

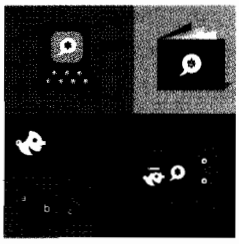
Netwatch By Jim Carroll

Your guide to business & accounting on the Internet

Short shelf life

I have started to wonder if the rush to purchase low-cost offshore home appliances and technology devices is leading to an era of quality degradation. Twenty-five years ago, flush with excess cash from teaching a part-time university course as a first-year CA, I bought my first television and VCR. Over time, my TV and VCR fell from their status as the predominant entertainment machines in my home to being used only while on my exercise bike in the basement. I threw them out two years ago. But I certainly got my money's worth from them.

Not so with some of the latest consumer technology in my life. Last fall, I bought a relatively obscure brand-name TV-DVD recorder. It was a wonderful device: plugged directly into my cable box and recorded TV shows and movies directly onto DVD, which has provided hours of entertainment during my many airplane flights. Yet after four months of use, it completely died, and I discovered it was under warranty for only three months. Purchased at the rock-bottom price of $150 when similar models were $300-plus, the TV-DVD recorder had looked like a great deal at the time. Now it will end up costing me more to ship and pay for the repairs than I had spent on the product. In other words, it's headed for the trash.



This isn't the only device I have purchased that has had a short life span. Last summer we bought a replacement XBox after our original unit gave up the ghost. Within six months it too had packed it in and of course only featured a meager three-month warranty. Two years ago, our brand new high-end Sony TV worked for a mere two weeks before it stopped; fortunately the warranty covered us. And the hard drives in my computers frequently fail; we go through monitors quite regularly. It seems there is a direct relationship between the decreasing cost of offshore production devices and their reliability and life span. If only I had read the product reviews about the DVD recorder before I bought it. After it died, I found numerous scathing reviews on the Internet — all noting shoddy construction.

Fortunately, the Internet is proving to be an extremely useful resource by showcasing what people have to say about products.

The first online site I refer to is the old stalwart ConsumerReports.org. It's now a fee-based online service and is full of detailed and comprehensive reports on a broad range of products. Another comprehensive site is Epinions.com, where individuals post their comments regarding a wide range of automotive, consumer electronic, office and other products. If you are looking for consumer technology or PC gear, the ZDNet review site is extremely comprehensive. Television or entertainment focused? Check out eCoustics.com. And don't forget Amazon.com. The company has moved beyond books into a broad range of products, and you can easily find extensive and often brutal user reviews of their various items. Don't stop there. Sometimes a simple search for a product name with the phrase "product review" will also turn up a variety of user comments.

And of course, always read the reviews with the realization that the accuracy and validity of any comments may be subject to question. Some folks might have an axe to grind with a particular company or product; conversely, other companies have been known to place their own glowing online reviews under assumed names.

As we enter a world in which product reliability becomes ever more fleeting, it makes sense to use the Internet to do our homework.

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a well-known speaker, author and columnist. Reach him at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com or log on to his website at www.jimcarroll.com

FIND MORE PRODUCT FEEDBACK

Consumer Reports
www.consumerreports.org

Epinions.com **www.epinions.com**

eCoustics.com **www.ecoustics.com**

ZDNet reviews **http://reviews-zdnet.com**