Guerilla Strategies for eBay Buying and Selling

Bass shows you how to take advantage of eBay's loopholes and trapdoors

by Steve Bass
Pasadena IBM Users Group

Everyone's heard of eBay, even my Aunt Blossom, my only relative without a PC. I'm guessing many of you buy from eBay but haven't had the nerve to sell.

Well, folks, I've been buying and selling on eBay for about a year, much of the time with great success. Over time, I've accumulated a few iron-clad strategies and a couple of rules, things that have helped me prevent getting burned either as a buyer or seller.

Fair warning: at least two tips might rub you wrong; some of you might call them unethical. I'll let you decide what's right for you.

Do the Diligence

Like everything in life, in order to be successful with eBay, you need to do your home work.

Whether you're buying or selling, spend lots of time examining similar products on eBay.

My rule is to examine the price and condition of at least 20 items from at least five different sellers. If it's a high-ticket item (a set of expensive, custom-made GNP speakers, for instance), I also want to track the day and time of day when other high-end speakers sell. That way I have a good feel both for pricing and when to put my speakers up for sale.

eBay provides flexible – and powerful – searching tools. When searching for an item, use an assortment of spellings. For instance, I was looking for a charcoal barbeque, so I searched on BBQ, barbecue, barbeque, bar-be-que, b-b-q, and grill. To hone in on the right BBQ, I modified the search to ignore things I wasn't interested in seeing. Placing a minus sign in front of each of following words eliminated them completely: gas, propane, indoor, book, tongs, and smokeless.

What may not seem obvious are eBay's tremendous tracking tools. Before I sell a product, I'll watch dozens of items using the Bidding/Watching tab portion of "my eBay." I also have a dozen searches saved within the Favorites tab.

A Seller's Market

Ready for some eBay sacrilege? I think you're better off selling on eBay rather than buying. Sure there are exceptions, lots of them. You might be looking for something unique, an item you just can't get elsewhere (and willing to pay the price). For instance, I really, really, needed a CPU for an old Gateway Destination and I found it on eBay – and at a decent price.

My take? Just because it's up for auction on eBay, it doesn't mean it's going to sell at a bargain price.

But overall sellers are having a field day because there's real excitement bidding, something that often pushes up the price.

For instance, not long ago I was looking for a specific Sony DVD player and watched a dozen eBay bids. I couldn't believe what I was seeing: The lowest auction ended at $130 plus $22 shipping; the highest at $140 and $21 shipping. The price at Crutchfield, a big online discounter? $135 with free shipping. (Sorry, you've got to do the math yourself.)

The message? Check outside of eBay for a pricing reality check.

Gimmie Some Feedback!

Everyone knows to check a seller's feedback, right? What's important is you need to do more than just scan the feedback, but pay close attention to the details.

The letter "B" and "S" at the right side of each feedback listing signifies whether the person was a buyer or seller. If you're a buyer, the feedback about the person's buying behavior, while not irrelevant, isn't as critical as his seller feedback.

Make sure to scroll through at least five pages of feedback, especially if you're buying a high-ticket item.

You can also get a better sense of a buyer or seller's attitude by viewing their feedback about others. Head for their feedback page and click on the "Feedback About Others" link.

Ebay Trick One

I discovered these two strategies by accident and now use them regularly.

I was thinking about selling my car, a '95 Volvo, through eBay. I watched dozens of auto sales and the majority were successful. Yet it was a $6000 sale so I was getting cold feet. I decided to contact potential buyers, people listed in the Bid History area of the auction page.

My goal was to find out what motivated them to buy and what dissuaded them from bidding on the car more than once. What I got was an enormous amount of valuable info. For instance, on guy said, "I only will bid on a car that has an eBay warranty on it for major problems." Another explained "Start the bidding at $1,500 in order to just get serious buyers. Nothing annoys me more than someone who starts bidding at $1 on a 2001 vehicle, especially when they have a buy-it-now price in the $20K range."

What was more exciting were these questions: "BTW – I've gotta ask...what color & how many miles?", "I feel the urge to ask – what kind of 95 Volvo do you have to sell, color, mileage, options etc.?"

I ended up selling the car locally, from a sign on the car that I parked in the street.

The Second Trick

I built a small pond in the backyard, something to attract birds. I needed a submersible pump and just missed an auction. I wrote to the seller, asked if he had any more, and bought one at about $10 less than the price it sold for at auction. I've tried that twice and both times it's worked out with a successful purchase.

Now reverse the situation. Say you have something you're about to put up for auction. You do your diligence and find a handful of similar items for sale. What's to say that after the auction's ended, you can't contact each of the non-winners (okay, losers – I was trying to be kind) and offer to sell them your item directly.

The truth is I've heard people say these methods are unethical, at least according to eBay's rules. I'm sleeping well but you'll have to make your own decision.

Listen, I've got to go. I just got a page that an auction's about to end and I have to start bidding.

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Buying Time

by Brent Ozar
HAL-PC

Computers are like Hammers

So you're just getting started with your home computer, and you want to know what it's for, how to work it, and where to put the quarters.

As it turns out, your computer doesn't need quarters to run: it takes bills, preferably twenties and fifties. That's what the slots on the front are for. No? Well, I can't fool you, smart reader. Instead, I'll give you my favorite analogy: computers are like hammers.

