Keeping Up
By Paul Howard, NCTCUG

I was cutting the grass this morning, hoping that I'd have it short enough so I could apply fertilizer with weed killer after the rain that's predicted. I've had long wet grass clog the spreader, and thus waste a day, the rain, and time. Then I realized, that aside from using the Internet to try and second guess the weather, technology sure hasn't impacted my yard chores very much. I can't plug in more memory, or upgrade to a faster processor.
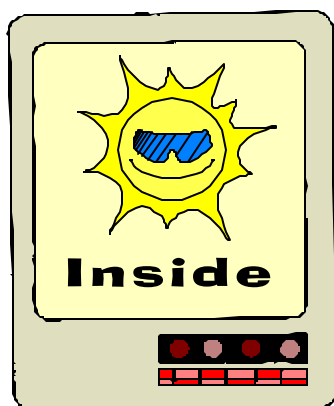
I mentioned that "WeatherBug" appeared on my computer system after one of the many XP updates I've loaded onto my system, while other user group members reported not having seen this program. It burrows in and starts on boot up, insisting on dialing up to get the latest temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, and a host of other weather statistics. It gets current realtime information from various sources close to your location — you provide your zip code. There are 25 locations within 10 miles of my house, mostly schools, but including Dulles Airport and the US Geologic Service

that can be selected to feed data into the WeatherBug application.

Lots of other weather information is available, including forecasts, weather maps, camera views, and radar information. When you're on-line, Weatherbug gives a chirp and lets you know when the National Weather Service issues an alert for your area. Give it a try - there's a mode that allows you to select advertisers that run in a banner of the Weatherbug console. Those banners will nag at times about updating to the paid version, but it's not that annoying, and I've used the ad-sponsored service for months. (http://weatherbug.com/aws/index.asp)

For Beginners Only
Using The Internet To Increase Buying Power

By Charlie Paschal, Editor/Publisher, Palmetto Personal Computer Club, Columbia, SC; Columnist, The (Columbia) State newspaper, SC

Buying on the Internet may intimidate some (not me) but the Internet can serve other purposes, such as a way to check prices against what you can find locally or in other nearby stores.

Ten years ago, I can't tell you the times I would buy something and then two weeks later find it for $50 or $100 less at another store in another city or town. After the normal fussing, I'd blame myself for bad judgment, although in those days I had no way of avoiding it.

Now, though, with the Internet, there is no excuse.

First, a couple of points to remember about the Internet:

- Items, in most cases, will be less expensive on the Internet.

- Shipping costs must always be added into the cost of an item.

- In some cases, you might save on taxes, but that depends on several factors.

- Chain stores, such as Wal-Mart, Target or Best Buy, usually charge the same for an item, even if it's in another state.

- Some items might be refurbished or reconditioned, so make sure that the item you're looking at is actually new because used items will be priced less.

There are several ways to check the price of an item, but you must do some homework first.

- Get the item's name and model.

- If you can't get all that information, get as much as you can.

- Plug that information into a search engine site, such as www.google.com.

- To get "real people" reviews of products, type that same name into www.deja.com.

Another way to use the Internet is to check the features of different models or the features of a model you're thinking about buying. This can reap dividends because while doing this research, you may find that the model you're buying might not have the features you really need.

Let's take digital cameras, for example. While using a broad search at google using only the term digital camera might bring up thousands of hits, it might turn up other digital cameras that have additional features you haven't thought about while shopping. As an example, you probably will find a site that lists digital cameras, feature-by-feature, giving you a better idea of what you need to look for in a camera.

Among those hits, too, could be information that can save you money in other ways. A good example is a modem, a device that hooks up to a telephone line to connect to the Internet. Most computers come with what's called a "soft modem," meaning it uses the computer's computing power rather than its own.

Although this might sound good, it's actually bad because these modems are cheap, cheap, cheap. If you're on a poor telephone line, you might want to get a "real" hardware modem so you can have a better chance at higher-speed connections. By reading

the information you get on modems, you could learn that a hardware modem is more expensive but in the long run, will offer considerably better performance. Sometimes buying higher quality pays dividends.

This also brings up another way you can use the Internet besides buying goods: reviews.

We all know the old saying about everyone having an opinion but on the Internet you can always find opinions and reviews of products. Despite everyone thinking the Internet is all about technology, the truth is that you can find information about every product known to man, including cars, furniture— you name it.

The two sites mentioned above can help you find reviews of nearly every product or real time opinions about products. Remember, though, that you must weigh the opinions, reading several before making up your mind. There will be some fervent opinions on both sides.

To produce some of these, just type in the name of the product and the word review afterwards. For example, type in Ford Taurus reviews and hit search. Do this in each of the search engines to get not only reviews written by professionals but reviews written by "real people" who don't normally write for a living. Quite often, the real people reviews give you more information than the professional ones.

You don't always have to buy on the Internet to reap its benefits. Browse, search, research; all of them can make your life more interesting—and safer.
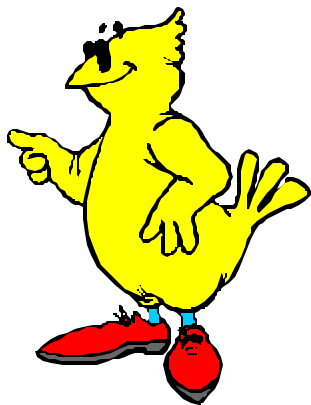
Accessibility For Everyone
By Billy Mabray, Oklahoma City PC Users Group eMonitor, February 2004

Many people, including a lot of Web designers, think Web-site accessibility is only about making sites work for blind users with screen reader software. Accessibility should be about all of us. There is a wide range of physical conditions that can make using the Web difficult. The Internet can be a frustrating place when you have poor eyesight, color-blindness, or trouble using a mouse. You may not fall into any of these categories right now, but consider this statistic: 100% of Internet users are growing older. At some point, we will all need help navigating the Web.

