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a computer club for everyone
Founded 1982

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Abby Stokes via Skype

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www.MrModem.net



Help: Email Causes Freezes!

Q. Sometimes people I send email to tell me that when they open my message, their computer freezes. I'm sending you one of my emails that did this. Can you tell me what I'm doing wrong that might be causing this?

A. The email you sent me contains eight graphical animations, including four animated closings, "Goodbye," "Adios," "CUL8TR," and "Sayonara." While I understand that "cutesy" is

in the eyes of the beholder, I would encourage some measure of restraint when it comes to email “enhancements” of this type for several reasons:

First, all those graphics and animations increase the size of your email exponentially, turning what should be a simple message into a bloated e-mess. For recipients with older systems or computers running a minimal amount of memory, opening your graphical extravaganza can be overwhelming to the system, resulting in a freeze.

Keep in mind, whether you're using IncrediMail or some other email fluffer-upper, there are only so many graphics and related animations, and graphically inclined senders all tend to gravitate towards the same ones. Toward that end, you can't go wrong if you extend the courtesy of asking your intended recipients if it's okay if you include animations. If they decline, thank them and honor their request not to include them. If they do not respond, do not assume that's an implied permission to continue sending cutesy. It is not.

In your case, remove the graphics and animations from your message and re-send it. Individuals who previously experienced a computer freeze will then be able to view your message without any problem.

Q. I notice that my 4-port USB hub feels warm to the touch. Is this normal or are flames about to leap out and cause me grief. Do you think I am worrying over nothing? Thanks, Mr. M.

A. There are components within the hub that can get warm, so some amount of warmth is normal. If it is too hot to touch, I wouldn't take any chances and I would replace it immediately.

My rule of thumb for something like this is if it makes me uncomfortable – rightly or wrongly – I replace it. It might not really need replacing, but if it's going to drive me to distraction to that extent then I will just replace it and be done with it. I would keep the USB hub that was replaced as a spare. And if the replacement hub ultimately feels about the same temperature as the one I replaced, then I'll walk to a mirror, look into it and say, “You moron! You replaced it for nothing,” though the peace of mind alone would be worth it.

Q. I would like to ask your advice and opinion about a software program called Driver Robot. It's supposed to scan your PC and then list all the drivers that are out of date. It then provides a link you can use to download and install the most current drivers.

A. Personally, I wouldn't touch a program like that with a borrowed ten-foot pole. It is of no consequence if drivers are old or outdated if everything is working properly. I have computers here that haven't had new or updated drivers installed in years. It's simply not necessary unless a problem arises, so this clearly falls within the advice category of, “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

If you are experiencing a computer problem, by all means, it should be addressed. Otherwise, just enjoy your computer. When things are running smoothly, you're not going to make them run smoothlier by installing anything new.

Mr. Modem's DME (Don't Miss 'Em) Sites of the Month

AllerGlobal

Create a ready-to-print card listing your food allergies, in any number of languages. For example, let's say I'm allergic to anchovies and it's time for my annual visit to Uncle Sven at the family farm in Hudiksvall, Sweden. Sven loves his kroppkakor and silltallrik thin-crust pizza with extra anchovies. If I accidentally eat a slice of delicious kroppkakor, when the paramedics arrive all I have to say is, “Jag är allergisk eller intolerant mot följande näringsämnen ansjovis,” before I lose consciousness, and I'll be in good hands.

www.allerglobal.com

American Car Brochures

Original, factory brochures that harken back to an era when cars were cars, not today's everything-looks-alike boxes. If you're like me and yearn for the good old days of massive tail fins, hood ornaments, hubcaps, white-wall tires, curb feelers, column shifts, slippery bench seats (without seat belts), and unpadded dashboards with eviscerating projectiles, you won't want to miss this site.

www.lov2xlr8.no/broch1.html

PicLits.com

A creative-writing site that matches beautiful images with carefully selected keywords in an effort to inspire you. No, seriously. The object is to put the right words in the right place and in the right order to capture the essence, story, and meaning of a given picture. Click the "Learn It" link for additional information.

www.piclits.com

It is with great sadness I must announce that this is the final Mr. Modem column. Mr. M has decided to take well-earned retirement. I know we will all miss his amusing and helpful answers. Enjoy your retirement, Mr. M. – Ed.

This is amazing. A relatively inexpensive, for home use, 3D printer. Watch it and weep. <https://glowforge.com/>

"LUCKIES Are Less Irritating!"

by Bob Rankin

Amazon has launched a lawsuit against 1,114 "John Doe" defendants, charging they damaged the company's reputation by posting "false, misleading, and inauthentic" reviews. Read on for some tips on spotting fake reviews at online shopping sites...

My first thought upon reading the news that Amazon was filing suit against 1,114 scam reviewers was, "Only 1,114?" The e-commerce giant hosts over 2 million sellers from more than 100 countries, all of them vying for the edge that an extra rating point can give them. Among more than 244 million active Amazon members, there must be more than 1,114 who have sold or solicited fake reviews and ratings.

This batch of mercenaries was caught on Fiverr <http://fiverr.com>, a freelancers' marketplace where people offer small tasks for a set price of \$5.00. Amazon was tipped off (probably by an Amazon seller) that people on Fiverr were offering to write favorable reviews of products and give five-star ratings for just five bucks.

Amazon's investigators posed as sellers seeking good reviews and ratings, buying a number of reviews and networking through the fake-reviewer community on Fiverr. Nailing down the reviewers' true identities was tough; many of them used multiple accounts and IP addresses to lay confusing trails. But Amazon filed suit against 1,114 unknown parties, hoping that will unlock their real identities.

fake reviews - online shopping

Fiverr will be subpoenaed for its records of the accused's true name, address, and full account activity history. And Fiverr's OK with that. Fiverr's terms of service bans things like offers to write bogus reviews. The two companies have cooperated in the past to shut down bogus review writers. (Yelp should take notice. I don't know anyone who trusts Yelp ratings, because they are notoriously corrupt.)

