

Alive & Kicking

With vendors shrinking and concentrating their offerings for maximum impact, and applicability and demand continuing to ramp, the projector market is in bullish mood.

Of late, it's been whispered in certain corners that the UK projector market may be on the wane, but if the sector's analysts and vendors are to be believed, reports of its impending doom have been greatly exaggerated.

According to the boffins over at DTC, for instance, the UK projector market is now one of the most advanced in EMEA, so it seems we Brits still seem to like our projectors after all. And with the market dynamics currently in play, who can blame us?

Firstly, the average unit price of technology products as a whole has been falling year on year, and projectors have been no exception, seeing some fairly dramatic drops over the last couple of years. More pertinently still, this is also happening even as the technology has continued to advance, offering users even greater cost to benefit value.

Then there are factors such as educational BECTA funding that arrived in 2003, which could drive a major market refresh through 2008, according to Tom Kendall-Smith, AV Product Manager at Insight.

The market is also moving towards a greater focus on installed rather than stand alone solutions in the corporate and education sectors, says Simeon Joseph, product marketing manager with NEC Display Solutions.

Throw a few other bits and pieces in to the mix, such as emerging AV-friendly concepts like collaborative working and knowledge sharing, plus greater portability than ever with some models weighing less than 2Kg, and the garden looks even rosier.

However, while the projector market is still strong in terms of sales, for various reasons it's not growing as fast as other areas of the display sector such as plasma and LCD.

Accordingly, despite his company commanding the world No.1 spot for projection since 2001 (and in EMEA since 2003) according to DTC, Graeme Davidson, Product Manager at Epson UK, is optimistic, but cautious. He explains: "The projector market continues to be competitive but after a slow start to the financial year and severe price erosion on entry level SVGA and XGA projectors, (it) has shown signs of a recovery..."

Steve Chu, UK director of sales at BenQ, is more bullish. He predicts that 2008 will be a good year for the technology,

with significant growth being buoyed by the replacement market and by further innovation. He cites factors and functionality such as wide format, WXGA, printers, and short-throw technology as key drivers.

Short-throw technology, explains Kendall-Smith, allows the user to project a large image onto their chosen screen surface from a very short distance, and cuts out distractions such as reflections and shadows – including those cast by the presenter standing between the projection unit and the screen. This helps ensure projectors are less restrictive than ever before, and is fast becoming a favourite new way for vendors to bring in new models.

"The Sanyo XE50 & XL50 for example, gives an 80" screen size projecting from only 3" from the surface it's being projecting onto", he says. "So the flexibility, the benefits, and the uses compared to a standard projector are vast."

Other manufacturers such as Epson with its ultra-short throw, compact, lightweight EMP-400W model have their own take on short-throw technology. The EMP-400W is designed for applications such as corporate presentations, especially in smaller meeting areas and delivers a clear, sharp-focused 60" image at just 65cm from the projection surface.

Steljes is a specialist AV market distributor which has been shipping short-throw projection technologies with interactive whiteboards for more than two years, and recently celebrated the shipment of its 6,000th short-throw product.

"It started with the introduction of the NEC WT610 followed by SMART Unifi 35, and then the launch last summer of Toshiba's Extreme Short-Throw Projector (ESP) solution", says Steljes Group Sales and Business Development Director Mark Bird, who cites easy IWB integration as another key benefit that will help the current short-throw boom continue.

"The Toshiba ESP, for example, not only fits perfectly with a SMART Board interactive whiteboard 5 or 6 series, but it can be retrofitted to replace existing projectors."

Other models, such as those recently introduced by NEC, now include widescreen capabilities in response to the popularity of widescreen plasmas and LCDs, and then there are "3D reform" projectors which can be used for creative and unusual displays, and be projected onto curved surfaces and shapes, adds Joseph.



Special Report: AV: Entering the Mainstream?

“When choosing a projector, companies need to consider the environment in which the projector is to be used, how it is going to be used, and by whom...”