There are many things that can be done to make the Web more accessible. Some of those things are already built into your Web browser. Others require Web designers to implement accessible features on their Web sites. If you are one of the many people who has difficulty using the Web, you will want to know what help is out there.

One of the biggest complaints people have is that text is too small. It is also the easiest to remedy. If you are using Internet Explorer, choose View>Text Size from the top menu. Also, if your mouse has a scroll wheel, you can hold the CTRL key and scroll up and down to change the text size. Now, this will not work on all Web pages – later, we will discuss why that is and what Web designers can do about it. The Netscape/Mozilla browser, however, can change text size on all Web pages. Choose View>Increase Text Size, or hold CTRL and press the + key.

There are many shortcut keys available for those who have difficulty using a mouse. For example, the backspace key will take you to the previous page, F5 will reload your current page, and ALT plus the Home key will take you to your home page (the page set to load when you open your browser). Also, if you have gone back to a previous page, ALT plus the right arrow will take you forward again. Another useful key on any Web page is the TAB key. You can use the TAB key (and SHIFT

Internet Comparison Shopping

By Jerry Wonderly, Dayton Microcomputer Association, Inc.

Whether we're ready or not, the Christmas season is fast approaching. We will soon be caught up in the rush of going from mall to mall and store to store in search of that unique gift. However, many Americans now do much of their shopping online and the savvy shopper uses comparison-shopping websites. After some research, I think I've come up with some sites that will be helpful as you begin to Christmas shop online too. I'm admittedly no expert so please consider the following as my own personal opinions.

In preparing for this article, a list was compiled of six possible gifts from six different categories because some comparison shopping sites are more comprehensive than others. The six theoretical gifts include: a highly-rated Canon Powershot A70 3.2 megapixel digital camera; a best-selling book called "Founding Brothers – The Revolutionary Generation" by Joseph J. Ellis; a top 10 PC game called "Rise Of Nations" by Microsoft; a bottle of Estee Lauder perfume called "Pleasures" in a 1.7 ounce size; a board game called "Harry Potter: Heir Of Slytherin;" and a popular golfing putter called the "Titleist Scotty Cameron Studio Design 1.5."

Next, a list of comparison-shopping websites was put together. As with last year, some of the popular sites have been swallowed up by their competition. Deal Time, for example, is now Shopping.com and Epinions is now run by Shopping.com while Lycos Shopping uses the Bizrate search engine. Strangely though, affiliated sites don't always return the same merchant results and even the price results can vary. At any rate, the following comparison shopping sites were used in my research:

> Lycos shop.lycos.com/,
> BizRate www.bizrate.com,
> Price Grabber www.pricegrabber.com,
> Shopping.com www.shopping.com,
> Epinions www.epinions.com,
> My Simon www.mysimon.com,
> Yahoo http://shopping.yahoo.com,
> Value Find www.valuefind.com,
> Shop Best www.shopbest.com,
> NexTag www.nextag.com, and
> Price Scan www.pricescan.com.

An improvement over last year is that most of the comparison-shopping sites now have merchant reviews, and automatically compute tax and shipping to get an accurate display of true pricing. These include Lycos, BizRate, Price Grabber, Shopping.com, Epinions, Yahoo, and NexTag. My Simon and Price Scan don't compute tax but do for shipping and also have merchant reviews. Shop Best and Value Find have unusual sites in that the results usually took me to only one vendor to choose from. Shop Best had a very slow search engine and Value Page's frames are cumbersome and wouldn't react properly when clicking links. However, overall, most of the sites worked extremely fast, were laid out well, and offered several categories and stores to choose from.

Many online merchants are listed on multiple comparison-shopping websites. Their prices often vary from site to site though so it pays to search more than one comparison engine. Many sellers offer free shipping. As with brick-and-mortar stores, use good judgement when deciding which vendor to buy from. Don't be hesitant about getting seller information from the Better Business Bureau at www.bbb.org/. Also, consider looking for coupons and discount codes from websites like Amazing Bargains www.amazingbargains.com, Deal Catcher www.dealcatcher.com and Deal Of Day www.dealofday.com.

Here are the results of my make-believe shopping trip:

On the camera, NexTag had the lowest price from a merchant called Dbargains at $240 plus tax and shipping. Unfortunately, you don't know what the tax and shipping are until after you've completed all of the online purchase orders. The next lowest price on the camera came from a Yahoo vendor called Rush4Digital. They are selling it for a total price of $264.80. However, Rush4Digital is an unrated merchant at the time of this writing. My Simon's vendor, Beach Camera, offers the camera for $269.00 plus tax, if any. Beach Camera www.beachcamera.com appears on many of the comparison search sites.

[DataBus Editor's Note: Whenever purchasing electronics over the Internet, be sure to ask the vendor if the item you want to purchase comes with a valid U.S. warranty. Sometimes the very lowest prices found in searches are for "gray market" goods that were intended by the manufacturer to be sold overseas and thus do not carry a U.S. warranty (and, infrequently, may not even have an owners manual written in English). The lack of a manufacturer's U.S. warranty should only be a problem if you need warranty service so every buyer must decide for himself whether to assume the lack-of-warranty risk with some gray market merchandise in exchange for a potentially lower price. See what the New York Better Business Bureau has to say about gray market merchandise at _http://www.newyork.bbb.org/library/publications/subrep45.html_.]

For the book, Lycos and Bizrate bested the competition with identical deals of $9.19 with tax and shipping included from Overstock www.overstock.com. I've bought from Overstock before and have had good experiences.

As far as the PC game, Yahoo had the lowest price at $37.95 total from a company called Purplus based in California. They have a high merchant rating on Yahoo.