Amazon polices its own house, too. The company's software algorithms scan reviews for "fake sounding" telltales. An obvious example is the five-star review of a USB cable with the

comment, “Good charger!” Well, what would you expect for five bucks – John Dvorak?

Marginalizing Bogus Reviews

Bogus reviews are not deleted, but their effects on ratings are diminished. Reviews posted by verified purchasers of products rise to the top of the algorithmic filter, giving their ratings more weight than those of non-purchasers. Suspected fake reviews are buried in search results and their ratings are discarded in calculation of sellers’ overall ratings.

Like most consumers, I pay attention to reviews and ratings when shopping online. Customers’ faith in the Amazon ratings system is fundamental to the company’s success, to date and for the future. Amazon takes fake reviews and the sellers who buy them very seriously. In fact, this “John Doe” lawsuit is not even Amazon’s first legal attack this year on fake reviews.

In April, 2015, Amazon filed suit against a number of websites that offered fake reviews for sale. Californian Jay Gentile is named as a defendant and owner of buyazonreviews.com; the other sites’ operators are “John Does” for now. They may turn out to be Gentile, or not.

Gentile was pretty careless in what he put on the Web, it seems. Aside from the domain name that screams, “SCAM!” he even told visitors his modus operandi, according to Amazon’s lawsuit. He (or one of his ghost review writers) would order a seller’s product and the seller would ship an empty box. Now Gentile was a “verified purchaser” so his review and rating carried more weight. Presumably, the money Gentile charged more than covered what he paid for the empty box that he received.

Editor’s note: A friend of mine who is trying to sell ebooks is fit to be tied because they eliminated all of her reviews. Since she knows for certain that the reviews aren’t fake (she begs her readers to write them but she doesn’t tell them what to write and she certainly can’t make them do it). They ignore her pleas for an explanation.

Buying ‘Open Box’ Goods and Save

by Ira Wilsker

I like bargains, and I like to save money while shopping. While the granddaddy of all bargain days, Black Friday, and its younger cousin, Cyber Monday, will be here in the next few weeks, some people might like to take advantage of bargains at other times. For those who might be willing to forgo a little personal vanity, some of the familiar retailers have websites devoted to often deeply discounted items that have been returned, had shipping damage, or had been refurbished to like-new condition, sometimes with the same warranty that the same new, unopened item may have had. Consider the fact that both brick and mortar local retailers, and the large online retailers sell massive amounts of merchandise; it is inevitable that a percentage of that merchandise will be returned for a variety of reasons ranging from a refused delivery, to shipping damage to the outer package, to the item being defective and returned for replacement. Reputable sellers will always clearly disclose the reason for the markdown, present an accurate description of the current condition of the item, guarantee the description, state if the item has been refurbished to “like new” condition, disclose any warranty, and typically offer free (shipping paid) returns if the consumer is not satisfied with the marked down merchandise.

In recent weeks, I ordered some merchandise that was posted on these reputable “open box” websites: a factory refurbished Lenovo laptop (not the latest model) that was marked down to about 70 percent off retail, as well as some mundane items such as some new premium-brand wiper blades that were in perfect condition, but had some damage to their outer packaging, thus were available for two-thirds off the regular price. While I have been a regular buyer of these marked-down goods when they are available, over the past year I have

had two returns. In separate transactions months apart, I had a factory refurbished laptop (not the one that I recently purchased) that came with the same warranty as a new laptop, but had a battery that would not hold a charge; the seller immediately sent me a prepaid shipping label, and issued a full refund as soon as the return was received. The second item that I had to return was purchased “open box” from a different major seller; it was a combination keyboard and case for an iPad that would not link via Bluetooth. Again the seller sent me a prepaid shipping label, and provided an immediate refund when they received the item back. While anecdotally these were two “open box” items that were returned, considering all of my online purchases, the return of these two items was not out of proportion with my returns of absolutely “new in the box” items, which I have also had to return.

The national chain Best Buy sometimes has some clearly labeled and marked down “open box” items on the shelf in the stores, but it also has an online outlet store that often has a wide selection of deeply marked down outlet style goods. Best Buy’s online outlet is “CowBoom” (cowboom.com), and according to the site, “CowBoom offers quality new, refurbished and pre-owned products at everyday low prices. Our products are in top condition, with each pre-owned and previously out-of-box item personally inspected by CowBoom’s technicians. Expect big savings by shopping at CowBoom.” In order to reduce the hesitation and risk of purchasing its merchandise, CowBoom offers a 15-day money-back guarantee.

CowBoom continuously has a large, and ever changing inventory of computers, audio and video equipment, televisions, mobile and cellular phones and accessories, cameras and camcorders, household electronics and a variety of other merchandise for home and office. Among the recognized name brands represented by the assortment of merchandise at CowBoom are Apple, Canon, Nintendo, Bose, Nikon, Hewlett Packard, Sony, Samsung and others. CowBoom also offers a daily e-mail with the deal of the day, which is a deeply discounted, often name brand item, like an Amazon Fire HD Kids Edition (below) that was \$149.99 sold for \$39.99.” This ruggedized tablet for children has a four and a half star rating from its users, strong parental controls, and access to Amazon’s extensive library of age appropriate movies, TV shows, music, books, Android apps, and games. While much of the content available for this tablet is free from Amazon, if anyone in the family has an Amazon Prime account, all of the content then becomes available at no additional charge. Since this Amazon tablet is a “Daily Deal,” a different product will likely be available on other days. For those looking for some potentially exciting deals on CowBoom, the website also has a selection of name brand goods that are being auctioned to the highest bidder.

