Kogan Agora

LIVES UP TO THE NETBOOK IDEAL, BUT IT'S SADLY HO-HUM IN TOO MANY ASPECTS

PRICE $399 **SUPPLIER** www.kogan.com.au

Kogan is mostly famous for cheap, online-only AV products – notably televisions. Kogan's Agora is a crowdsourced netbook: it's produced in a factory in China to the specifications that Kogan's website visitors most wanted. Even so, it doesn't feel new or innovative.

Take the specifications, for example. The 10.1in 1024 x 600 display, 1.6GHz Intel Atom N270 are standard netbook fare, and combined with the expected 160GB hard drives, Intel GMA 950 graphics and 802.11b/g Wi-Fi it's all a bit ho-hum.

Kogan is one of the few netbooks that still comes supplied with Linux onboard – you can opt for it with the BenQ joybook, and a few others, but it's uncommon. It uses gOS, a Google-heavy Ubuntu port that's reminiscent of Mac OS X. Many of the included apps live in the Google Cloud.

The six-cell battery provides a comfortable angle for use – it's a step up from the bulging 6-cell batteries of the MSI models on test this month.

The keyboard provides reasonable key size, but responsiveness is less than ideal. It felt cheap and uncomfortable for long periods compared to other models this month.

The build quality is comparable to the early Eee PC – it feels as though Kogan has based their entire model around these early designs, in fact – and bends more than we'd like both for screen and chassis. We experienced some wireless dropouts during use, and for a netbook that has its head so firmly in the clouds, it poses a definite problem.

Having said all that, the one place where Kogan is leaps and bounds ahead of the competition is price. Given that netbooks started as a cheap alternative to laptops, only Kogan, out of the models here, really lives up to that ideal.

BATTERY LIFE	★★★☆☆
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★☆☆☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★½☆

Lenovo IdeaPad S10e

FINE BUILD AND A KEEN PRICE, IF NOT THE PRETTIEST OF DESIGNS

PRICE $529 **SUPPLIER** www.citysoftware.com.au

Lenovo's IdeaPad S10e may not exude the glossy panache of some its rivals, but its plain, matte-black figure has an understated class all of its own. It probably won't win any style points for its design, but it certainly doesn't look or feel cheap. The build quality is typical of Lenovo computers – it's stiff, sturdy and wholly reassuring.

The attention to detail is impressive. Removing just two screws on the underside gives easy access to both the memory slot and hard disk – something that IT departments will undoubtedly come to love – and the provision of an ExpressCard/34 slot is a rarity in the netbook world.

These little touches are matched by sensible design elsewhere. The keyboard, for instance, isn't the best here, but despite the half-height Enter key and slightly cramped layout it still proves perfectly usable. Look beneath, and while the touchpad is a touch too small, its traditional layout and firm-feeling buttons are a pleasure to use.

There are some niggles, however. The 4700mAh battery gave disappointing results, with just over five hours of light use. The display isn't great, either, with a lowly 1024 x 576 resolution. If you think a standard netbook display is cramped, the Lenovo's is worse. The speakers mounted on the front edge aren't particularly musical, either.

However, for $529, it's easy to overlook the worst of the S10e's transgressions. It may not be a hit with consumers, but we can imagine its IT manager-friendly features helping it fit into the business world.

BATTERY LIFE	★★★★☆
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★★½

ATOM BOMBED

Intel's Atom platform may provide the backbone of today's netbooks, but with rivals emerging, Intel could find itself playing a smaller part in the future.

The first challenger pounces on Intel's major Achilles heel: its mediocre graphics performance. The Atom itself is an efficient performer, but the accompanying GMA 500 and 950 chipsets baulk at gaming and HD video playback. Nvidia's Ion platform remedies this by taking Intel's graphics out of the equation and employing its own significantly more capable GeForce 9400M graphics chipset.

Ultimately, the limited horsepower of the Atom CPU limits how much graphical grunt Nvidia can bring to the party, but even modest Ion-based systems such as Acer's Revo are capable of light gaming and 1080p video playback. And with Lenovo's forthcoming IdeaPad S12, Nvidia's Ion finds its first portable home in a sleek-looking 12in netbook. If the projected pricing is to be believed – just $499 in the US, $50 more than the standard non-Ion spec – the S12 will blur the line between ultraportable and netbook like no other.

Nvidia also has something up its sleeve that could potentially nudge Atom out of the netbook world altogether – Tegra. It's a simple recipe: take an ARM processor, the likes of which you'd normally find in a smartphone, and bolt on a graphics unit capable of HD video decoding along with the south bridge, north bridge and memory controllers.

The benefit? Well, thanks to its drastically lower power consumption and more efficient architecture, Tegra promises not hours', but days' worth of battery life.

There's one serious downside, however. The ARM architecture means Tegra can't run x86 software such as Windows XP, Vista or 7, so it has to make do with Windows CE embedded and the promise of a 3D rendered GUI on top. Intel isn't entirely unprepared for all of this, however, and its Pine Trail platform – slated for a late 2009 arrival, though we've heard rumours of delays – promises new heights for Atom. With a graphics processing unit built into the CPU, it too promises lower power consumption and improved performance, and while running a standard x86-based operating system too.

Whether it will turn the tide against Nvidia's best is yet to be seen, but whoever wins the battle, it's going to be an exciting few years for the netbook.