

Business sense Gadgets

All the kit that's fit to print

Yes, they're boring – but printers are used every day by most small businesses. Here's five of the best

Guy Clapperton

There are a couple of tricks to buying a printer for a business. The first – and most important – is to ignore the printer completely. It's boring. It just sits there and prints. There are only three things you need to consider: the speed, the quality and type of output and the cost of refilling the thing. Extra functions like whether it can be attached to a network will have different importance to different people.

It's the cost of the toner that takes most people by surprise if they thought they'd bought a cheapie and find that it costs its purchase price again by the end of the first year in consumables. This is where looking for a laser, which will be much more expensive initially, will pay dividends in the longer term – unless you want to print photos, in which case inkjets offer better quality.

Speed will matter more if a printer is to be shared; the home worker who wants to print the odd bit of correspondence here and there won't mind waiting. Speed costs, as does the ability to print on to, for example, transparencies as well as paper. For the smaller office, where space is at



Affordable: Lexmark X5470

a premium, it will be worth looking at multifunction devices – something that photocopies, scans and prints as well as possibly faxing. All of the caveats for buying a printer apply to the multifunction box; also bear in mind the cheaper models you'll find are likely to have last year's printer rather than an up to date version. Given that 2005's printers were pretty good, this isn't especially important.

The market leader HP C5180

Many home workers will want something that simply sits on the desk and prints. They don't have room for massive floor-standing printers bigger than the stationery cupboard, so something like this HP will represent good value. Photo printers will welcome the chance to put memory cards and USB memory sticks straight into it and see the pics on a small preview screen. It works happily enough as a scanner and colour photocopier as well and, on a good day, you can get a 10x15cm photo out of it within 12 seconds.

It'll look good in your office and the set up is simple. If one thing holds it back it's the absence of fax capability. Let's stress immediately that at no stage does the manufacturer so much as hint that fax is an option, but it should have been and probably wouldn't have cost a fortune to put in (look at the others in this round-up). This is an excellent machine; trouble is, it leaves you with just one more gadget on your desk than it needed to.

Price: £199 including VAT
Maker's URL: www.hp.com/uk
Pros: An affordable price for business and good quality output
Cons: For an extra few quid it could have had fax as well
Star rating: ★★★★★

On a budget Lexmark X5470

This Lexmark device is a four-in-one product – printer, scanner, fax and photocopier – and offers an impressive 25 pages per minute black and 18ppm colour print speed. It will also print pictures without being connected to a PC. It looks chunkier than the HP but is half the price and it has a fax machine included. And the consumables don't cost a fortune.

In fact it's the inclusions that let this one down slightly. There's just so much extra software. This is good initially, but by the time you've also installed your Google toolbar, your Yahoo! toolbar and whatever else you have loading when you start your computer, it's likely to slow older systems down.

Price: £99.99
Maker's URL: www.lexmark.com
Pros: Easily affordable
Cons: Too much extra software
Star rating: ★★★★★

The workhorse Brother MFC-440CN

This is essentially how you do a printer for a small workgroup. You put networking in



Small package: Brother MFC-440CN



Serious printer: Canon C2880i

so that you don't need a "main" computer switched on the whole time. You put in all the slots that you'll need to get pictures off cards or USB keys, install Pictbridge as standard so that printing straight from compatible cameras and phones will work, and you bring it in for £150.

This multifunction printer is part of a series: the next one up has a handset and speakerphone so you can share conference calls; the next one down doesn't have the fax. The only minor niggle is the small size of the paper loading tray. If you care, spend some more; if you don't this is highly recommended.

Price: £149.99 including VAT
Maker's URL: www.brother.co.uk
Pros: Everything in a very small package
Cons: The physical size means you can only get so much paper into the loading tray, but you can see that at a glance
Star rating: ★★★★★

The luxury option Canon C2880i

The new multifunction range from Canon is very much a serious printer and multifunction device. A glance at its size tells you it's aimed at the larger small business and it's likely to serve those businesses well, with security features built in as standard, networking almost obligatory and the ability to scan and send documents by fax or email instantaneously.

The interesting stuff at this level is the ability to track and manage your printing, with reports going to the network admin-

istrator about who is doing what and whether there could be savings.

With most small businesses in the UK having fewer than five people working for them, this is not going to be a device for the majority. But for a busy office with heavy printing demands it should enable people to track their printing activity accurately as well as simply produce paper.