Shopping for the perfume led me to the lowest price at Price Grabber's LuxNY.com based in New Jersey. They offered it for a total price of $34.94. The drawback is that LuxNY is an unrated merchant. Shopping in the fragrance category on all of the comparison shopping sites was a bit unusual. None of them formulated tax and shipping for some reason.

Next, I looked for the Harry Potter board game. Most of the search sites came up with nothing. Only Lycos, BizRate and Yahoo had listings. The lowest price was found on Lycos and BizRate at a merchant called TovBid.com. They sell the board game for $8.99 with free shipping. There's no mention of sales tax.

Lastly, the Titleist putter was kind of hit or miss. Five of the sites either didn't have a category of Sports or just didn't list this putter. Of those that do have merchants selling this putter, Price Scan has a store called Golfalltheway who lists it for $219.99 plus tax and shipping. Yahoo's Need2Golf.com sells the putter for a grass blade less at $219.00 plus tax and shipping.

In conclusion, I was pleased overall with the improvement of the Internet comparison-shopping experience over last year. There are several good competitors out there with many reputable stores in their listings. It is pretty easy to navigate their sites and most of them allow you to sort the results by total price. This year we can be spared some of the aggravation of running from mall to mall and store to store in search of that perfect gift by doing at least some of our shopping online. But, you want to know something? Even if I do find all of my gifts online, I think I'll still venture out into the madness of the store crowds just to get that Christmas feeling.

Then again, I might just stay home and watch that "Charlie's Angels" Christmas Special…

Happy Holidays, everyone.

To Upgrade or Not to Upgrade!

By Timothy Everingham, TUGNET teveringham@acm.org

To upgrade or not to upgrade, that is the question. Whether it is nobler to upgrade the computer you have or to put aside the invested fortune of your current computer and get a new one? Or yet do you even need to put your cash into computer hardware? Even Shakespeare didn't have to deal with these questions, which in recent years have become even more complicated to answer.

Where you should start is by determining what your present and future needs and wants are going to be. Don't try to project over five years. I am not talking about what hardware you may drool over, but what you will want or need to do with your computer. Will it be word processing; web surfing; email; burning CD and DVDs; database or list management; software development; photo, graphics, video editing and creation; or something else? Then you look at the application software that will accomplish those tasks. Also look at how long will your current application software and operating system(s) be supported by the manufacturer (Windows 98 will no longer have support and patches available after December 31, 2003). Also, if you have software that is known to be troublesome, like Windows ME, the need or desire to upgrade it should be considered. Then you look at the system requirements to run these applications: hardware, operating system, and other supporting software (software that is required to be installed on your system in order for your application to run).

Remember that the companies want to sell you the software or hardware, resulting in the minimum software requirements listed being as low as possible and may not reflect real world conditions. If you have a system that is exactly listed as the minimum system requirements (it is the minimum system requirements if only one is listed) consider that this product will run extremely slowly and crash at times. Some manufactures list both minimum and recommended system requirement, and you do not want to be too far below the recommended requirements. Also, some system requirements listed do not change the RAM requirements for different operating systems. They list as minimum RAM the one for the oldest operating system. A program may run on Windows 95, 98, 98 SE, ME, 2000, and XP; but the amount of RAM needed in reality is more for Windows 98, 98 SE, and ME than Windows 95 and more for Windows 2000 and XP than Windows 98, 98 SE, and ME.

There are some general guidelines. If you have a Pentium II computer, AMD equivalent or older and are doing anything else than word processing, simple web surfing and email you are looking at having too many things needed to upgrade for it to be worthwhile. With Macintosh or notebook computers, upgrade options are more limited than desktop PCs so, unless it is fairly new, you should be looking at getting a new computer. Also, you have to look at how many of your computer's components are close to or past their expected lifetimes. If your computer's components are five years or older, your computer is living on borrowed time. Where the upgrade option looks better is with Pentium 3, Pentium 4 or Athlon-based desktop computers. However, software activation has made this more complicated. With activation the software takes a snapshot of your computer's hardware configuration. If you try to run it after doing too many upgrades the software decides that it is not the same computer; violating the software license and shuts itself down. You then have to go to the software manufacturer and try to convince them that the computer you upgraded is not a new computer. The most famous of the programs that includes this feature is Windows XP, but there are a growing number of application software packages that also have this feature.

Of course this has bred a lot of fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD) about upgrading computers, which the people who sell new computers are happy to take advantage of. If you do a combination motherboard (main circuit board) and processor replacement, activation should be a problem for you.

If your current computer fits your system's requirements of your expected needs and wants, congratulations; you are done without having to spend any money.

However, if you still are considering upgrading, the next thing you want to do is get out your mother-board manual (may be contained in computer man-ual). It will tell you what components can be in-stalled on it. If you can't find your manual, there is likely to be a PDF of it on the manufacturer's web-site. While you are there check to see if there are any BIOS updates available that may give the moth-erboard new features that you may need. If the motherboard does not support the processor; type, speed or amount of RAM; or the type of plug-in card (AGP, PCI, EISA, ISA) you want to install, you will have to install a new motherboard that will. For drive (IDE, ATA, SATA, SCSI), IEEE 1394 (Firewire), and USB interfaces you can get plug-in cards instead of getting a new motherboard.

Upgrading your RAM is probably the thing that can be most effective in putting off the need to buy a new computer. The others would be a new video card and a new hard drive.

Installing a CD or DVD R/RW drive is also a good option in order to backup things on you hard drives and being able to take data and media files off your drives that you use infrequently.

Don't forget to calculate your power requirements and have the case be able to fit the motherboard. After you make up a list of your proposed upgrade parts, add up the cost of them. Then compare this cost to the cost of a similar system to what your up-graded system would be. If you are doing a lot of upgrading you will find that the totally new com-puter will be close to or cost less than the cost of upgrading (there is a discount for buying an entirely new computer rather than just the parts of one). If you find yourself in this position you should lean toward buying a new computer. With this type of consideration you should also be looking at how you will transfer data and applications from your old computer to your new one (remember software acti-vation issues).