If you buy your hammer at a chain store, don't expect a tutorial. The guys in the hardware department don't necessarily know how to build a tree house. Similarly, if you buy your computer at a big monster chain store, don't expect the sales staff to hold your hand while you learn to surf the Internet. And…

Don't go to a construction site looking for help, either. While the big burly guys in the hardhats appear to be standing around with nothing to do, that doesn't mean they have time to show you how to use your new hammer. To get up to speed, you'll want to watch some Discovery Channel or TLC shows, maybe read some home improvement books, and talk with your friends. Computers are the same way: if you interrupt a professional at work, they'll use many of the same gestures you saw that time you cut off the quad-cab pickup with guys on their

way to the job site. Instead, I'd suggest heading over to HAL-PC, where we offer friendly classes.

Over the long run, you'll spend more on nails. It's hard to comprehend that one human being could ever pound thousands of nails in, but if you use your hammer regularly, you'll do it. Plus, you'll buy different kinds of nails for different tasks. As you're holding the receipt for your brand new computer, it might be hard to imagine ever spending that much on accessories, but you'll do just that. Between the printer cartridges, software, computer desk, and monthly Internet bills, you'll spend more on upkeep than you did the initial purchase.

There are different hammers for different jobs. Don't buy a sledgehammer when you're just starting out – but don't be surprised if you pick one up later. Until a couple of years ago, my mom's only use for a hammer was to wave it menacingly at me as an incentive to hang pictures for her. As a result, she had a small hammer that accomplished her needs. In the last year, though, she's become a feminine Norm Abrams, redoing her cabinets, installing wood floors, and even knocking out a wall. (Intentionally, no less!) She's graduated to not just one, but several professional hammers. At the same time, two years ago, she went online only now & then, and she didn't even have her own computer. Today, she has a full-blown home network, complete with a desktop in her home office, a wireless router, and a laptop that she can carry anywhere around the house and stay online.

Don't use your hammer as something it's not, like a flyswatter. Why spend fifty cents on a cheap plastic flyswatter when you've got your cool new steel hammer? Because while a hammer could technically function as a flyswatter, it would miss most of the time, and it would leave little dents behind every time you try to murder Mr. Fly. There's software out there that will turn your computer into an answering machine. Don't try to replace your $50 appliances with your new $1,000 computer. Your computer will do a bad job of it, and it will hamper your computer from doing the things it actually does well.

Don't steal nails, even though they're cheap and easy to hide. Whenever you need to build something, you could easily stroll into Home Depot, fill your pocket with nails, and walk right out the front door. They'd never know, and they certainly couldn't prove that you didn't bring them in.

You might even justify it by saying you wanted to check the quality of those nails before you bought them. But it's still wrong. There are web sites online where you can download pirated software – that's the computer term for stolen. This is stealing, plain and simple, and as a guy who makes his living from writing computer software of various sorts, I can

tell you that we need to eat just like you do. Stealing software is no different than stealing nails.

Finally, knowing how to use one makes you feel like Tim Taylor on ToolTime. Wielding tools makes you feel powerful, not to mention eager to pass your newfound knowledge on to others. The more you learn about your computer, the more you'll enjoy that same sense of self-accomplishment. Every now and then, look back at your early computing days and take pride in everything you've been able to do. See, you can teach an old dog new tricks!

Reprinted from the October issue of HAL-PC Magazine. *Brent Ozar is a HAL-PC member, web developer and network admin. He lives with his girlfriend, two turtles, and the sad knowledge that he will never kick his coffee habit. He can be contacted at brento@brentozar.com.*

Computer Law:

A Tale of Two Congressional Proposals

by Bill Wood

AlamoPC Organization, Inc.

You probably haven't heard or read much about privacy legislation recently. With very few exceptions the talk for the last year has centered around collecting and sharing information in the war on terrorism. The USA Patriot Act and the Cyber Security Enhancement Act of 2002 (HR 3482), the Homeland Security Act (HR 5005) and the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 may have some privacy provisions, but the thrust of each of those bills has clearly been in the other direction.

However, there have been exceptions. Two competing proposals have been introduced into Congress that directly affect the collection of private information on the Web. The business community favors one bill; the other is more appealing to consumer groups. One is awaiting floor action in Congress; the other is still in committees.

Senator Hollings of South Carolina introduced S 2201, known as the Online Personal Privacy Act. It was recently reported out of committee and is awaiting action before the entire Senate. His bill is the pro-consumer version.

On the other side of the Capital, and the other side of the debate, is HR 4678, which has been introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Cliff Stearns. Most business groups favor his bill.

Is there a constitutionally guaranteed right of privacy? Don't look in your text of the Constitution for it…unless you know how to read between the lines. There is no specific portion of our Constitution that grants, or more properly, reserves unto the governed a right of privacy.

It wasn't until 1928 that a Supreme Court opinion even mentioned it. And even then it was in a dissenting opinion written by Justice Brandeis in the case of Olmstead vs. United States. The Court did not adopt his concept of a Right of Privacy at that time when it ruled that the government did not need a warrant to tap a bootlegger's telephone.

Justice Brandeis' argument that privacy is inherent in the Constitution was not on the winning side of a Court opinion until almost forty years later.

Even today, the courts of the United States have not applied the implied right of privacy to very many situations. And, even in those situations it is only applicable to governmental action, not commercial activity.

Rather, Congress and the various state legislatures have adopted hundreds of laws that set privacy standards in vastly different situations. There are health privacy rules, banking privacy rules and election privacy rules. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act extends certain protections regarding Web sites that collect information from children under the Age of Thirteen.

The practical effect is that someone who feels that her personal information has been misused usually must find some specific statute that restricts access or use of that information. No such general law applies to information collected on the net.