Price: TBC – available from mid-October
Maker's URL: www.canon-europe.com
Pros: Security is built in with users having to identify themselves
Cons: The sheer amount of space taken up
Star rating: ★★★★★

The small laser Samsung SCX-4200

The Samsung is about to be upgraded by a model with a colour printer later in the year. For the moment the SCX-4200 represents a good value mono laser with a copier and scanner included. It's a little ungainly, but is inexpensive and from a reliable brand.

If your needs are likely to change – if you think you might want to print the odd photo or send the odd fax in future – don't buy this. It'll be a white elephant. For people who can be pretty certain their printing needs will remain static and that they'll be happy with black and white, this is a good no-frills option.

Price: £103 excluding VAT
Maker's URL: www.samsung.com/uk
Pros: Does the job efficiently enough
Cons: A little bulky
Star rating: ★★★★★



Efficient: Samsung SCX-4200

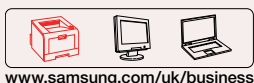


Good value: HP C5180



CLP-600 Colour Laser Printer

- Prints up to 20ppm in A4 (Colour and Mono)
- Business colour printing quality with 2400 x 600 dpi effective output
- Large paper capacity with 350 sheets on line supply
- Network ready with Ethernet 10/100Base TX Interface (CLP-600N)



However, the new Samsung CLP-600 colour laser printer is just as speedy – and cuts out the legwork too.

Imagine being able to print in colour as fast as in black and white. And just think of all the time and frustration you could save by cutting out those long walks to the office printer, only to find the document hasn't even started printing yet. The new Samsung CLP-600 delivers laser quality colour or mono print outs at up to 20 pages per minute. Just another example of the care and attention we put into the design of our business products. To see the other ways our reliability and innovation can make your business better visit www.samsung.com/uk/business. With Samsung it's not that hard to imagine.



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How to turn your clicks to cash

which provides searchable access to the Land Registry's list of property transactions in England and Wales. He reckons he spends about £3,000 a month promoting the site, £200 on hosting and £800 on fees to the Land Registry. Set against this, his income from AdSense last month was just over \$10,000 – or around £5,400 – not a huge profit, but worth having.

Making money from AdSense, however, requires patience. It takes months before even the best-designed, most useful website appears in the rankings of Google and other search engines. When people start coming to a site it's unlikely that more than 3-4% of them will actually click on the ads.

Improving click-through rate (CTR) can easily become an obsession because Google offers such detailed reports on numbers of visitors and how many click on the ads. There's much debate about the most effective methods of improving the percentage CTR, but there's general agreement that ads that blend in with the site and are displayed high up are most likely to be clicked on.

This should be easy. Google provides AdSense subscribers with a fairly wide variety of shapes and sizes for ad blocks. There's even greater flexibility in colour

schemes. However, those of us who are not web designers by trade and would prefer to use off-the-peg templates for blogging can find the compromise between content and advertising hard to make.

Most blogs, for instance, have a wide space for text and pictures with a narrow column down the side for navigation, links and so on. AdSense really works better across three columns, an option that isn't always available from hosts.

Worrying about design structure is, however, somewhat secondary. I know how excited I got when I found I'd earned \$2.65 in a day, but that still falls short of even my limited financial targets. What's missing is traffic.

For me that should come with time. The most successful websites and blogs, in AdSense terms, are specialist and with plenty of regularly updated, original text content.

Meanwhile I'll keep signing into my AdSense account, hoping that the daily number of page impressions will move into triple figures and the number of clicks will increase too so that my page CTR will register a decent percentage. Maybe then my dollar income will cover the cost of hosting my website.

Blogging A nice little 30-year earner

The idea of making money from a blog is particularly appealing to journalists, as former Lancashire Evening Telegraph reporter Craig McGinty explains: "When I write an article for a website it could be around for 20 or 30 years earning me money from advertising." That's rather different from the usually disposable nature of a journalist's work and income.

Blogging is also something that can be done anywhere. McGinty started thisfrenchlife.com in the Dordogne, although he's currently back in Manchester helping with a site he sold. He reckons he now earns a little less than he would on a newspaper, but his disposable income is greater because he no longer has the cost of commuting.

"One of the most effective types of article is the simple 'how to' guide, especially if you can provide some good inside information," he says. "I wrote an article on when the best times are to get tickets on the Eurostar, and it's a consistently good earner as people click to buy after they've read it."



Inside information: Craig McGinty

Generally, he says, the most important thing for anybody wanting to try and make a living from online self-publishing is to try out lots of different ideas and see which ones work. The only major cost is time. NC

'It took a few minutes for the slow wheeze and snort of the train to lull me to sleep'
Travel, page 7