

notebooks

FOUR COMPANIES SHARE THE TOP SPOT, BUT A PERENNIAL LEADER SLIPS SLIGHTLY.

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This year, Dell is singing a different tune in the notebook space. Last year the company dominated the category, with the only overall A. This year, however, four companies shoot to the top to attain A's, and—surprise!—Dell isn't one of them.

We are pleased to see major improvements in the overall notebook category from Apple, Hewlett-Packard, and Toshiba, all climbing from C's to A's; IBM rejoins the A class, moving up from a B in 2001. "I have always had excellent technical support, without fail, from the IBM group," says Liz Mabry, one of the respondents. "I swear by the IBM ThinkPad," adds James Bailey. Larry Sanders, a network administrator, notes, "Other than my users occasionally screwing up the configuration, the laptops never give me a moment's trouble."

Toshiba receives better-than-average scores on each of the four key measures that determine the letter grade and is the sole A-list company with a significantly better-than-average repair frequency, though it is just average in office use. IBM now earns A's for both office and home notebooks as well as overall (an improvement from its lone A for office use last year). Apple and Toshiba receive A's for notebooks in home use.

Dell's rapid rise to number one or number two in notebook sales this year (depending on whose polls you read) may be stretching its quality-control lines thin. Dell falls to worse than average on repair frequency, so despite better-than-average scores on every other key measure, the company drops to a B+ for both office and home notebooks as well as overall.

Fujitsu, which previously lacked enough responses for us to report, picks up market share in this year's survey and ends up with a B overall; only it and Toshiba have better-than-average scores for repair frequency—in this case, 8

percent of units needing repair in the past year. Since 29 percent of Dell's notebooks needed fixing and the overall notebook average is 21 percent, Fujitsu's survey debut is noteworthy.

Compaq and Micron remain unchanged with an overall E and a D, respectively. Acer and NEC, not included in last year's results, also have E's. Ironically, HP has far better grades than Compaq, though the HP Omnibook line will be put to rest in favor of Compaq's better-known brands as the two companies merge their product lines.

Regardless of the high number of units needing repairs, Dell customers are more than satisfied with their machines' reliability, whereas Compaq consistently gets worse-than-average scores. IBM does well on satisfaction with technical support: Overall, only 10 percent say IBM gave them the runaround on the phone, versus 14 and 13 percent with Compaq and Dell. Respondents say IBM kept them on hold for 8.1 minutes, compared with 12.9 minutes for Dell and 15.2 minutes for Compaq.

Our new plus/minus grading helps show the enigmatic nature of Sony notebooks, which receive a B- overall. On the whole, respondents rate Sony better than average in overall satisfaction and likelihood to buy again, although the level of satisfaction with both repairs and technical support is below par.

A whopping 34 percent of Sony notebook owners report getting the runaround from technical support. That number is twice as high as the next-worst, Toshiba, with 17 percent. Sony also has the longest on-hold time for callers, 15.8 minutes (IBM is best, at 8.1 minutes). Unhappy Sony notebook owner Paul Shields calls this "the ab-

solute worst customer service experience I have ever received." In fact, it is clear that not responding quickly to customers is a good step toward putting yourself in the doghouse. Sony and Compaq have the slowest telephone response times, to go with their worse-than-average scores for satisfaction with technical support.

We decided to drill down into the raw numbers to see how people who bought their notebooks in the 12 months leading up to the survey feel about their machines and the service they have been receiving. Not surprisingly, owners of relatively new notebooks are relatively satisfied as charted (above), but the companies emerge in much the same rank order as in the more general results charted on page 103. (You can find similar analysis of the other product categories at www.pcmag.com/sr.)

Some notebook repairs can be attributed to the nature of the beast and are seen across all company lines, such as operating-system hassles, low battery life, and premature battery failure. The most common problems noted are protective doors and hinges that break or fall off.

First-Year Satisfaction

	Overall satisfaction	Satisfaction with reliability	Units needing repair in the past 12 months	Satisfaction with repair	Satisfaction with technical support	Would buy again from this company
Compaq (231 responses)	⚡	⚡	⚡	—	⚡	⚡
Dell (615)	⬆️	⚡	⚡	⚡	⚡	⬆️
Gateway (77)	⚡	⚡	⚡	—	—	⚡
Hewlett-Packard (164)	⚡	⚡	⚡	—	—	⚡
IBM (214)	⬆️	⬆️	⚡	—	⬆️	⚡
Sony (149)	⚡	⚡	⚡	—	—	⚡
Toshiba (196)	⚡	⚡	⬆️	—	—	⚡
AVERAGE	8.2*	8.4*	15%	6.8*	6.7*	7.8*

⬆️ Significantly better than average
 ⚡ Average
 ⚡ Significantly worse than average

A dash indicates that we do not have enough data to give the company a score.
 * On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is best.