That is where Senator Hollings and Rep. Stearns agree. Some privacy right should be recognized. They differ on whether or not the federal law should overrule (preempt in lawyer jargon) state laws on the subject. They also disagree on whether or not the injured party should be able to file suit on her own behalf.

Hollings proposal begins, "An Internet service provider, online service provider, or operator of a commercial Website on the Internet may not collect personally identifiable information online from a user, or use or disclose personally identifiable information about a user, of that service or Website except in accordance with the provisions of this Act."

Senator Hollings takes the position that the information cannot be used unless the individual is given "clear and conspicuous notice to the user in the manner required by this section for the kind of personally identifiable information to be collected. The notice shall disclose–

1. the specific types of information that will be collected;
2. the methods of collecting and using the information collected; and
3. all disclosure practices of that provider or operator for personally identifiable information so collected, including whether it

will be disclosed to third parties."

Further, for sensitive financial and health information, he adopts an opt-in program. "An Internet service provider, online service provider, or operator of a commercial Website may not —

1. collect sensitive personally identifiable information online, or
2. disclose or otherwise use such information collected online, from a user of that service or Website, unless the provider or operator obtains that user's consent to the collection and disclosure or use of that information before, or at the time, the information is collected and the user's consent is manifested by an affirmative act in a written or electronic communication.

Representative Stearns' bill, the Consumer Privacy Protection Act, generally takes the opt-out approach. It explicitly preempts any state statute and removes the ability from state legislatures to adopt new rules on the subjects. It's key provisions is, "A data collection organization shall provide to the consumer, without charge, the opportunity to preclude any sale or disclosure for consideration of the consumer's personally identifiable information, that may be used for a purpose unrelated to a transaction with the consumer, to any data collection organization that is not an information-sharing partner…"

Rather than permit private suits, Rep. Stearns' bill would empower the Federal Trade Commission to pursue civil penalties. "A violation of any provision of this title is an unfair or deceptive act or practice unlawful under section 5(a)(1) of the Federal Trade Commission Act (15 U.S.C. 45(a)(1)), except that the amount of any civil penalty under such Act shall be doubled for a violation of this title, but may not exceed $500,000 for all related violations by a single violator (without respect to the number of consumers affected or the duration of the related violations)."

It is not clear at this point that either of the bills will pass before this Congress adjourns later this year. Right at the moment Congress is preoccupied with the upcoming elections and many other issues in our unsettled world. Absent a public outcry by either consumers or business interests, these bills will probably be reintroduced in the next session. Stay tuned for further details.

Reprinted from the October 2002 issue of PC Alamode Magazine. *Bill Wood is an Assistant City Attorney in the San Antonio City Attorney's Office. He practices real estate and technology law for the city.*

Kindergarten Art for Grown-ups

by K. Joyce McDonald
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In the corner of my home office sits a low desk fashioned from an adjustable ironing board with a footstool that serves as a chair. I put it together yesterday when my 3-year-old granddaughter came to visit and the weather turned rainy. With a pink box filled with markers and crayons, a plastic place mat for a desk mat, and a yellow pad she spent many happy hours creating artwork for posterity.

Today it's still raining and the only "kids" in my office, with the exception of a couple of cats lounging on the desks, are my husband and I. Inspired by my granddaughter, we also are spending a rainy weekend afternoon creating artwork for posterity. The only difference is that we are using his computer instead of crayons and a yellow pad.

Neither my husband nor I have developed any more artistic talent or know-how than our granddaughter. Neither he nor I have any experience in working with computer graphics. But we did create some pieces that we were pleased to hang on our walls and even point out to our friends and family.

Our first project of the day was a picture that I took on the Oregon coast during my vacation. Not only am I a terrible photographer; I am so hard on cameras that I don't buy my own cameras. I use the "disposable" cameras that you turn in with the film. Along with the inevitable pictures of the sky, the ceiling, the floor and my thumb, I usually come out with at least a couple of keepers. This time, I not only got a keeper; I got what I considered an artistic photograph. It was a still life of a concrete mooring on a rocky bay with a lighthouse in the background and a magnificent blue sky and ocean. The color and arrangement of the photograph warranted an enlargement, so I set the print and the negative aside to order reprints from HEB's photo processing center.

My husband has been putting together some nice portrait enlargements by taking photos of our grandkids that our kids e-mail to us, enlarging the pictures and printing them on photo quality paper. Then he frames the pictures in black plastic certificate frames that we buy 3 for $5 at Office Depot. The portraits look amazingly good, and we always have a fresh supply to hang at home and in his office.

Before I went to the expense of ordering an enlargement of my photographic masterpiece, I asked him to try scanning it and printing and

enlargement. If anything, the resulting scanned and printed enlargement looked better than the original.

We recently replaced my four-year-old IBM scanner (which we gave to my daughter) with a Microtek ScanMaker 4800, which we bought at Best Buy for about $100. It came with a rebate, although we can't remember how much. The scan software, Microtek's ScanWizard 5 and Adobe Photo Deluxe Home Edition 4.0 came with the scanner.

The printer, also a recent purchase, is an Epson Stylus C60 and cost about $100 before rebate. It is quiet and prints some remarkable color, especially on the Epson Glossy Photo Paper that we bought at Office Max. The paper, by the way, comes with better documentation than some computer programs.

Regarding the rebates: They have probably expired by now, and we're not sure about the amount, so don't count on them.

The next project came about because Clarke wanted a picture to include with my ArcSoft PhotoBase software review. I looked around for some screen capture software that would allow me to capture my Palm screen and transfer the capture to my desktop machine, but I wasn't able to locate such a tool.