One of the best-kept secrets about online bargain hunting is Amazon’s Warehouse Deals. According to Amazon, the Warehouse Deals shopper can, “Find deep discounts on open-box, like-new, and pre-owned products.” As I type this, Amazon is listing 541,866 items in its warehouse store, and states that, “Every item (is) hand checked and graded, available for Prime and free shipping, backed by Amazon Customer Service, (and has a) 30-day return policy.” Currently listed on the Amazon Warehouse Deals website under the heading “Our Best Deals” is a new, \$250 all-leather briefcase style laptop bag marked down to \$59 with free shipping, and a new \$160 7-inch Android tablet for \$39. Other “Best Deals” include a 42 percent markdown on select “open box and used laptops,” up to 59 percent off of “open box wearables” including smart watches, half-off select open box digital cameras, up to 48 percent off of a selection of open box and used unlocked cell phones, up to 67 percent off of open box and used smart phones, 45 percent off of coffeemakers, and dozens of similar “Best Deals.” By category and quantity, the largest selections of products available from Amazon Warehouse Deals includes books (83,756 available in the Warehouse Deals), electronics (60,384 items), auto-motive (47,796 items, not including the windshield wiper blades that I recently

purchased), tools and home improvement (44,935), home and kitchen (44,597), sports and outdoors (37,161), and clothing and shoes (29,179).

Amazon Warehouse Deals can be located directly by entering “Amazon Warehouse Deals” in the search box on any Amazon page, and then utilizing the “Deals” page menu or search system. While that method may be totally adequate to satiate the bargain hunter, my personal preference to locate “Warehouse Deal” priced items is to perform a routine Amazon search for a particular product, and then from that product’s page click on the link that shows alternate sources for that product, including any under the “Used” tab; if there are any Amazon Warehouse Deals for that particular item, they will be listed under the “Used” heading. My personal preference when buying items under the “Used” banner is to purchase those listed as Amazon Warehouse Deals, rather than from unknown third party sellers; while sometimes slightly more expensive, I know that Amazon has inspected and rated the individual items, the description and condition is most likely accurate, I can get free shipping (I have an Amazon Prime account), and that Amazon will stand behind the purchase.

Another excellent resource for open box and refurbished items is “Tech for Less” (techforless.com), a Colorado-based seller with a large selection of these discounted products. Tech for Less specializes in open box and refurbished goods from major manufacturers, with a 30-day money back guarantee, and a comprehensive “low price guarantee.” Tech for Less will price match both before and after the sale if a lower price is found on most other online and physical stores. In order to get the difference rebated from Tech for Less, send an e-mail with your order number, a link to the lower price, and a note that you’d like to apply our Lowest Price Guarantee.

During the past year from Tech for Less, I purchased an Epson all-in-one printer (refurbished), three extra handsets and bases (all in new condition) for my cordless phone, and a refurbished modem for my broadband service. Being a careful shopper, I compared prices, warranty, and shipping costs, finding that for these items, Tech for Less had the best deals. Tech for Less sells almost all of the major brands, including Apple, Canon, HP, Panasonic, Sony, and others. They carry a good assortment of laptops, desktops, monitors, TVs, portable audio and MP3 players, printers, digital cameras, camcorders, drives and other storage devices, tablets, servers, and many other products. Most items sold by Tech for Less have the same warranty as a new item, but are available for up to 75 percent off of the retail price for the same new item. The consumer can often choose the degree of the discount for many of the

items by choosing a combination of “condition and pricing”; as an example a particular Toshiba laptop that I was considering is available with free shipping in many “conditions” such as “New – Inner Seals Intact Condition,” “New – Open Box,” “Factory Refurbished (Re-tored to manufacturer condition, may show limited signs of use, manufacturer warranty),” and “Refurbished – with



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www.podcomputers.com



manufacturer's warranty." Each lower condition is available at a lower price, which allows the potential buyer to balance the condition with the price, but regardless of condition, all of these laptops had the manufacturer's warranty.

If hunting for bargains, there may be no need to wait for Black Friday or Cyber Monday. If willing to accept a deeply discounted open box or refurbished item, often with the same warranty as a new item, that may be the way to go.

Book Review: *My eBay for Seniors*

by Chris Johnson
Golden Gate Computer Society, CA

My eBay for Seniors

by Michael Miller, Que, 2014

Education, \$24.99

The large sans serif type and its references to grandkids makes *My eBay for Seniors* — a book geared to older folks in the publisher's eye. Everything else about the book—its information and colorful artwork—is for the beginner or average user—of any age. But I did like that I didn't have to whip out my glasses to read it.

Some of the instruction lists run into the high 20s for number of steps, but visually the book makes it seem easy with lots of clear artwork of what you'll see on the screen each step of the way. It shows you how to buy and sell and relist items...and what happens when you make a sale.

If you want to use eBay from your smartphone or tablet, the book even has a chapter dedicated to buying and selling that way too.

Bidding for items on eBay can be exciting like in a real auction—and, except for the cost of the item (and shipping charges if additional), you pay no money to eBay to shop or buy.

When you bid on an item and a box appears on the screen to tell you that you are outbid that means that someone put in a maximum bid that they are willing to pay that is higher than the amount you just entered.