With AMD releasing their Athlon 64 bit desktop processors, one of the issues in upgrading or buying a new computer is "will I need a 64 bit processor." For most people the answer is not until the later part of this decade. To get the most out of a 64 bit proc-essor you need 64 bit applications running on top of a 64 bit operating system. Of course if you have a
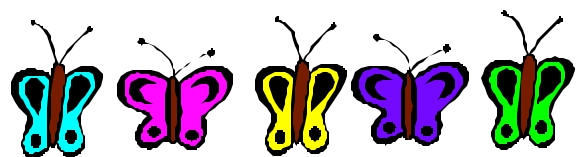
Mac G5 system running Panther (Mac OS 10.3) and some of the recent versions of the high level Apple content creation applications you are already there, but for the PC world only 64 bit applications pro-grams now are very high level server based or sci-entific applications.

There is 64 bit Linux, but the Windows XP version is still in beta and won't be out until spring 2004. There will be 64 bit versions of some games in 2004, but do not look until 2005 for a significant amount of 64 bit software for Windows XP. Be-cause there will be a lot of 32 bit computers around for a while there should be plenty of 32 bit soft-ware. The 64 bit Athlons and what rumors say Intel is developing as a 64 bit desktop processor will be able to run 32 bit applications well, which should also keep the 32 bit software market healthy for quite a while. So unless you are a high level gamer, run high-level scientific or content creation applica-tions, or run Macs you should wait on getting a 64 bit processor computer.

Making the decision on whether to upgrade your current computer or buy a new computer has be-come more complex than it was a few years ago. A systematic step-by-step approach is appropriate. First determine your needs, then what will support filling those needs, and then weigh the costs of up-grading or buying new. May the wisdom of the Great Elizabethan Bard be upon you, resulting in a fruitful bounty of computer buying.

Essentials for that New Computer

By Ira Wilsker

According to preliminary sales figures, computers were among the most popular items purchased this holiday season. Straight out of the box they may be a joy, accompanied with confusion, and some mild fears. Experience and familiarity will resolve most of the confusion, but some common essentials may help eliminate many of the fears.

Almost all new computers straight from the box were most likely manufactured prior to the release of the latest security patches, and will require the downloading and installation of all critical updates. Likewise, most computers recently made to order will not have the latest operating system updates. If operating system software was purchased separately, it also will not be up to date. It is imperative that once set up, if internet access is already established, that the user of a Windows computer immediately goes to windowsupdate.microsoft.com and download and install at least the critical updates listed. Other non-critical updates listed may be downloaded and installed when desired, but the critical updates must be installed immediately.

Another absolute essential for that new (and old, too) computer is antivirus software. While many new computers come with a limited time trial version of some antivirus product installed, there is no necessity to renew that particular product when it expires. There are many excellent titles available, often at spectacular prices after rebates. In the retail market, the sales leaders are Symantec's Norton AntiVirus (often bundled with other Symantec Norton titles), and Network Associates' McAfee Antivirus (also often bundled with other McAfee products). Many other excellent titles are available either at retail from the local stores, or for download. If holiday bills are a pressing problem, one of the free antivirus products may be appropriate. One commercial bundle, including antivirus, firewall, and popup killer is Computer Associates eTrust EZ Armor Security Suite, available for a limited time as a free (for personal use) download. This full featured commercial product ($50) is currently being made available for free download from www.my-etrust.com/microsoft as a promotion cosponsored by Microsoft's security division. The free download

includes a year of free updates. Once the year is up, the user will have the option of renewing for another year at the then current license fee. Other free (for personal use) antivirus software is Avast available from www.avast.com, and AVG downloadable from www.grisoft.com.

With today's risky cyber environment, a firewall has also become an essential product for new (and old) computers. A firewall isolates your computer from hacker attacks over the internet, and also provides some protection from Trojans sending out information. While often bundled with antivirus software, many times it must be installed separately. Commercial firewalls from McAfee and Norton are available locally, as are other firewalls. There are also several excellent firewalls available for free (for personal use) by download. My personal choice is Outpost, available from www.agnitum.com. The single most popular firewall in use is Zone Alarm, www.zonelabs.com.

Also essential is a good anti-spyware program to protect your personal privacy and security. One of the most popular and highly rated spyware detection and removal programs is Spybot Search and Destroy, available for free download from www.safer-networking.org. This program also includes an "immunize" function that will offer some protection from much of the spyware that is common on the net. The leading commercial spyware protector is PestPatrol, available for download from www.pestpatrol.com. As with antivirus and firewall software, anti-spyware software is frequently updated by the publisher, and updates must be downloaded and run frequently in order to maximize protection. One proviso; never purchase anti-spyware software from popup ads or spam mail, as they are often fraudulent or of low quality, and only encourage more spamming.

Something often neglected with that new (or old) computer is power protection. The electricity coming into our homes is often "dirty", with electrical noise and power fluctuations, and these events may damage the sensitive electronics in our computers.

At a minimum, a good surge suppressor (not a simple power strip) is a necessity to protect the computer and its peripherals from electrical damage. Surge protection is measured in "joules", and the more joule capacity, generally the better the protection. Even better is a good quality "UPS" or uninterruptible power supply, which in addition to providing clean power to the computer and its peripherals, can also safely power the computer for short periods of time in the event of a brownout or power failure, allowing for a safe and orderly shutdown, without losing data or damaging equipment. If a UPS is in your future, make sure it has enough power for your system. All surge suppressors and UPS devices should also have a UL1449 rating, an indication that it meets minimal feature and safety standards.