An important principal I've learned in 12 years of technical writing is when you can't find the appropriate tools, cheat. We displayed a color picture of my grandson on the screen of my Palm M130 and placed the PDA face down on the scanner. The resulting scanned image was a beautiful picture of the PDA with a blank screen. When your cheat is not quite successful, cheat some more.

I have abused Microsoft many times in print, but one thing I always bless them for is making cheating easier with the universal Windows cut and paste. It is available in almost every program, and no self-respecting graphics program would ship without it. Using Adobe Photo Deluxe we pulled up a cute picture of my grandson, copied it into the clipboard and pasted it in the appropriate place on the scanned picture of my PDA. Then we sent it to Clarke.

Emboldened by our success with the Palm picture, we experimented with cutting, copying, resizing and pasting. I have a room I call my "ocean room" where I display pictures of ocean views, lighthouses and clipper ships. This is where I hung my Oregon coast masterpiece. In the same room I have a clock with a lovely round wood frame reminiscent of a porthole. Unfortunately, the clock had an ugly face with a cheesy pseudo-Navajo print for a background. The clock's size and shape worked well in the room, so I looked around for a picture I could substitute for the clock's existing

background — something with better colors, something that would look like a view from a porthole.

I picked a Dutch Masters pipe tobacco can for its vivid colors and colorful picture of a clipper ship. We put the can on the scanner and zapped the resulting faithful reproduction into Photo Deluxe. Now we had to figure out how to get the printed picture onto the round face of the clock. We tried cutting with scissors, but by the time we got the picture down to size, too much of the old ugly round face showed up and the clipper ship was too tiny to stand up to the huge numerals.

My husband recommended scanning the clock's face to capture the numbers and have better control of their size. (I had already removed the hands and movement from the clock.) He scanned the clock face, used Photo Deluxe to trim the picture of the tobacco can and pasted it on the face of the clock. It looked pretty good, but when we got the size of the can right, it covered up the 12 and the 6.

We are both such rank amateurs we could only guess what to do next. I suggested opening another copy of the clock face picture, cutting out the 12 and the 6 and pasting them in the appropriate places on our Dutch Masters piece.

Since I had never used Photo Deluxe before, I wasn't sure how to do this. I started hunting through the Photo Deluxe menus. I found Selection Tools under the Select menu and picked Rectangle. Using the mouse, I drew a rectangle around the 12. I'm a klutz with a mouse, so it took me a couple of tries to get the rectangle situated where I wanted it. Thank heaven for the prominent Undo button. I copied the rectangle using Copy from the Edit menu (I could have also used the Windows universal Ctrl+C keystrokes.)   Then I switched to our Dutch Masterpiece (which was still open) and used the mouse to draw a rectangle where I wanted to paste the 12. Using the Edit menu again, I selected Paste and watched the 12 appear on the clock face (I could have also used the Windows universal Ctrl+V keystrokes.) Of course, I did the same thing with the 6.

After I finished my cutting and pasting, I went back to the Selection Tools menu to select Object. This changed the mouse pointer back to its usual function of highlighting what you point to. Now we were ready to clean up our cut and paste work.

Since my husband has a steadier hand with a mouse, I let him take over.

He clicked to select each of the numbers and used the "handles" to make the numbers fit into the clock face. Handles are little boxes that appear at each corner and in the middle of each side of a selected picture or portion of a picture.

I had to explain to him just how handles behaved, another feature that is universal in Windows programs. The handles at the corners allow you to increase or decrease the size of the object while keeping its length and width proportionate. If you use the handles that appear the center of any side, you increase or decrease only the length or width of the object, distorting the original proportions of length to width.

When we printed our clock face masterpiece, what most impressed us was the quality of the picture of the can. The shiny metal of the can looks just as it did on the original can, making our admittedly amateurish attempts at graphics creation a little more interesting, and perhaps proving that you don't need to be a professional to create some fun and useful graphics.

Reprinted from the October 2002 issue of PC Alamode Magazine. *Joyce is a senior technical writer for a San Antonio software company.*

Preventive Maintenance

Backup Plans

by Russell James
Alamo PC Organization, Inc.

I have talked about computer disaster recover plans many times in the past but it seems that the word is just not getting out fast enough. This week we had one customer that lost everything without a plan and another that made it to us just in time to save most of his data. He got lucky. If you are one that has heeded my warnings and instituted a plan, then we will consider this a refresher course for you. For those of you who think that nothing bad will ever happen to you, this column is for you. It seems that the people who have a good plan are the least likely to have a problem. This could be for some other reason besides the planning, but it does seem to be a fact that holds true for the most part.

The first thing you need to know to come up with a backup plan is what you want to backup. Most of the machines on the market today come with some sort of recovery software that will reinstall all of the software that came with your system. This type of software is good because it will help you to recover from a disaster by giving you a known starting point in your plan. If you have the reconfigure software, I would recommend that you plan on using it in the case of a disaster and simply keep up with your data backups. This will make the recovery process a lot easier when the time comes. All you would need to do is run the recovery software and then restore your data and you would be back in business.

Now let's look at your data. How much room, in megabytes, would it take to store all of the data on your system? Since we are planning to use a recovery disk, we only need to look at items like e-mail, letters, spreadsheets, financial programs and the like. Anything that you have made changes to would be considered data. You need to make a point to find out where each of the programs that you use stores the data file that you are using. If you are going to backup only the data, then it would be easier for you if it was stored in one convenient place. You would think that all of the software companies could get together and agree on one central location but this does not seem to be the case.