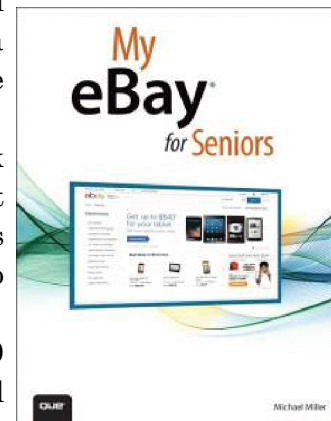
You can do the same after you are the highest bidder. The book explains how to easily set up that maximum bid up so you don't have to hover around your computer, even on the day the item's auction will end. Though eBay doesn't like bid retractions, you do have that ability under many conditions if you made a mistake.

To win an auction for an item takes a strategy. The book's 10 tips for better bidding include the recommendation to bid in odd numbers, such as \$10.03 instead of \$10.

The book also recommends waiting till the last 10 seconds to ever bid on anything (also called sniping) and gives a list of automated sniping services that will do it for you if you can't be up at midnight when an auction ends. One of the services listed is even free: Gixen (www.gixen.com)!

eBay also lets you keep a watch list to track items you are interested in but haven't bid on yet. The watch list is only one of many lists eBay lets you keep in your account, which is called the dashboard in "My eBay." Others include items you've bought or sold in the past, and more.

You can pay for items in whatever way the seller lets you pay. Oftentimes people accept credit cards, but you can almost always pay with PayPal (using your credit card or other means), which makes it even safer for you. The book even details how to set up a PayPal account and how to link it to eBay.



You can most often shop safely on eBay, but occasionally people can run across deadbeat sellers...folks who take your money and don't ship. Two chapters talk about the risks on eBay and how to minimize them.

Various colored stars for each seller is a feedback system that rates the sellers so you can know if they've long been trusted on eBay. Most good sellers also offer a money-back guarantee, but you'll likely have to pay for the returning shipping costs.

Maybe you want to sell an item on eBay. The seller pays fees to eBay, not buyers. The fees depend on what the item is and how you want to sell it. The first 50 items you list each month (that's a lot!) are free to list, but you do pay a fee if it sells.

That final value fee is 10% of the total selling price (item price plus shipping/handling charges). If you are listing items in eBay Motors or Real Estate categories, the fee pricing differs.

eBay has many optional fees, such as having a boldface title, a subtitle, or a reserve price. Having a reserve price (that only you and eBay knows) lets you list an item at a low starting bid, but it won't sell unless the bidding reaches the reserve price you set in advance (you don't pay the fee, though, if the bidding doesn't reach the reserve price).

You can see the various fees at pages.ebay.com/help/sell/fees.html. The book outlines how to use eBay's Fee Calculator too.

Another source of fees comes from PayPal, which most sellers use to receive payments for their items. Granted, eBay owns PayPal, but the fees are separate. The PayPal fee is \$0.30 per transaction plus 2.9% of the amount paid to you by the buyer.

The book walks you through the process of setting up a buyer's account and the more detailed seller's account. You'll likely want to have a PayPal account too, which is easy to link to eBay. Again, the book details how to do it.

Beyond using the website, you'd need to prepare an item for sale and then ship it when it sells. The book details everything from finding items to sell to picking categories to sell it in to writing effective titles and descriptions and photographing and packing the item.

It even provides tables of grading systems for level of quality, a list of services to refer to, and the common abbreviations used, such as MIB for Mint in Box.

The book also lists what you cannot sell on eBay, such as ivory, lock-picking devices, tobacco, and used underwear...but people *do* sell them all on eBay (with cleverly couched wording in the descriptions). eBay does have an Everything Else > Adults Only category that a lot of people don't know about, but no nudity or sexually explicit content is allowed in the listing.

Although you may not copy someone else's picture for your eBay listing, you can use eBay's stock photos for certain items, such as books, CDs, and electronic products.

The book recommends that you shoot and edit your photos with 1600 pixels on the longest side (500 pixels minimum on the longest side) for the best possible display. You can post up to 12 photos for free.

The book also describes how to determine the way to sell your items: Individually or in lots? List items yourself or use a service? Sell by auction or fixed price (or both with the Buy It Now feature that lets buyers bypass the auction)?

The book really is inclusive of everything you'd want to do on eBay, from canceling an auction to blocking an unwanted buyer to packing an item for shipping. The red boxes labeled "It's not all good" gives a heads up about pitfalls to avoid each step of the way. I'm a regular eBay buyer and seller and I learned some tricks too!

AARP has teamed up with Que Publishing to help those 50+ learn how to use technology, including smartphones, tablets, computers, and social media. Que and AARP are developing new products within Que's popular "My for

Seniors" book series.

The AARP community may purchase a Que book, eBook, or video today and save 40% off the list price. Use discount code AARP in the "Enter a New Discount Code" box during checkout.

If your group belongs to Que's UG program, you receive a 30% discount.

Scam I Am

by Greg Skalka

Under the Computer Hood User Group, CA

Scam I Am

I don't like things to slow me down
The web is made to click around
Passwords are a royal pain
There's no room for them inside my brain
 My inbox may be filled with spam
 But I'm not worried about a scam
 Google's tracking helps me shop
 My Facebook postings never stop
Hackers will not target me
There are bigger fish in the world-wide sea
My check has bounced – there's no money left
Oh no! I'm a victim of identity theft!

Scams, cons, theft and deceit have been around forever. Just as technology has helped us increase our productivity, it has helped the crooks become more efficient as well. The old scams and trickery have been made easier to execute, while new forms of theft have been developed.

The authenticity of bank robber Willie Sutton's quote about why he robbed banks, "Because that's where the money is," may be in question, but robbers today still go where there are things of value. Now their targets are subscriber personal data at Anthem Blue Cross, credit card information at Target, and account information from phishing attempts on individuals through email.

