



LEXMARK C534dn

Lexmark color lasers have a good track record in earning Editors' Choice nods, so I was looking forward to getting my hands on the Lexmark C534dn (\$999 direct). Sure enough, it lives up to expectations, delivering great-looking output at high speed. Even better, it offers the right paper-handling features for its target market of small offices or workgroups, including built-in duplexing, a standard 250-sheet paper drawer, a 100-sheet multipurpose tray, and a 550-sheet paper tray option (\$299 direct) for a maximum 900 sheets. And, yes (so you don't have to skip to the end to find out), it's good enough to earn an Editors' Choice.

The C534dn is one of six new related color lasers at prices ranging from \$499 to \$1,299 (direct)—the others are the C530dn, C532n, C532dn, C534n, and C534dtn. Lexmark says all of these are variations on a theme, built around the same engine that's rated at 24 pages per minute for monochrome printing and 22 ppm for color.

The differences between the models lie mainly in cost per page (based on the toner cartridges available for each) and some additional features in the more expensive models, such as secure printing, with the printer holding a job in memory until you punch in a PIN code on a front-panel keypad. The claimed cost per page ranges from a high of 2.6 cents for black and 14.5 cents for color (for the C530dn) to a low of 1.9 cents for black and 9.6 cents for color (for the C534 versions).

At 19 by 17.3 by 16.1 inches (HWD) and 59 pounds, the C534dn's size and weight are typical for those of printers in this category. You'll probably want at least two people to take it out of its box and move it into place. Setup is typical, too: Remove the packing materials, load paper, connect the power cord and cable, and run the automated installation routine.

Using a network connection in my tests, the C534dn took 8 minutes 26 seconds on our business applications suite (timed with QualityLogic's hardware and software, www.qualitylogic.com). The similarly priced Konica Minolta magicolor 5440 DL turned in a somewhat slower 9:02. You have to move up to the more expensive Xerox Phaser 6300DN to get a faster speed (7:07). For photos, the C534dn took only 17 seconds on average for each 4-by-6 print and 27 seconds for each 8-by-10.

The printer's output quality is as impressive as its speed. It can handle any text you throw at it, with output that's a match for that of the best monochrome lasers and among the best available. Every font in our test suite that's appropriate for typical business documents was easily



readable, with well-formed characters, at 4 points. Even the toughest font to print well needed only 10 points to pass the threshold for easy readability. Most printers can't pass the test with that font even at 12 points.

Graphics quality was easily good enough for any internal business use. And if you're careful about staying away from thin lines, which tend to disappear (as they do with many other printers), it's good enough for output going to an important client or for things like trifold brochures.

I also saw some minor visible dithering (patterns in what should be solid fills) and misregistration (in the form of small slices of white between blocks of colors, because the colors don't line up precisely). But the key word is minor. Neither issue should be a problem unless you're a graphic artist who needs the highest quality possible, or have a well-trained eye and insist on perfection.

Photos looked surprisingly good for a color laser printer. Mount most of our test photos in a frame behind glass and they'll pass for photo quality—at least, until you look closely and notice the visible dithering. In some photos, however, colors were a little off, tending toward being too punchy or just missing a muddy look. In any case, the photos are easily good enough for client newsletters or trifold brochures.

If you need a color laser printer for a small office, the Lexmark C534dn's overall level of output quality, combined with its speed, paper-handling, and price, should be on your short list. —M. David Stone



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Bottomline: If you're looking for fast, good-looking output and reasonably heavy-duty paper-handling for a small office or workgroup, the Lexmark C534dn delivers it all.

Pros: Fast. Top-quality text. Impressive photo quality for a color laser.

Cons: Although good enough for business use, graphics output is a notch below the best available from color lasers.