Microsoft Money puts the file in the folder where the program is installed by default. Quicken and many other programs use the same process. Windows 2000 and XP default most of the programs file saving location to the My Documents folder. This folder is actually a folder under the Documents and Settings folder. This tends to confuse most of the users since they click on a shortcut to get to the My Document folder and the files show up. It really doesn't matter where the files are stored as long as you know where they are when you do your backup. You have the option to change the location by right clicking on the folder and then left clicking on properties. You can then click on Move and browse to a different location from the default. After you have chosen a new location you will be given the opportunity to move any existing files to the new location.

My users at the office have a folder on the network that stores all of their data files. They click on My Documents and most of them have no clue that they are pulling files from a network drive. This also allows me to backup their data files when the server is backed up every night. This helps me as well as them in case there is some sort of disaster or hardware failure.

Take a look at the programs that you use and find out where the files are located. Microsoft Money uses one file to store all of your entries. When you move the file, Money will ask you where it is the next time you open the program. Browse to the new location and you are back in business. The program will default to the last file that was opened so you will only have to look for it once. Quicken will also default to the last file that you had opened but you will need to use the file utilities within the program to move the files to your My Documents

folder. This is because Quicken only shows you one file when you open the data file, but there are actually four files, all with the same name and different extensions. If any of the files are missing, you will not be able to open that particular data file.

E-mail is another type of program that likes to hide your data from you. Microsoft Outlook defaults to another folder within the user folders. Everything in Outlook is contained in a file with the extension pst. You can find the location of the file by searching your hard drive for a file with the pst extension or viewing the properties of the personal folder in the folder view of Outlook. Click on the Advanced button and the location will be shown under filename. If you move this file into your My Documents folder, the next time you open Outlook you will get an error message saying that the pst file cannot be found. Browse to the new location and choose the pst file that you moved to continue opening Outlook. There will be another message stating that the location that messages were delivered to has changed and would you like Outlook to recreate the shortcuts. Choose yes and you will be finished with the move. Outlook Express will need to be moved within the Options of the program. Click on the Maintenance tab and then the Store Folder button. Click on Change and browse to the My Documents folder. There are a number of files that contain all of your Outlook Express data so a separate folder to segregate them from the general population would not be a bad idea. Shut down and restart the program to finalize the move.

No matter what program you are using, it is always going to be easier to keep up with your files if you will have a central location. You will need to do a little work to get all of the programs set up to use the same location but I can assure you that it will be better for you in the long run this way. Make a point to look through your programs and find out where your data is. I have seen more than my share of people without a plan that have lost everything. You don't want to be the next one do you? Start with getting all your files in one place and then we can talk about how to get these files backed up on a regular basis.

Reprinted from the Sept 2002 issue of PC Alamode Magazine*. Russell James is Operations Manager at BJ Associates of San Antonio. They are an authorized service center for IBM and Toshiba systems.*
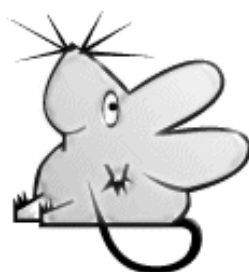
Your First Sale

Book excerpt: Starting and Running Your Own PC Business

by Morris Rosenthal

You've sold your first PC to your mother's friend Doris, and then find out that whether you order it assembled or in pieces, there's not going to be any profit because you included Windows XP in the price but forgot to add in the cost. This drives you to ignore the top two tiers of distribution and go straight to the small importers with the aggressive pricing. You know the stuff is good because it says so on the fax. By using PriceWatch.com and going with the most aggressive pricing for each part, you figure you can scrape out a fifty dollar profit. You order an ATX case, keyboard and mouse from one place; a motherboard, CPU, RAM, hard drive and OEM Windows XP from a second place; and a floppy drive, video adapter, CD-ROM, modem, monitor and soundcard from a third place. Even the guy on the other coast promises you'll have the stuff within a week.

The next day, the ATX case and power supply show up with the keyboard and mouse, and the UPS gal wants a check for $80. "What's this?" you say. "The parts cost was $71." The UPS gal explains that the shipping cost was $5 and the COD tag allowing you to pay with company check cost $4. You pay and go back to your spreadsheet to see where this is heading. Three days later, the motherboard, CPU, hard drive and Windows show up from the middle of the country by Fed-X. You feel pretty good until you look at the invoice, which shows your credit card was billed for $355. Wait a minute, the parts total was $321. The bottom of the invoice shows a $29 item for 2nd day shipping, and another $5 for handling and insurance. You call the supplier, who reminds you that you wanted it by Thursday, and that he did tell you he was waiting for a shipment of RAM to arrive Tuesday morning. Well, at least you can give yourself credit that you bought the motherboard, CPU and RAM from a single vendor. Doing otherwise before your really know your vendors is pretty risky.

After assembling the parts that have arrived, you settle in to wait for the package from the other coast. It shows up after a week with a COD tag for exactly what you thought you were paying! Great! You pay, unpack the stuff to finish building your first PC and find the modem is missing. You read the invoice and see that the modem was "backordered" and the COD amount didn't include it. You run to the phone and call the vendor, who tells you, "Don't worry, it went out three days ago." "Call me next time before you backorder something on me," you yell at the voice. After you hang up, the

voice says "Jerk." Three days later, the $29 modem shows up with a COD tag for $38. Hey, he did have to handle it separately, and the $4 for the COD is a constant. It's not the modem you ordered, but at this point, Doris is calling every day (she pre-paid), so you swallow a total of $81 ($9 + $34 + $29 +$9) in shipping, handling and insurance costs. You begin to see where ordering everything from one nearby vendor, preferably with net terms (non-COD) or a credit card, makes more sense than parting the thing out all over creation.