With so many institutions, from banks, retailers, insurance companies, medical providers and even the government holding sensitive information about us and apparently not protecting it all that well, we are all at high risk of institutional data theft, though there is not much we can do to prevent it. For most of us, hiding out in the woods with no legal residence, credit cards or medical coverage is not an option. I have Anthem Blue Cross health insurance, so since their announcement of the loss of subscriber data through a cyber attack, all I can do is take advantage of their offer of free credit monitoring and identity theft protection, and watch my accounts and credit reports carefully. While we can't do much about the institutional data hacks, we can do a better job of protecting ourselves from those threats that target us individually.

There is a strong correlation between crime rates and the proximity to a freeway onramp; access to a highway facilitates finding victims and provides criminals a quick and easy getaway. The connection to the Information Superhighway we get through our computers, tablets and smart phones works in the same way, bringing the potential for crime closer to us. Now financial misfortune can be as close as our inboxes or browsers.

We have all received those ridiculous emails reported to be from Nigerian customs officials, foreign attorneys, and even the head of the FBI, asking for help or offering huge sums of money for us to claim. It is hard to believe anyone falls for these scams anymore, yet I still

continue to receive the emails. I've also received many emails that appear to be from banks, credit card companies and online services, but are really phishing attempts. These are generated by criminals intent on tricking me into providing them with my sensitive information. A lot of them are easy to spot; they may be from institutions I don't have accounts with, or may have misspellings or other flaws that are a tip-off that they are fakes. I have received some very convincing phishing emails, however. Either by random chance or because the scammers knew I had an account there, I've received emails that appeared legitimate and pertinent to my situation, but after close examination and research, turned out to be fakes intended to scam me.

With income tax filing season in full swing, the media is presently full of warnings about email and phone scams related to the IRS. We hear about all these scams and hacks; hopefully we take these warnings seriously and don't disregard them as things that only happen to others. I'd heard about phone scams where callers try to convince you that a loved one is in trouble and you must send money to help them, but I never considered them a serious threat until someone tried to scam my mother.

A few weeks ago, my mom called our home and asked if our daughter was all right. She then told us the story of the scam call she had just received. Fortunately, she was suspicious and did not get taken. It is not clear if she was targeted specifically by scammers with knowledge of our family situation, or if it was just a random call.

When my mom answered the scam call, a young female voice said "Hi Grandma." Since she has only one granddaughter, my mom replied "Hi Alli," so it is not clear the caller knew my twenty-four-year-old daughter's name beforehand.

The caller initially engaged briefly in some small talk, like how have you been and such, but then, either having some knowledge or taking a chance, asked if Grandpa was there. The scam would have been exposed at that point had my father been deceased, but fortunately he was there.

The caller then said "Grandma, I'm in trouble, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else in the family about this. Can you do that, Grandma?"

My mom was getting a little suspicious, but agreed.

The caller went on. "Grandma, a good friend of mine died suddenly and I'm in Virginia for the funeral. Because she was Jewish, they had to bury her right away, so I had to travel on short notice. After the funeral, some other friends and I stopped at a restaurant for a drink before returning to our hotels. I only had one drink, but because I was also taking antibiotics for bronchitis, I hit a street light and knocked it over on the way back."

The addition of bronchitis to the scam narrative is interesting as it generates sympathy for the caller (she is not just a drunk) and could explain why she perhaps did not sound quite like my daughter. This scam would understandably work best on grandparents that don't often get calls from their granddaughters. I'm certain my wife and I would have been able to recognize our daughter's voice had we been called.

The caller continued. "Grandma, I'm at the police station here. They said they would not charge me with anything if I could pay for the damaged street light, but I don't have the money. A lawyer here is willing to pay for it on my behalf if you can send him the money. Here is a policeman."

A male voice came on the line. "Hello, this is Officer Raleigh. Your granddaughter needs you to send \$2300 to cover the damage to the street light, and then we can release her with no charges. Can you do that?" Officer Raleigh then provided detailed instructions to my mom on sending the money. She was to take \$2300 in cash, with two IDs, to a Walmart and send it via Western Union MoneyGram to Ronald Pearlman in Bristol, Virginia. When Officer Raleigh

asked if she understood all of this, my mom replied that she didn't think all this sounded right.

Officer Raleigh put the phone down for a minute, as if he was not sure what to say. When he came back to the call, he began repeating the payment instructions again. When my mom again said she didn't think this sounded right, Officer Raleigh hung up. The scam was thwarted.

I told my mom's story to a coworker a few days later and she said a similar thing had happened to her relatives in Mexico, except that it was kidnappers calling to say they had their daughter. Her relatives unfortunately paid \$1500 before finding out their daughter had been safe at a friend's house all along.

With all our personal information entrusted to companies and the Internet, hackers and crooks can have a much easier job deceiving us. To avoid being taken advantage of by these thieves, we all must unfortunately be more suspicious and skeptical. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they are not out to scam you.

From the April 2015 issue of Drive Light, newsletter of the Under the Computer Hood User Group, CA. Courtesy of APCUG.

To SSD or Not to SSD? - That Is the Question.

by Phil Sorrentino
The Computer Club, FL

Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer the Slings and Arrows and stay with Hard Drives, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles and Convert to a Newer Technology (Solid State Drives). Well, maybe that's not quite what Shakespeare had in mind, but it does bring up the question. Should we begin to move to Solid State Drives in our computing devices? (Are we starting to see a replacement for the traditional mechanical Hard Drive?) Mechanical Hard Drives have been around since the beginning of Personal Computers. The IBM PC XT in 1983 included an internal 10MB (yes, that's Megabyte) hard disk drive. Anyone remember the name "Winchester Drive"? The term Winchester actually comes from an early type of disk drive developed by IBM that had 30MB of fixed storage and 30MB of removable storage, so the inventors labeled it a Winchester disk, after the Winchester 30/30 rifle, but I digress.