Internet access has become almost universal, and has switched from a geek luxury, to almost everyone's necessity. Generally avoid the "deals" that are often preinstalled or bundled with new computers, especially for some of the overpriced national services. There are several excellent local internet service providers (ISPs) that typically offer service superior to many of the well know national providers, but at a lower price. If dialup service is wanted, check with such fine local companies as Eonet (www.eonet.net) or EXP Internet Services (www.exp.net). Broadband is available via satellite from EXP, DSL from SBC, or cable via Time Warner or your local cable company. One proviso; if the broadband provider is offering a "12 month special price", find out what it will cost after the trial period is over.

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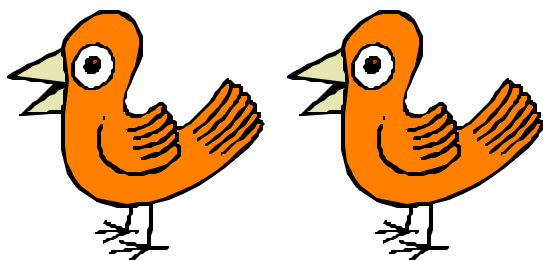
plus TAB to go in reverse) to quickly navigate forward through all the links and form fields on a Web page. Once you have tabbed to a form element, other keyboard shortcuts may come in handy. For drop-down boxes, you can use the up and down arrows to highlight your selection. For radio buttons or checkboxes, use the space bar to select your choice. If you are using a recent version of Netscape/Mozilla, you can also use "Find As You Type." Start typing at any page and it will automatically do a search for what you are typing on that page.

Some people, particularly the colorblind, find Web sites hard to use because the color of the text does not contrast enough with the background colors. If the color scheme of your favorite Web site makes it difficult to read, you can override that as well. You will find this under Tools->Options or Edit->Preferences, depending on your browser. You can set your default fonts, font sizes, and page colors. You can also specify that your defaults always override what is set by the Web page.

While these browser features can be helpful, there is still much Web designers must do to make their site accessible to the widest possible audience. A good example is text sizing. If Web designers use fixed text sizes – sizes that specify an absolute unit of measurement, such as points or pixels – on their pages, Internet Explorer users cannot change their text size as I described earlier. Web designers can, and should, use relative text sizes to make their pages more accessible. Designers who prefer to use absolute sizes for text should provide a "style switcher." This is a link on the page that allows the site's visitor to make the text bigger and saves that preference in a cookie.

Another accessibility feature that some designers use is access keys. These are just like the shortcut keys I mentioned earlier; except they are defined by the Web page you are on. For example, the designer could define ALT plus 4 to take you directly to the search function. If you visit a site regularly and know their access keys, they can be useful.

Web designers should also use labels for forms.

Computer Viruses And Spam Ruled In 2003 — Be Prepared!

By Ira Wilsker

The final statistics on spam emails and viruses have been released by several organizations and companies, and it was not a good year for computer users who had to deal with them. Through awareness of what happened last year, we may be better prepared to deal with what we may encounter in 2004.

Even though President Bush signed the "Can Spam" act, and it recently went into effect, the spam tracking companies have found no decrease in the amount of spam emails being sent, and in fact there are indications that it is still increasing at a rapid rate. According to the e-mail filtering service Brightmail (www.brightmail.com), the percentage of all emails in December, 2003, that were spam was 58%, compared to the January 2003 rate of 42%, a substantial increase. Of the spam filtered in December, Brightmail determined that 21% was for products advertising general goods and services, 18% was financially oriented, 18% was adult oriented, 9% was for outright scams, 6% each for health, leisure, or internet related, 3% was spiritual or religiously oriented, and 3% were for clear frauds.

The marketing research and information company Synovate (www.synovate.com) found that the average American received an average of 155 spam emails per week, for each email account used. One out of five Americans received over 200 spams per week, in each account. Statistically, men receive more spam than women each week, 164 compared to 147, and there is no major difference in the rate of spam based on age ranges. Geographically, people living in the northeast received the fewest spam emails at 131 per week, while those of us living in the south received the most at 163. While many computer security experts have stated that the best way to fight spam is to simply delete it, 11% acknowledged having a transaction initiated by a spam mail.

The commercial spam filtering company Commtouch (www.commtouch.com) reported that the single most common subject used by spammers was "Viagra", or a substitute for Viagra. In order to attempt to slip by the spam filters commonly used, the spammers uses over 50 variations of the spelling of Viagra, according to Commtouch. They also reported that 28% of all spam contained some form of trickery in the subject line in order to penetrate the spam filters, and be delivered to the recipient.

Far more destructive than spam mail was the proliferation of computer viruses, worms, Trojans, and spyware. According to the antivirus software company Panda (www.pandasoftware.com), over 3700 new viruses and worms, including variants, appeared in 2003, which was about a third more than appeared in 2002. Documented and projected damage from these digital vandals was enormous. The British security company "mi2g" (www.mi2g.com) calculated that the most damaging viruses and their variants of 2003, in terms of dollars of damage around the world, were Sobig ($36.7 billion), Klez ($19.4 billion), Yaha ($11.3 billion), Mimail ($10.5 billion – and still very active in 2004), and Swen ($10 billion).

Mi2g also saw, "a meteoric rise in electronic crime: business interruption, financial fraud, "phishing" scams, extortion demands post distributed denial of service attacks, espionage and mass spam campaigns." They attribute much of this increase to global criminal syndicates, and extremist group activities, the 2003 rate being several times more than in 2002. According to "mi2g", the most frequent victims were home users, and small to medium businesses. Users of broadband internet access were more frequent targets than dialup users. There also was a dramatic increase in "pfishing" and other elaborate scams to ensnare victims into disclosing sensitive personal and financial information through fraudulent email and websites appearing to be authentic banking, retail, or other commercial websites. Many customers of major banks, retailers, credit card companies, and online services were duped into providing their information to thieves who used that information to conduct financial transactions, steal their identities, hijack their internet access for nefarious purposes, or commit other criminal activities.