You put all the paperwork in a file folder labeled "Doris" and file it. This is really a critical step. Nobody will take defective stuff back without paperwork, unless you have a real good relationship and can get the salesman to look it up on their computer system for you. You finish putting the PC together, load Windows XP, and everything is great. You load all the driver CDs for the video, modem, and sound card (you forgot to include speakers in the price), and Windows XP now takes twice as long to boot. Par for the course. The monitor gives off an odor like burning plastic on an ocean breeze, but you figure that will clear up. You run Scan Disk a couple times, wonder what a 24 hour burn-in really means, and if you should spend a hundred dollars on some testing software. Unless you have money to burn, don't bother. Just leave the thing turned on over night and check that it still works in the morning. It's a decent test, and you're doing a lot more than most guys I've known.

You put the PC in the car, and drive it to the customer's home. If you were a mail-order business you could leave it on the doorstep, ring the doorbell and run, but you aren't. You take the PC out of the box and plug everything together. Your customer turns it on, the Microsoft flag appears, so you leave your homemade business card and go home relieved that you only lost around $31 selling your first PC. You use a hobby knife to cut up the boxes that Doris didn't want and you put them out for recycling day. The foam peanuts you save, believing that eventually they'll come in handy- good luck. The next morning the phone rings, your first tech support call. Doris bought an inkjet printer at Staples (they had it cheaper than any price you could find) and it doesn't work - Staples tells her it sounds like a computer problem. You warn your mother's dearest and oldest friend that if it's not a computer problem, you'll have to charge her your $50 field service rate, and she agrees. You arrive at her house, and immediately see that she's trying to use old typewriter paper in the printer and the paper isn't heavy enough for the feeder, producing all sorts of jams and "printer not ready or not connected" errors. Since you only spend two minutes in the house and it's such a silly problem,

you can't bring yourself to charge her.

Being the clever sort, you cut a deal with your local Internet Service Provider (ISP) where they promise to pay you $100 at the end of the year for each new customer you deliver to them. You call your customer, talk her out of going with AOL or Compuserve, which her son in Dallas has told her to get, and you drive out and create a dial-up-networking connection to her new ISP. You set her up with§ Internet Explorer and Outlook Express, spend two or three hours teaching her how to use e-mail and buy junk on E-Bay. Then you go home satisfied that you're now making the $35 to $50 an hour you always knew you were worth, even if you won't get it for twelve months.

Unfortunately, when her son visits for Christmas, he convinces her that she can save big bucks by signing a multi-year deal with a national provider, and your $100 miraculously vanishes. Adding insult to injury, the day after New Year's she calls you to say the modem isn't working anymore. On hearing that she has moved to AOL, you spend a half-hour on the phone angrily explaining that it's probably a software problem, and that you'll have to charge that elusive $50 field rate if you come out. She agrees, and you show up to find that the modem really did die.

You go home, pull out the "Doris" folder, call the vendor, who gives you an RMA (Return Merchandise Authorization) number and tells you he'll ship a replacement. You breathe a sigh of relief that the vendor is still in business, since you haven't talked to him in three months, and then send off the modem. After a week, you call, and he explains that he has to ship it back to his supplier, but they turn stuff around really fast, and you should have the replacement within two weeks. You give up and call your local importer and buy another $29 modem, paying with a credit card. It comes the next day and you install it. Doris is pretty upset at having been offline for a week, and suggests that maybe you've bitten off more than you can chew in "your little computer business." Two months later, her original modem arrives in a beat up package from some place you never heard of with a note saying they tested it fully and it worked for them. You put it in your own PC to test it and immediately smell smoke. Welcome to the PC business.

Society News

President's Message

by Ron Matteson

We had a great meeting on November 12th. Jeff Leist, president of Microworx Service-Land, and Dave DeYager, manager of the ServiceLand operation, gave us the latest information on microprocessors, motherboards, RAM, hard drives, etc. There were lots of questions, and I'm sure the MS (Microworx ServiceLand, not that other MS) would be glad to answer more questions if you have them.

The place was packed out, even after all the tables were moved out of the way. We might have to move to larger quarters, if this keeps up. See the RCSi web site for the slides that Jeff used. Our speaker in December's Program meeting will give a discussion of the use of Linux for common home applications (see back cover). We also hope to have a crew able to help WXXI do one of their periodic phonathons in December.

In January at our Program meeting, we are planning a talk on DSL, for faster Internet connections. We also are hoping to have a Build Your Own PC workshop, possibly in late January. Let me know if you are interested in the workshop.

I hope those who were interested found some helpful software at the last meeting. There's more good stuff coming! We have some cables, keyboards, and more to get rid of at our future meetings, so bring your shopping baskets!

For those of you who listen to SoundBytes, on WHAM at 12:20 PM on Saturdays (if Syracuse University football is not on; in which case Sound-Bytes comes on after the game) they have added a User Group calendar page to their web site. You can find out information about our next meeting at: http://www.soundbytes.org/calendar/, or check out our own web site at http://www .rcsi.org/.

Planning Meeting Minutes

November 19, 2002
by Larilyn E. Bauer, Secretary

The Board of the Rochester Computer Society, Inc. met Tuesday, November 19, 2002 at Sally Springett's home, 335 Wilmot Road, at 7:00 p.m. In attendance were Ron Matteson (President), Steve Staub (Treasurer), Bob Avery (Webmaster), Jim McGrath (Software Chair), Sally Springett (Monitor Editor), Dan Rothfuss (Member at Large), and Larilyn Bauer (Secretary).

