfaction rating of 43%, with 34% for customer support, so clearly it's doing something right. Or at least, better than a year ago.

And if you're a BT or Sky customer? Then take a good read of the rest of this article. If you've been hooked by other services, such as TV or discounted mobiles, now might be an excellent time to set yourself free.