Mi2g also predicts that 2004 will see a worsening of cyber problems, with the rate of spam increasing to 66% of all email (despite recent US and European laws designed to restrict the practice), spam costing the world economy $60 billion in lost productivity and other costs. Mi2g also predict that there will be a greater merging of spam, viruses, worms, and Trojans in 2004, where personal computers hijacked by viruses and worms will be used to generate spam at far higher numbers than in 2003, or attack other computers. Where virus writers used to be vandals seeking notoriety, 2004 will see a dramatic increase of viruses and worms created for financial gain, identity theft, or infrastructure attack, with some of the most dangerous being politically motivated. It is predicted that while much of the politically motivated "hactivism" will originate in Moslem countries, with unofficial reprisals from American, British, Indian, and Israeli hackers. "Pfishing", the attempt to steal sensitive personal information by tricking the victim into thinking that he is responding to a legitimate request from his credit card company, bank, or retailer with which he has a relationship, is expected to continue to increase, resulting in a continued loss of confidence in our established institutions.

Our personal risks can be reduced by using common sense, deleting all spam and other questionable emails without opening them, using updated anti-virus, firewall, and anti-spyware software, and never disclosing personal information without verifying the necessity and destination of that information.

As the gruff sergeant on the "Hill Street Blues" said at the end of every roll call, "Be careful out there!"

Ira Wilsker is the Advisor for Region 8, APCUG Representative & Bylaws Chair for the Golden Triangle PC Club, a columnist for The Examiner in Beaumont, Texas, and has two radio shows. He also graciously shares his articles with the APCUG editors. There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context with proper credit given the author. The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

Don't Forget System Restore
By Charlie Paschal, PPCC

Viruses are always a threat, but did you know that one can "return" without warning if you don't turn off one Windows XP feature when cleaning up from a virus?

One of XP's great features is System Restore that can take your system back to a time when it was running better. I've used it countless times to return an ill-acting system back to a healthy time.

What if, though, you get a virus? Because System Restore can contain system settings that will restore the virus itself, it should always be turned off before you remove a virus.

To do that:

‣ Right Click on My Computer and select Properties and left click. Click on the System Restore tab and check the box labeled "Turn Off System Restore on all Drives."

‣ Then, clean up the virus and reboot. Don't forget to turn System Restore back on after cleaning up the virus.
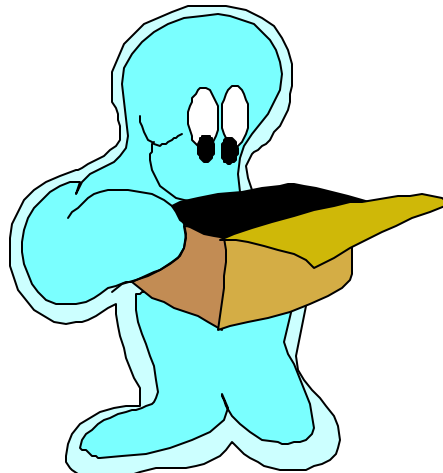
Is That a PC in Your Pocket/Purse?

By Lee Schwab (KISS = Keep It Simple Schwab)
Napa Valley Personal Computer User Group, Inc., California

Hewlett-Packard
iPAQ 3800 series

For some people, the Pocket PC (PPC) is an incredibly useful tool while other people are not familiar with the Pocket PC. Some people confuse the Pocket PC with a Palm which is similar in appearance but is a different device that uses the Palm operating system. Below is an overview of what is included in a Pocket PC and how it helps me organize and simplify my life.

The Pocket PC uses a scaled down version of the Microsoft Windows operating system which is called Microsoft Windows Mobile 2003 (replaced Microsoft Pocket PC 2002 in June 03). Pocket PCs ship with lots of software, are very powerful, light-weight (4-7 ounces), small enough to carry in your pocket or purse (approximately 3" wide and 5" long), and easily synchronize with your desktop or notebook PC.

Here are some of the Pocket PC features:

ActiveSync: This third party software automatically synchronizes the data on your Pocket PC with your desktop or notebook PC. You can also use it to transfer files between the devices. Because I use the Pocket PC extensively, I synchronize them almost every day.

Calculator: Use it as you would any simple math calculator. Use it to figure the tax on a purchase, the unit price of grocery items, the percent of a discount, tips, etc. Third party calculators are also available for more sophisticated or specialized calculations (i.e., financial, scientific, statistical).

Calendar: Keeps track of your appointments (who meeting with, where to go, what time, and notes). You can also set up reoccurring appointments, a reminder alarm, or cut and paste appointments. Information can be viewed by day (with a choice of two formats), week, month, or year.

Communications: Wi-Fi and/or Bluetooth may be included in the Pocket PC or added using the SD (Secure Data) or CF (CompactFlash) slot.

Contacts: Use to organize address book information (i.e., name, address, phone, email).

Washington Area Computer User Group (WAC) Meetings

WAC Meetings will be held on June 19 and July 10 (NOTE: 2nd Saturday!), 12:30 PM to 3:30 PM. at the Fairfax County Government Center, 12000 Government Center Parkway, Fairfax, VA

You do not need to be a member to attend. For more information on WAC meetings and events, call the WAC AnswerLine (voice) at (703) 370-7649. Also see WAC's Web Site at

http://www.wacug.org/

Excel: This Pocket version of Excel supports 100 functions and formulas, rows, columns, and spell checker. Use it to keep track of expenses when traveling, rosters, fundraisers, etc.

Expansion: Many Pocket PCs include slots for CF (CompactFlash), SD (Secure Data), and/or PC Cards. Use them to add memory, a camera, communications capabilities, etc.

Find: Search the entire Pocket PC or a specific area (i.e., calendar). Use it to find a contact, a specific appointment, something in a Word or Excel document, etc.