Following the President's agenda, we began with old business. Evaluation of last program meeting revealed 40 seats filled, including 3 guests and 1 new member joining. Help's Half Hour rendered many questions and answers in a wide gamut of areas. Jeff Leist of Microworx Serviceland presented a very thorough show of future trends in microprocessors.

Financial balance has increased ever so slightly from last month.

Bob Avery reported not much is new.

Arpad has about 3 PC scanners and 1 MAC scanner he is checking out for possible raffling off at a future program meeting.

Ron has some flea market items left and will probably be dumping them. Adaptors on hand will be brought to the next program meeting. He has a DOS laptop that was donated and will be raffled off. It has Microsoft Works loaded on it. There are many cables donated that can be used for the "PC Workshop.

Future programs currently planned are: December 10: Linux-Tony Placilla, January 14: DSL-Chris Muller of Frontier and possibly February: Desktop Publishing-Ralph Squire of RIT. Sign-up will be available at December program meeting for PC Lab to "Build Your Own PC". Some of the more experienced members will be the instructors. Possible event date is January 23, 2003.

Steve Staub and Arpad Kovacs will represent RCSI at the next MarketPro on November 24.

When Ron contacted WXXI for the Phone-a-Thon, he was told all the dates were filled and therefore RCSI volunteers would have to wait until the next event.

RCSI will be at MarketPro, represented by Steve Staub and Arpad Kovacs on Sunday, November 24 The Monitor newsletter will be printed on Friday, November 22 and assembled on Saturday, November 23 at St. Stephen's Church, 350 Chili Avenue.

New SIG's: Gaming SIG and Linux SIG have not taken off as well as hoped for. Our Program Meeting is posted on Digital Rochester.com website.

Ron will attend a SGML/XML user group meeting November 20 at Lennox TEC Building, 150 Lucius Gordon Drive 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM.Meeting adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Review Copies

O'Reilly publishing has asked if we are interested in review copies. Look at the list on their web site at: http://www.oreilly.com /catalog/prdindex.html to see if there's a book you want to review. Call Sally to order.

New Users

Nov. 5, 2002
by John McMillan

Auser's machine froze at the Windows logo screen the next time he started up after downloading McAffee on line definitions. Dell representatives talked him through several fix attempts including a safe mode start, but none of them worked. Bill Statt had experienced a similar problem on his fathers machine. He used his laptop to display a note written to the Sound Bytes Forums web site explaining the problem and the response he got from Dave Enright, who indicated that there was a known problem with the latest McAffee download. Someone signed "Rugrat" said it was necessary to change the registry and provided instructions on how to do it. Dave Enright said go into safe mode and at the C prompt type edit autoexec.bat and press enter. Look for a line that says bootscan.exe. Change just this wording to scanpm.exe and save the file. Reboot the PC and you should be all set. That did not work so Bill wrote back identifying the actions taken and results seen with a number of more precise questions. Dave wrote back "Highlight bootscan.exe, how-ever...." Gophman, a 3rd responder, wrote about an easier way. Go into safe mode by taping the F8 key before the logo comes up. Go to Start>Run and then type sysedit and press OK. A series of windows should open in cascade form. Choose Autoexec.bat as the active window and look for a line that says bootscan.exe. Change it to scanpm.exe. Go to the menu bar and click file>save, close the window and restart the computer. Bill tried it and it worked.

Bill reminded us of Joe Pia's article in the Sep. Monitor that discussed AVG 6.0, when he displayed the interface screen from his laptop. AVG 6.0 is a free virus checker from Grisoft.com. Its definitions are updated once a month rather than weekly, and it only works with Microsoft Outlook and Outlook Express mail systems. It was also noted that Explore will not list virus files quarantined by Norton's Virus Checker. If you have friends in Canada there is a virus that sends false billings to Sympatico users address listings.

A phone call was received earlier from a person considering the use of F-disk. Owners of preloaded or second hand machines should be particularly careful that they have current backup disks for all software and data files. Since fdisk wipes the hard drive clean, backup disks are essential to reconstruct the system. Bill cited the following web site that walks Windows 9x users through hard drive reformatting: http: //www.compguystechweb.com/troubleshooting/fdisk/ fdisk_scr.html.

This raised a question about backup technique.

Safe mode only allows for the use of 3.5 inch floppies which in these days of extensive hard drives means many, many disks to complete the task and may prevent the storage of large photographic files. Prior to the introduction of CD writers, 100 and 250 mb zip disks were often used to reduce the number of disks required for backup. Some tape systems existed which held more data but were more expensive and required sequential accessing. It was pointed out that CDRW's (rewritable) are slower and more costly than CDR's (write once) that may cost a dime or less apiece with rebates and special sales. CDR's would be safer in the event of problems during the backup process.

This was followed by a very animated discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of Roadrunner versus DSL (Direct Subscriber Link) with occasional interjections from dial up modem users. Dial up is the least expensive but has the slowest data transfer rate, often less than 56kb per second. DSL and Roadrunner cost in the neighborhood of $40 a month but the maximum data transfer rate per second for DSL is said to be 3mb versus 2mb for Roadrunner. DSL has some restrictions about distance from a Frontier office and also offers a 256kb per second service for about $26 a month. Both DSL and Roadrunner have local access numbers in major population centers across the U.S. Other points were difficult to extract from the multiple discussions that ensued.

