

# Mail Order for PC Users

by Patrick Johnston

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Is the high cost of Japanese computer technology getting you down? Have your trips to Akihabara left you weary and confused rather than better equipped? Don't despair; a solution may be not much more than a phone call away.

Flip through any copy of a U.S. magazine for personal-computer users (PC Magazine and PC World, to name just two), and you will see advertisements for a wide assortment of companies that offer retail services through the mail at discount prices. If used properly, mail-order houses can provide you with some of the best equipment the computer world has to offer—at some of the lowest prices.

To many Japan-based computer users such services seem too far away and too risky. Better, they think, to stay close to home, where the going is easy, if expensive. For those who use NEC computers, there is good reason to buy in Japan. But if your equipment is MS-DOS compatible, there are bargains to be had overseas, and availing yourself of them is not as difficult as you may think.

To facilitate the process of ordering by mail, two things are necessary: a fax line and a credit card. Once you have those, simply decide what you want to purchase, write it down, along with your credit-card number and date of expiration, and fax off your order. The mail-order company will do the rest.

Sound easy? It is. But be careful. It's best to do your research thoroughly before taking the plunge. Here are a few tips and caveats from people who order regularly.

Remember to make allowance for shipping costs. A Federal Express charge can sometimes bring the price of what you're ordering close to or even over what you would pay in Japan. Apparently if you use Federal Express for big items and airmail for small you'll minimize shipping costs. Remember also that there is a 10 kilogram weight limit for airmail. Check the weight of the product you're ordering before you decide what shipping method to use.

Many companies charge an additional fee for payment by credit card. Check the fine print.

Guarantees for products ordered directly from the United States won't do you any good in Japan. You can't even be certain the manufacturer will service the equipment. If you want to buy a computer or a printer, make sure there's someone around who can take care of any problems.

Mail order works best for software. The range of DOS software available in the United States is immense, and the catalogues offer it at prices much lower than those in Japan. Mail order is also handy if you are looking for specialized equipment (fax boards, scanners) that is manufactured in the United States. Often such equipment isn't available in Japan; and when it is, the price is hardly worth the investment.

Some recommended U.S. mail-order companies are Softline, PC Connection, and Fast Micro. They are prompt and reliable, and they deliver overseas, which not all such companies do.

Finally, it pays to do your homework. Check to see what is available in Japan and at what price. The exchange rate fluctuates, dealers come and go, and new products are always coming on the market. A well-informed computer user can get the best of both worlds at a considerable saving. □

*[Publisher's Note: I have used PC Connection extensively and find them to be fast, courteous and efficient, but they do have a \$250 minimum on overseas shipments. This is fine if you want one large software package, but you risk delays if you order several items and one or more are not in stock. Since they will ship whatever they have if it's over the \$250, you could be short one or two items, which, if under \$250 will not be back-ordered. Moral - Tell them to hold the shipment until all is in stock.*

*You can usually save yourself a bundle on shipping costs if you open an account with Federal Express and insist on the supplier billing your account. Fed. Ex. set up my account in 30 minutes with one phone call!*