Kendall-Smith believes that projectors with wireless networking functionality – which will allow multiple users to connect to a projector with ease, and enable remote management and analysis – will also continue to grow in popularity.


Remote networking and monitoring is particularly key where multiple projectors are to be installed – perhaps in a number of meeting or training rooms across a complex – where it can make a significant difference to maintenance and running costs, says Davidson. Epson’s EasyMP technology is one of a growing number of solutions that can help here. It gives advance notice of any potential maintenance required by generating email alerts and provides essential information on changes to be made.

With the consumer market becoming ever more demanding and the average price falling, Kendall-Smith also sees the home cinema projector space – this having evolved alongside High Definition and Widescreen advancements – as being a key market this year.

Of course, there are no specific rules of thumb when buying projectors and all say that firms should evaluate on a case-by-case basis. “When choosing a projector, companies need to consider the environment in which the projector is to be used, how it is going to be used, and by whom”, says Epson’s Davidson. He feels that versatility and ease-of-use should be primary concerns though, as projectors are often used by a large number of people within the business and need to operate within a range of varying environments.

“With various specifications and technologies best used for certain applications, the most important thing is to find the right projector for the users’ requirements and for the environment in which it will be used”, echoes Kendall Smith. “There is nothing you should really avoid. However, it’s worth remembering that projector lamps have a life span, so lamp replacement is worth considering when purchasing the original projector.” Consider any warranties on offer too. They vary from manufacturer to manufacturer, but good deals are often available that cover both the projector and the lamp.

With kit getting smaller, lighter and therefore easier to steal, a further key concern is the question of security, with each vendor evolving their own particular answers. The Toshiba ESP for instance, comes with its own control panel which is fixed to the wall so that the projector is rendered useless should anyone steal it. Other measures include password driven security – Epson’s EMP400We requires a password whenever it’s reconnected to the mains – special cages, and clear anti-theft labelling to put potential thieves off.

However, as Joseph rightly points out, concerns over security are really no greater than those of other pieces of IT equipment, so security should be dealt with in the same way – thoroughly. 

Choosing a projector?

Brightness (Lumens)

More lumens, higher price. Choose a projector with the lumen rating you need. No need for overkill. What’s the audience size? Larger audiences need larger images. Larger images need brighter projectors. Brighter projectors have greater lumens ratings. How bright is the venue? The lighter it is the brighter the projector needs to be to compensate.

As a rule, products with around 700 ANSI lumens are sufficient for small groups of up to say six or eight people. Mid-sized groups (20-25) need around 1000 ANSI lumens. Larger groups really need 2000 ANSI lumens plus.

Throw Distance

The distance from the projector’s lens to the screen/ projection surface. The farther from the screen the projector is positioned, the larger the image will appear and the greater the light source therefore needed.

Resolution

Categorised in the same way as monitors. Choose according to your usage. For example: For PowerPoints, slides, simple clear graphics = SVGA. Spreadsheets, more detailed graphics, Large screen = XGA. Extreme detail, CAD, technical and architectural drawings = SXGA.

Weight

What’s the projector for – auditorium based presentations? The meeting room? Off site demos? The more it gets moved around the lighter and more portable it must obviously be.

Categories include:

- Home Cinema – the lightest unit at sub-2Kg (a bag of sugar). Increasingly popular for domestic entertainment.
- Micro Portable – the smallest/ lightest commercial projectors at 2-3Kg (notebook PC). Ideal for presenting on the move
- Ultra Portable – Up to 6kg (2 notebook PCs). Heavier but generally higher functionality
- Desktop / Portable – 10 to 15 kg (6 bottles of wine). A meeting/conference room staple
- Fixed – Top weight, top performance, top price. Ideal for larger venues..

Price

Try to buy to budget, not price.

Fan Noise

A noisy fan can be a real distraction, so check the noise rating before buying.

In a nutshell

The projector market looks set for continued growth this year as vendors look to ship smaller more powerful solutions to market. Portability is no longer an issue because of this and new lateral thinking has helped secure these products further.



UK.INSIGHT.COM/iQ ▼ 0800 333 333