Although AOL is perhaps the best known server, several users in the group use Juno that costs about $100 a year. Bill Statt mentioned that Blue Frog is still available at $4.95 a month. Juno and some others offer free E-mail and Internet browsing but may impose time restrictions and have limited equipment available for free service. Scanning the Internet would provide the most current data on the options available. This can be done at many local libraries if not available on a machine at home.

A user asked the difference between fax mode and voice mode. Gregg Sayre thought that all modems can handle fax mode which is data transfer, but extra circuitry would be needed for voice transmission. Faxing software should come with the modem. He suggested checking for phone tools or the modem software disk to verify what capabilities are present.

Another user who works with beginners mentioned a problem in which the cursor seemed to be stuck in the middle of the screen and cleaning the mouse had no effect on the cursor movement. The status bar had been moved from the bottom of the screen to the left hand side. It was known that the status bar can be relocated by dragging with the mouse, provided the mouse is working. The screen color had changed from blue to green with a blue

border. It was not know whether these changes occurred as a result of loading AOL from one of the free disks. It was suggested that the keyboard be used to uninstall AOL. Then try going into safe mode to see if the mouse works. If not, right click My Computer, select properties, click the Device Manager tab and verify that there is a mouse icon. If there is no icon, it may not be properly plugged in, or the mouse driver may need to be reloaded.

Our next meeting will be held Dec. 3rd at the Monroe Developmental Center, 620 Westfall Road. Everyone is welcome. Will we see you there?

Treasurer's Report

by Steve Staub

Balance as of 10/22/02	$847.70
Income	
Dues	$372.65
Expenses	
Postmaster	$100.00
Office Max (paper)	47.28
Lease	86.72
St. Stephens	75.00
Total Expense	$309.00
Balance as of 11/19/02	$811.35

The Lighter Side

If Microsoft ran Christmas

Each time you bought an ornament, you would have to buy a tree as well. You wouldn't have to take the tree, but you still have to pay for it anyway. Ornament/XP would weigh 1,500 pounds (requiring a reinforced steel counter-top tree), draw enough electricity to power a small city, take up 95% of the space in your living room, would claim to be the first ornament that uses the colors red/green together. It would interrogate your other decorations to find out who made them. Most everyone would hate Microsoft ornaments, but nonetheless would buy them since most of the other tree types wouldn't work with their hooks.

If Apple ran Christmas...
It would do everything the Microsoft ornaments do, but years earlier, and with a smaller mouse (not stirring).

If Fisher Price ran Christmas...
"Baby's First Ornament" would have a hand-crank that you turn to hang the thing on the tree.

If The Rand Corporation ran Christmas...
The ornaments would be large perfectly smooth and seamless black cubes. Christmas morning there would be presents for everyone, but no one would know what they were.

Their service department would have an unlisted phone number, and be located at the North Pole. Blueprints for ornaments would be highly classified government documents. X-Files would have an episode about them.

If the NSA ran Christmas...
Your ornaments would have a secret trap door that only the NSA could access in case they needed to monitor your tree for reasons of national security.

If Sony ran Christmas...
Their Personal Xmas-ing Device, which would be barely larger than an ornament and flat, would allow you to celebrate the season with a device attached conveniently to your belt.

If Cray ran Christmas...
The holiday season would cost $16 million but would be celebrated faster than any other holiday during the year.

If Radio Shack ran Christmas...
The staff would sell you ornaments, but not know anything about them or what they were for. Or you could buy parts to build your own tree.

Costello's First Computer

Costello: Hey, Abbott!
Abbott: Yes, Lou?
Costello: I just got my first computer.
Abbott: That's great Lou. What did you get?
Costello: A Pentium III, with 128 Megs of RAM, a 12.1 Gig hard drive, and a 48X CD-ROM.
Abbott: That's terrific, Lou
Costello: But I don't know what any of it means!!
Abbott: You will in time.
Costello: That's exactly why I am here to see you.
Abbott: Oh?
Costello: I heard that you are a real computer expert.
Abbott: Well, I don't know...
Costello: Yes-sir-ee. You know your stuff. And you're going to train me.
Abbott: Really?
Costello: Uh huh. And I am here for my first lesson.
Abbott: OK Lou. What do you want to know?
Costello: I am having no problem turning it on, but I heard that you should be very careful how you turn it off.

Abbott: That's true.

Costello: So, here I am working on my new computer and I want to turn it off. What do I do?

Abbott: Well, first you press the Start button, and then…

Costello: No, I told you, I want to turn it off.

Abbott: I know, you press the Start button…

Costello: Wait a second. I want to turn it off. OFF. I know how to start it. So tell me what to do.

Abbott: I did.

Costello: When?

Abbott: When I told you to press the Start button.

Costello: Why should I press the Start button?

Abbott: To shut off the computer.

Costello: I press Start to stop?

Abbott: Well Start doesn't actually stop the computer.

Costello: I knew it! So, what do I press.

Abbott: Press Start

Costello: Start what?

Abbott: The Start button.

Costello: Start button to do what?

Abbott: Shut down.

Costello: You don't have to get rude!

Abbott: No, no, no! That's not what I meant.

Costello: Then say what you mean.

Abbott: To shut down the computer, press…

Costello: Don't say, "Start!"

Abbott: Then what do you want me to say?

Costello: Look, if I want to turn off the computer, I'm willing to press the Stop button, the End button and Cease and Desist button, but no one in their right mind presses the Start to Stop.

Abbott: But that's what you do.

Costello: I am starting this conversation right now. Goodbye!