The question is shall we upgrade to SSDs? And I think the answer is "yes," where it makes sense. So, let's look at where it might make sense. Consider that our computing devices fall into the following categories; desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Right off the bat, tablets and smartphones only come with solid state memory, so there is no decision to be made there. So that leaves desktops and laptops for our consideration. Though the number of desktops and laptops are expected to drop over the next few years, many of us will have at least a laptop for the foreseeable future. (A forecast made by International Data Corporation, a provider of market intelligence for information technology markets, indicates that around 85% of the Worldwide Connected devices by 2017 will be Smartphones and Tablets. For the other 15%, Laptops will outnumber Desktops by about 2 to 1.)

So, let's look at why we might want to upgrade to an SSD in the first place. An SSD is a replacement for a traditional, mechanical disk drive. An SSD is a mass data storage device that uses solid-state memory to store non-volatile data for future access, in the same manner as a traditional hard disk drive. Traditional hard drives are electro-mechanical devices that employ spinning disks coated with magnetic material, and moveable read/write heads which "fly" over the disk at a height of less than 1 millionth of an inch. (A human hair is approximately 2,000 millionths of an inch.) In contrast, SSDs use microchips which retain data in non-volatile memory chips and contain no moving parts. SSDs allow for easy replacement

because they are manufactured in the same physical form factor, and use the same electronic interface, as traditional hard drives. SSDs are typically more reliable, they are less susceptible to physical shock, and with no moving parts they are silent. But it is the fact that SSDs store and retrieve data faster than traditional hard drives that make them a desirable upgrade. On the down side, SSDs are more expensive and typically support a limited number of writes over the life of the device, which is probably only a consideration for a super power user.

So, let's consider the question of upgrading a laptop or a desktop. Two common reasons for upgrading either of these might be lower cost or some type of improved performance. Today, for larger SSDs, lower cost is not in the cards. In fact, currently, large SSDs (say 1TB) are about four to five times as expensive as the equivalent hard drive. A large 1TB traditional hard drive would currently be about \$75 and a 1TB SSD would be about \$400. However, for smaller drives (say 100GB) the cost difference is much less. A small SSD might cost only around \$50 but here a comparison is difficult because traditional hard drives only start at around 500GB. So on the low end, the SSD begins to be cost competitive. (Keep this in mind when we look at the desktop upgrade.)

So with cost not an advantage, then the reason would have to be improved performance, and in fact this is where the SSD really shines. A PC with an SSD will boot in tens of seconds, definitely less than a minute. The same PC with a hard drive will take much more time to boot and will be slower during typical use. So, the PC with an SSD will boot faster, launch applications faster and will generally exhibit faster overall performance. A minor side benefit with the SSD is that there is no need for defragmentation; because of the way the data is stored, the effects of fragmentation are negligible. (In fact you should never defragment an SSD because the defragment activity will lower the number of writes available.)

Now that we know that the main benefit of an SSD will be increased speed, and to a lesser degree increased reliability (remember no moving parts), what else should we consider. First, let's look at a laptop upgrade. Most laptops have space for only one drive, so we should probably put in a drive large enough for the laptop's intended uses. With only one drive, the Operating System and Applications and Data all have to share that one drive. The OS and Applications could take 80 to 100 GB, so a 256 GB drive might be the smallest to consider. Currently, 256GB drives can be had for somewhere in the \$100 to \$150 range. For someone with large music, picture, and/or video collections, a drive closer to 1 TB may be in order. Currently, 1TB drives can be had for somewhere in the \$350 to \$550 range. It is always good to have more space, but with the price premium of SSDs it may pay to buy only what you think you will need. 512 GB may be enough for most users. Currently, 512 GB drives can be had for somewhere in the \$250 range. If this cost is no problem, then the laptop upgrade probably makes sense.

Finally let's consider a desktop upgrade. (I bet the audience for this upgrade is a whole lot smaller than for the laptop, but let us press on.) The nice thing about the desktop is that there is usually space for multiple drives. Two, three, or four spaces are not unusual. In this arrangement, the C: drive can be separated from the other drives. This allows the C: drive to be only as big as needed for the OS and Applications (data can go on the other drives). Maybe 120 GB is all that is needed, so this upgrade may be less than \$100. The other drives can still be traditional hard drives. With this mix of SSD and mechanical drives, the boot speed and the general operation will definitely be improved. (Although some data intensive operations where the mechanical drives are being used a lot may not show as much of a speed improvement.) This is a really inexpensive upgrade and it affords a lot of bang for the buck, so it, too, probably makes sense.

Do You Still Have a Landline?

by Bob Rankin

askbobrankin.com

If you still have landline phone service, you are in a rapidly shrinking minority. Only 27 percent of U.S. households were still using landlines at the end of 2013, according to data from the FCC. By the end of 2015, households relying exclusively or primarily on landlines will shrink to just 11 percent of total households. Many of those homes are switching to VoIP service. Here's what you need to know...

Best VoIP Services 2015

Most of the cord-cutters – especially millennials – are relying upon cellular phone service, but 30 percent of all telephone-using households use “non-traditional services such as VoIP,” says USTelecom. I guess other “non-traditional services” might include smoke signals or the beloved cans-and-string telephone. (Incidentally, the Smithsonian Institute has a gourd and twine telephone invented by an unknown Peruvian hacker 1,200 to 1,400 years ago.)

Let's back up a step and define the term. VoIP stands for “Voice over Internet Protocol” and in simpler terms, it means that your voice calls travel over the Internet instead of a traditional telephone wire. You might have VoIP and not even know it. If your cable or telephone provider offers a “double-play” or “triple-play” bundle that includes Internet and/or TV with phone service, you've got VoIP.