Notebooks: Overall

	Readers' Report Card grade	Overall satisfaction*	Satisfaction with reliability*	REPAIR EXPERIENCE								TECHNICAL SUPPORT								Would buy again from this company*				
				Units needing repair in the past 12 months*	Satisfaction with repair*	Problem was solved over the phone	Problem was solved via Web/e-mail	Company sent a new part	Notebook was fixed on-site	Notebook was sent out for repair	Company sent a new notebook	Satisfaction with technical support*	Customer got the runaround	Tech was knowledgeable	Tech tried everything to help	Prompt resolution	Required more than one call to resolve	Satisfaction with telephone support	Average time on hold (minutes)		Satisfaction with Web/e-mail support	Average Web/e-mail response time (hours)		
Acer (76)	E	🔴	🔴	🔴	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴			
Apple (100)	A	🟢	🟢	🟢	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟢			
Compaq (945)	E	🟢	🟢	🔴	🔴	16%	11%	21%	10%	55%	6%	🔴	14%	45%	45%	33%	32%	🔴	15.2	🔴	21.9	🔴		
Dell (1,684)	B+	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	17%	6%	31%	38%	26%	4%	🟢	13%	42%	40%	38%	25%	🟢	12.9	🟡	20.7	🟢		
Fujitsu (106)	B	🟡	🟡	🟢	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	
Gateway (299)	C	🟡	🟡	🟡	🟡	28%	5%	16%	9%	52%	8%	🟡	11%	39%	38%	34%	32%	🟢	10.6	—	—	—	🟡	
Hewlett-Packard (338)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡	22%	6%	9%	9%	63%	2%	🟢	14%	38%	47%	44%	20%	🟢	11.3	—	—	—	🟢	
IBM (910)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	12%	6%	23%	14%	51%	9%	🟢	10%	47%	46%	40%	23%	🟢	8.1	🟢	16.8	—	🟢	
Micron (90)	D	🟡	🔴	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴
NEC (72)	E	🔴	🔴	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴
Sony (343)	B-	🟢	🟡	🟡	🔴	11%	—	11%	—	79%	7%	🔴	34%	28%	28%	22%	34%	🔴	15.8	—	—	—	—	🟢
Toshiba (875)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡	10%	7%	20%	13%	63%	3%	🟡	17%	35%	37%	28%	23%	🟡	11.8	🟡	22.6	—	—	🟢
AVERAGE		7.7**	7.9**	21%	6.2**	17%	7%	19%	16%	56%	6%	6.4**	16%	39%	40%	34%	27%	6.5**	12.2	6.5**	20.5	—	—	6.9**

GREEN text denotes Readers' Choice. A dash indicates that we do not have enough survey data to give the company a score. * Contributes to the Readers' Report Card grade. ** On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is best.

Notebooks: Office, Home

	Readers' Report Card grade	Overall satisfaction*	Satisfaction with reliability*	REPAIR EXPERIENCE								TECHNICAL SUPPORT								Would buy again from this company*						
				Units needing repair in the past 12 months*	Satisfaction with repair*	Problem was solved over the phone	Problem was solved via Web/e-mail	Company sent a new part	Notebook was fixed on-site	Notebook was sent out for repair	Company sent a new notebook	Satisfaction with technical support*	Customer got the runaround	Tech was knowledgeable	Tech tried everything to help	Prompt resolution	Required more than one call to resolve	Satisfaction with telephone support	Average time on hold (minutes)		Satisfaction with Web/e-mail support	Average Web/e-mail response time (hours)				
OFFICE USE																										
Compaq (321)	E	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	13%	13%	26%	17%	41%	7%	🔴	13%	48%	41%	25%	28%	🔴	13.1	—	—	—	—	🔴		
Dell (747)	B+	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	14%	5%	27%	46%	23%	5%	🟢	13%	40%	33%	37%	20%	🟡	10.8	🟡	21.7	—	—	🟢		
Gateway (100)	D	🔴	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴	
Hewlett-Packard (111)	B	🟢	🟢	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	
IBM (385)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟢	9%	4%	23%	21%	46%	10%	🟢	5%	44%	39%	44%	20%	🟡	8.0	—	—	—	—	—	🟢	
Sony (92)	B	🟢	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	
Toshiba (311)	C	🟡	🟡	🟡	—	10%	7%	23%	16%	59%	3%	🟡	7%	40%	30%	30%	21%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	
AVERAGE		7.7**	7.8**	24%	6.7**	12%	7%	25%	25%	42%	6%	6.7**	10%	43%	36%	34%	22%	6.7**	10.6	6.6**	21.7	—	—	7**		
HOME USE																										
Acer (56)	E	🔴	🔴	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴	
Apple (70)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟢	
Compaq (615)	E	🔴	🔴	🔴	🔴	18%	10%	17%	4%	63%	6%	🔴	17%	41%	41%	34%	34%	🔴	16.4	🔴	24.4	—	—	—	🔴	
Dell (932)	B+	🟢	🟢	🔴	🟢	19%	7%	35%	31%	29%	4%	🟢	17%	38%	41%	36%	26%	🟡	14.1	🟢	19.6	—	—	—	🟢	
Fujitsu (81)	B	🟢	🟢	🟢	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	
Gateway (198)	C	🟡	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	13%	33%	39%	35%	31%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡
Hewlett-Packard (225)	C	🟡	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡	19%	37%	42%	44%	28%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡
IBM (517)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡	16%	7%	24%	7%	55%	9%	🟢	13%	42%	41%	43%	26%	🟢	11.6	—	—	—	—	—	🟢	
Micron (53)	D	🟡	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴	
Sony (247)	C-	🟡	🟡	🟡	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🔴	32%	24%	21%	21%	34%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟡
Toshiba (558)	A	🟢	🟢	🟡	🟡	10%	7%	17%	10%	67%	1%	🟡	24%	36%	34%	30%	22%	🟡	8.3	—	—	—	—	—	—	🟢
AVERAGE		7.9**	8**	19%	6.4**	16%	8%	23%	13%	54%	5%	6.4**	19%	36%	37%	35%	29%	6.6**	12.6	6.3**	22.0	—	—	—	7.1**	

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