Games: Solitaire and jawbreaker are included with the Pocket PC. I am not a gamer but there are lots of third party games available.

Inbox: An email application that lets you send, receive and synchronize email.

Infrared beaming: Beam information between devices. My husband and I beam appointments and documents between our Pocket PCs.

Internet Explorer: This software program is included on the CD-ROM that accompanies the Pocket PC.

Memory: Pocket PCs come with 32-128MB built in RAM and 32-64MB ROM.

Microsoft Reader: This eBook reader can be used to read electronic books. Use it to read the Pocket PC manual, books that are on the accompanying CD-ROM, or books that are downloaded. It includes search capabilities to help find a section or word in the eBook.

MSN Messenger: Instant Messenger application.

Notes: Create handwritten or typed notes, drawings, or make a short voice recording.

Pictures: View your .JPG pictures in thumbnail or full screen. This is a good place to keep an electronic picture of your spouse, children, or special events because it can easily be updated and the edges do not get frayed.

Power: Many Pocket PCs include a main battery, back up battery, and power cord for external power. The suspend mode and brightness levels can help conserve battery life so the Pocket PC can be used all day without a charge. If the Pocket PC battery is allowed to run all the way down, data may be lost. It is recommended to fully charge the batteries every night.

Price: Depending on features and manufacturer, the prices range from $199 – $649.

Processor: Chips (Intel, Samsung) and speeds (200-400 MHz) vary depending on the device manufacturer.

Screen: Most screens are 3.5" (measured diagonally) and are Transflective TFT or Reflective TFT.

Tasks: Keep track of your "to do" or "honey do" tasks. You can prioritize the tasks so the most important tasks will be at the top of the list.

Text Entry: You can enter text using the software keyboard, block recognizer (graffiti), letter recognizer, or transcriber (cursive, print, or mixed handwriting recognition). As you enter text, words are suggested to help you complete the words. Some Pocket PCs have built in miniature keyboard where your thumbs are used to enter or you can purchase a foldable keyboard (Targus makes good and sturdy keyboards).

Voice Recorder: Make short recordings and playback using the Notes application.

Windows Media Player: Use to play MP3 or Microsoft Audio Format music, or Microsoft Video Format videos.

Word: The Pocket version of Word is incredibly useful for keeping reference documents, taking notes in meetings, writing articles, keeping shopping lists, etc.

The Pocket PC also includes lots of systems software (Asset Viewer, External Keyboards Functions Support, File Explorer, Infrared OBEX beaming, Server Sync Client, setup/configuration utilities, Terminal Server Client, VPN Client, etc.).

Ergonomic Gizmos

by John R. Chait D.C., drchait@hotmail.com, Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc.,

How Do You Use Your Laptop?

Are you an occasional user who works on your laptop for short periods of time, or are you a full-time user with the laptop as your main computer? Occasional users will have less ergonomic risk of problems developing than full-time users.

Laptop Posture — laptops violate basic ergonomic design requirements, so using a laptop is a tradeoff between poor neck/head posture and poor hand/wrist posture.

Occasional Users — Find a chair that is comfortable and that you can sit back in. Position your laptop in your lap for the most neutral wrist posture that you can achieve. Angle the laptop screen so that you can see it with the least amount of neck deviation.

Full-time Users — Position this on your desk in front of you so that you can see the screen without bending your neck. This may require that you elevate the laptop off the desk surface using a stable support surface, such as a computer monitor pedestal. Use a separate keyboard and mouse. You should be able to connect a keyboard and mouse directly to the back of the laptop or to a docking station.

Use the keyboard on a negative-tilt keyboard tray to ensure a wrist neutral posture. Use the mouse on an adjustable position mouse platform. The design of laptops violates a basic ergonomic requirement for a computer, namely that the keyboard and screen are separated. In the early days of personal computing desktop devices integrated the screen and keyboard into a single unit, and this resulted in widespread complaints of musculoskeletal discomfort. By the late 1970's a number of ergonomics design guidelines were written and all called for the separation of screen and keyboard. The reason is simple: if the keyboard is in an optimal position for the user, the screen isn't and if the screen is optimal the keyboard isn't. Consequently, laptops are excluded from current ergonomic design requirements because none of the designs satisfy this basic need. This means that you need to pay special attention to how you use your laptop because it can cause you problems.

Labels make the text next to a form field clickable, just like the field itself. For example, if a form has a checkbox that reads, "Click here to subscribe," and that text is set as a label, the user can click anywhere on that text to check the box. It can be very helpful to have a larger target when trying to click things with a mouse.

We still have a long way to go before the Web is accessible to everyone. But now you know some of the helpful features you have at your fingertips already, and you know what to ask for from the Web sites you frequent. Hopefully, as users learn what they can do, and designers learn what they need to do, we can all enjoy the Web a little more.
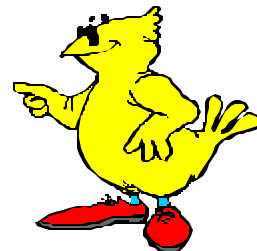
(Continued from page 13)

I bought Hewlett Packard iPAQ 3800 series Pocket PC in 2001 and my husband is using it now. This year I bought a DELL Axim5 but I would not recommend a DELL because the screen was badly scratched within one month, the calendar intermittently and randomly changes appointment times (i.e., 1:00PM becomes 2:00PM). I will probably buy a Hewlett Packard iPAQ but there are many choices.