Clearly, the VoIP market is huge, and that has attracted many competitors for consumers' dollars. If you're not already getting VoIP phone service from Comcast, Verizon, Time Warner, or your local utility monopoly, here is the rundown on some of the major independent players.

Cancel Your Landline?

VoIP pioneer Vonage has about 2.1 million residential customers. But the company has been losing residential customers steadily for years. Complaints range from high cost (\$25.99/month base price) to dropped calls and customer service that would make Comcast proud in comparison. In June, 2015, Vonage lured Alan Masarek away from Google to be Vonage's new CEO. His priority is the small business market; Indeed, Vonage Business is currently priced a dollar less than residential service. I can't recommend Vonage any more.

ITP VoIP offers a Basic plan for just \$9.99/month, but its features are limited. True, you get a free ITP adapter/router, and your first month of service is free. You get unlimited incoming calls from anywhere in the world. But the Basic package includes only 500 minutes of outbound calling to the U. S. and Canada. The Premium plan, with unlimited outbound calling to the U. S. and Canada, costs \$19.95/month; other features are the same as the Basic plan, and they are numerous.

PhonePower offers unlimited US/Canada calling for \$19.95/month on a no-contract basis; by prepaying for a year the price drops to \$8.32/month. The company's VoIP adapter is provided free of charge and works with or without a router. The list of included features is similar to ITP's or Vonage's. A noteworthy extra is a free cloned line; it uses the same phone number as the primary line. A cloned line is useful to make or receive calls while someone else in the household is using the primary line.

VoIP on a Budget

VoIPo offers two years of service for \$149 – that's \$6.21/month, and includes unlimited US/Canada calling plus 60 minutes/month of international calling. Two years is a big commitment, so VoIPo offers a 30-day moneyback guarantee. A free adapter is also included.

If you're prepared to drop some cash up front to save money, consider the Telo VoIP device

from Ooma. After purchasing the Telo device (\$130 list price; or refurbished by Ooma, \$80) you pay nothing for unlimited calling within the U. S. except the inescapable taxes and government fees (under \$5 a month). The Premier service plan (\$9.99/month) adds a package of features similar to the others mentioned above, including unlimited calling to Canada. Ooma also sells wireless add-ons for extensions and so forth.

Today, VoIP service can cost less than a Big Mac per month, if all you want is basic domestic phone service. Why continue paying \$60+ per month for a landline?

The Downside of Ditching the Landline

Reliability is the main reason. Landlines carry their own power, and usually can still be used during electrical power outages. So can cell phones, while their batteries last. But when electrical power goes down, so does Internet service and VoIP service. If you switch to VoIP, keep a cell phone fully charged and handy.

Emergency service is another concern. A landline is mapped to a specific street address, and that address is automatically passed to 911 dispatchers. But Internet devices have IP addresses which are of no use to emergency responders. VoIP providers are required to offer so-called “enhanced 911” services. Basically, that means you provide a street address to the VoIP provider when you sign up. When you call 911 using your VoIP service, that address is given to emergency responders. Woe betide you if you move and forget to update your e911 address.

Only 14% of U. S. adults over the age of 65 have abandoned landlines for cellular, VoIP, or a combination of both. It’s not just a matter of technophobia; older people need reliable, transparent 911 service more than youngsters. But some elders may need to save money even more. For those folks, a combination of budget VoIP and a no-frills mobile phone plan might be ideal. (See my related article *No Frills Phones and Service Plans* for help with that.)

Interesting Internet Finds

by Steve Costello

Boca Raton Computer Society

In the course of going through more than 300 RSS feeds, I often run across things that I think might be of interest to other user group members.

How To Create An Animated GIF Using Your Own Pictures, With GIMP

<http://www.7tutorials.com/how-create-animated-gif-using-your-own-pictures-gimp>

Have you seen animated GIFs, and wondered how you could make your own? This 7tutorials post explains how to do it (provided you have at least two pictures, of course.), using the free GIMP application. It should be similar with any good image editing software.

USB Type-C Explained: What it is and What it Can Do

<http://www.guidingtech.com/45984/usb-type-c-explained/>

I keep hearing about this more lately, so if you want to know more about it too, check out this GuidingTech post.

If You Give a Kid Linux....

<http://fossforce.com/2015/07/give-kid-linux/>

I thought it was interesting that kids who had no prior experience with any other operating system just took to Linux.

Still Getting Spam? 4 Email Mistakes to Avoid Today

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/still-getting-spam-4-email-mistakes-avoid-today/>

I still hear people complaining about how much spam they get. If you are one of those, or have someone close to you who is, check out this MakeUseOf post, and see if you are making

any of the mistakes shown.

What is Wi-Fi Sense and should you be using it?

<http://www.ghacks.net/2015/07/28/what-is-wi-fi-sense-and-should-you-be-using-it/>

Wi-Fi Sense will be enabled by default with Windows 10, so if you are jumping into the upgrade, you should check out this Ghacks post first. (Note: I am going to wait a while before upgrading any of my machines to Windows 10)

Make Your Passwords More Powerful: Lessons from a Locksmith

<http://www.groovypost.com/unplugged/make-passwords-more-powerful/>

Learn from a locksmith about some things to do to make sure you are as secure as possible online. He explains that securing yourself online is pretty much doing the same type of things you do to secure your home or other property, only you are doing it with software and passwords rather than locks and bolts.

How to Fix a Kindle eBook That's Not Downloading

<http://blog.the-ebook-reader.com/2015/05/25/how-to-fix-a-kindle-ebook-thats-not-downloading/>

It doesn't happen often, but it has happened to me before. Read this post and bookmark it for later, so that you won't have to work through trial and error like I did. One of the methods suggested should work.

How to Remove Ask Toolbar and Ask.com Search From Your Browser

<http://www.maketecheasier.com/remove-ask-toolbar-and-search/>

I don't know why, but this question has come up pretty often lately. MakeTechEasier shows how to remove them from your browser, as well as suggestions to prevent getting them in your browser.

The Best Hidden Features of VLC

<http://lifehacker.com/the-best-hidden-features-of-vlc-1654434241>

If you use VLC, my default media viewer, you might not be taking advantage of a lot it can do. Check out this Lifehacker post to learn about hidden features.

How to use Google Maps offline mode on iOS, Android

<http://www.cnet.com/how-to/how-to-use-google-maps-offline-on-ios-android/>

c|net explains how to set up Google Maps to use offline. This comes in handy if you end up with no service for some reasons, but won't do you any good if you don't set it up before you go. Check it out and use this way to still be able to find where you need to go.

How To Tell When You Last Booted Your System [Windows]

<http://www.addictivetips.com/windows-tips/how-to-tell-when-you-last-booted-your-system/>

Addictivetips gives you two methods for telling when your Windows system was last booted.

How Google Knows Everywhere You've Been

by Rob Schifreen

In the age of the internet, we need to accept that we don't really have any privacy. Web sites know what we like, and which pages we visit. They sell that information to advertisers, so they can display eerily relevant adverts that make it clear they've been watching our every move.

Intelligence agencies like MI5 and the CIA probably track all of our movements too, and can find out where someone was last Tuesday. Probably.

Actually, the location tracking thing is a reality. A worrying one. And one that might just surprise you.

Do you have an Android phone? Do you have a Google account (ie, do you use sites such as gmail or youtube?). If the answer to both of those questions is yes, and if you haven't actively

turned off location tracking, Google knows where you've been because your phone keeps sending its location back to Google's servers. And if you want to see all that information, nicely plotted on a map (a Google map, obviously), you can.

Fire up your web browser and head to <https://maps.google.co.uk/locationhistory> for something which might surprise you. See all those little red dots on the map? That's where you've been recently. And while Google promises that the data is viewable only by you, they clearly overlook the fact that it's also available to anyone who knows your Gmail login details.

Take a look at your own location history, and prepare to be amazed at how much information the internet clearly knows about you.

The Tip Corner

by Bill Sheff

Lehigh Valley Computer Group, PA

Scams and Viruses

Last month I inadvertently typed in the wrong password for my AOL account, and could not get in. You would think I would go to "Keyword Password Reset," but for some reason I googled aol help. A site that appeared to be AOL connected me to a tech with an Indian dialect. Although I explained that all I wanted to do was reset my password, he told me that I had a problem and wanted permission to take over my computer to "clean it up." Brrr! That was close. It seems that more and more hackers are finding ways to get our information. So beware. I then did go to Password Reset and was back in in a matter of minutes.

If you ever discover that your C: drive appears blank and all your icons are missing, don't despair. Even though your antivirus program has cleaned a virus from your computer, it appears some viruses can leave behind some unwanted results. One such virus is the Windows 7 Recovery virus, which will hide your files in an attempt to make you pay to remove the virus. Try this tip which seems to work.

Click the Start button in the lower left corner of your task bar. Type cmd in the search box at the bottom of the menu and press Enter. If you're using Windows XP, click Run and type cmd into the Run box.

Then type `attrib -s -h -r c:/*.* /s /d` and press Enter to execute the command. After a few minutes it will finish executing the program. You can then close the command prompt window and check your desktop. The hidden files have been restored. By changing the c: drive to the name of a flash or other drive the tip should work.

Print part of an email or other text?

At a recent meeting the question came up. "How can I print a portion of an email?" Here are a couple of ways of achieving this.

One way is to highlight the section of the email you'd like to print. Select copy and paste to a word document. This method is good if you want to do some editing of the text.

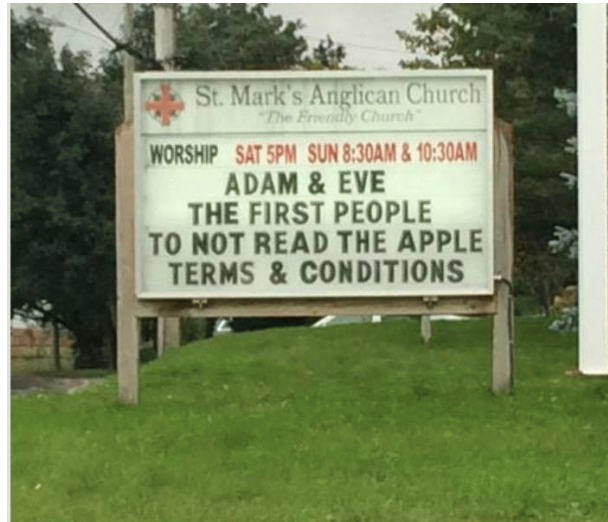
Another method is to highlight what you want, right click, select PRINT. When the print dialog box comes up, in the "Print Range" box, place a check mark in the box that says "SELECTION." Finally, highlight what you want, right click and select PRINT PREVIEW. Select the "As laid out" option click the drop-down button, and click "As selected on screen" and you will see only the selected portion of text, ready to print. That will print out just what was highlighted.

Use Google Now for Quick Calculations

Need to calculate a tip. On your Android phone tap the Google Now Widget and tap the microphone or say Okay Google. You can then ask Google to calculate by asking, "What is 18

percent of Forty two dollars?" Google now will then calculate your tip. You can also ask it many other questions such as what is the circumference of the earth?

The Lighter Side



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