Pocket PCs and cell phones have teamed up and are called smartphones. These devices use the Microsoft Windows Mobile for Smartphone software. The smartphones have to make some compromises in their form and function. To learn more about Pocket PCs or to make a purchase, check out the following. My favorite is the Pocket PC magazine (their 2004 Buyer's Guide is available now).
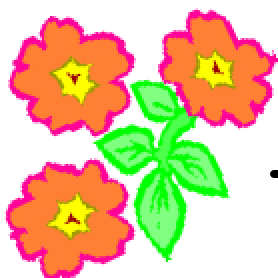
Magazines

Handheld Computing (PPC & Palm devices)
Mobility (mobile and wireless)
Pen Computing (mobile computing & communications)
PocketPC (Windows Mobile PPC reviews, comparisons, & smartphones)
Wireless (wireless communications)

Websites

amazon.com
hpshopping.com
mobileplanet.com
PocketPCmag.com
pcconnection.com
tigerdirect.com

There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context with proper credit given the author. The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

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Article Submissions

Articles, helpful hints, and other items of interest to readers of the NCTCUG Journal are always welcome and will be published as soon as possible after submission. Priority is given to members' contributions. Items may be submitted via modem to the BBS or on diskette. Submissions to the BBS should be uploaded to the Newsletter Conference and a message left for the Editor. Files should be straight ASCII, unformatted, with C/R only at end of paragraphs; no indents for paragraphs should be used. Preferred format for diskettes is MS-DOS 3½ 720k or 1.44Mb. Diskettes in other formats may be submitted but there will be a considerable delay in processing. If absolutely necessary, items may be submitted in hardcopy only but these will also meet with delay.

Membership Policy

The National Capital Tandy Computer Users Group, Inc. is a non-profit [501-c(3)] organization founded in 1977 to educate users of all Tandy computers and MS-DOS compatible computers. Membership dues are $25.00 (U.S.Funds) per year, with a $5 surcharge for international mail. Membership in NCTCUG includes membership in all SIGs, access to the BBS and software libraries, and subscription to the Journal published 10 times per year. Applications may be obtained at any club meeting, by downloading from the BBS, by calling one of the officers or board members, or by writing to the club. A sample newsletter, membership application and related information may be obtained by enclosing $1 and mailing your request to Jim Rhodes, 201 S. Kensington Street, Arlington VA 22204.

Advertisement Policy

Members' advertisements: Ads are accepted from members for non-commercial purposes at no charge. Copy should be sent to the Editor in the same format as article submissions. Commercial Advertisements: Ads are accepted from commercial advertisers at the rate of $60 per full page, per appearance, with discounts for multiple insertions. Smaller ads are priced accordingly. Payment for ads must be made in advance of appearance. Advertisers must supply a permanent address and telephone number to the editor.

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COMPUCENTER BBS

Is no longer in operation. It has been replaced by the 'compucenter' mailing list at http://groups.yahoo.com/

If you are moving

Please send your change of address to the club PO box as soon as possible to avoid missing issues.

Thank You!

(Continued from page 1)

Rebates, Rebates, Rebates

When I look back at the last four or five months, I begin to think I need to find a 12 Step group for Rebate-a-holics. Here's the pile: Norton Internet Security; Audiobahn CD-Rs; Turbotax Deluxe / Quicken Deluxe; Turbotax Federal eFile; State eFile; Turbotax State; Norton AntiVirus; Nova Development's Art Explosion 600,000. These items totaled $394.69, and I'm expecting checks for $184.94 in rebates - almost 47% savings. I won't mention the other $27 I missed 'cause I didn't follow my own rules i.e., apply for rebates the same day you buy stuff! It's hard to convince me it's not worth 15 minutes to fill out the coupons, clip the proof of purchase seal or bar code strip from the box, and use the scanner to make a couple of copies.

I recently "invested" in a Toshiba laptop - it appeared in a CompUSA 20th Anniversary ad with a special series of rebates in one Friday's *POST*. Rebates included $100 from Toshiba, $150 from CompUSA, plus another $100 from CompUSA to price match the same computer offered by Circuit City in the Sunday ads. Then, there was the $187 in free merchandise I was able to select as part of the Anniversary Sale. That provided a Belkin Wireless Router / 4 port switch, and a wireless LAN card.

My other big weakness is restaurant discount coupons. "My name is Paul............."

[*Ed. Note:* The paid version of WeatherBug allows you to keep a list of several locations to choose from — handy if you have activities in different parts of the metro area! I don't know if the free version has the same option.]
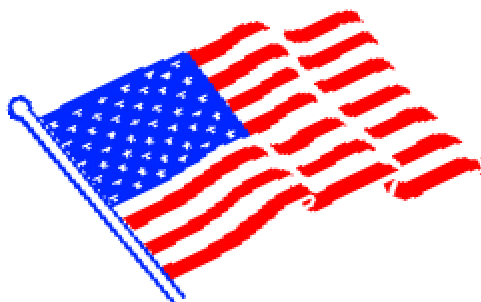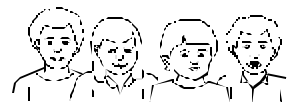
June/July 2004

1st Wed. (6/2, 7/7) **7 p.m.**
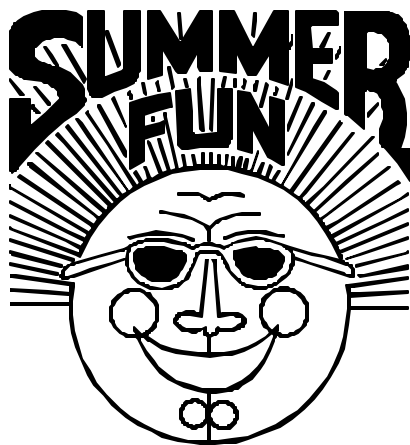Virginia General Meeting

4th Wed (6/23, 7/28) **7 p.m.** Internet SIG
No meeting Christmas Eve!
Happy Holidays

3rd Monday (7/19, no meeting in June) **7 p.m.**
Board of Directors

All meetings are at **Carlin Hall**, 5711 S. 4th St., Arlington VA: East off of Carlin Springs Rd, just south of Arlington Blvd/Route 50.

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