RANDOM THOUGHTS

I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid.

Riding off in all directions at once

2003:04

In old westerns, the sheriff would round up a posse to look for the bad guys. They'd all jump on their horses and ride off in various directions. An extension of that image is the disorganized person who "jumps on his horse and rides off in all directions."

That's where this month's *Random Thoughts* is going: Everywhere. At once. We're off …

Hairless website architects

Some people who work on websites may have hair. I once had hair. That was before I got married, had two daughters (one of whom gets married this Saturday as the other makes plans to go to college), and started working on websites. I don't know that a causal relationship exists between my loss of hair and any of these events, but I have my suspicions.

I was leafing through one of those 1000-page books that people who work with computers tend to collect. At one point, *Web Design: The Complete Reference* discusses the relationship of a standard page of paper to some of the common monitor sizes.

Below I've drawn several standard monitor sizes and a standard sheet of paper. I've also labeled each monitor with text that is the same size from one image to the next.

First, note that a standard VGA monitor doesn't display the full page and that the text that indicates the size of the screen fills about half of the screen. On the SVGA monitor, the text is smaller compared to the screen, but the screen is still incapable of showing the full page. The 1024x768 XGA screen displays nearly the entire page and the text size, relative to the screen, is smaller still. My monitor runs at 1280x1024, so I could actually fit two pages side by side and the text that appeared to be huge on a VGA monitor looks comfortable on this screen.

Adding to the puzzle, we must be mindful of the fact that text will stretch across the full screen if the browser window is maximized. Lines of text could be too long and hard to read. Good typography calls for 60 to 80 characters per line, which is why this newsletter needs to have two columns with its 10-on-12 Amerigo BT roman type. Width can be controlled with tables, but tables can have an adverse effect on printing.

Generally speaking, anything that looks good on a VGA screen will look far too small on an XGA screen. Fit the site to an XGA screen and everything will look too large on a VGA screen.

There's also the question of physical screen size. Does the user have a 14-inch monitor or a 21-inch monitor? (Imagine each of the screen illustrations being the same width.) Has the user changed the text size setting? No matter what the designer does, the user can wreck it with a bad setting.

Those who design for paper are used to having control. Designing for the screen is all about making do with virtually no control over the final appearance. This won't soon change.

For now, the key to good website design is: **Control what you can, ignore what you can't control, and know which is which**.

Added value

Every month when I send time-billing statements, I include a copy of this newsletter with hopes that you'll find something useful, thought-provoking, or amusing here. Occasionally, with luck, I might even say something profound. [See: *Monkeys (infinite number of), typewriters, and Shakespeare*.]

I can't talk with every client once per month because I'm in Ohio and my clients are scattered around the state — and in several other states: California, Washington, Arizona, Texas, and New Jersey. So I write. I think it's a good way to keep in touch and I hope you consider it worth your time.

640x480 VGA

1024x768 XGA

800x600 SVGA

1280x1024

NOW what??

Dead Trees seemed to be a somewhat negative name for this publication. Starting with this issue, the new name is *Random Thoughts*, suggesting – if not deep analytical articles – that at least minimal thought during development of the articles. Please note that I still bear no particular animosity toward trees.
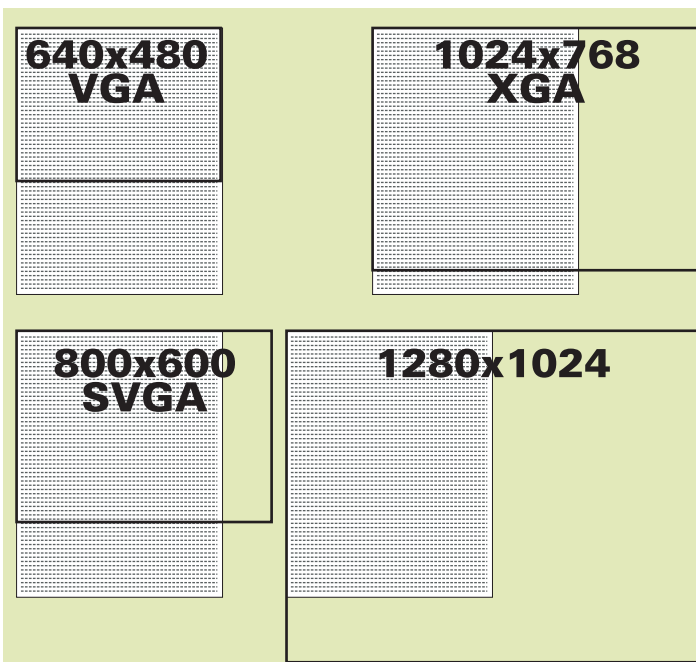
One client I work for almost always writes a note on the check I receive. The company isn't General Motors, but it's large enough that I'm always pleasantly surprised by the personal attention that my statement receives.

Actions like this take a little extra time. A little extra care. But the time spent is well worth the effort. People notice because it's easy in today's high-tech society to lose touch.

What additional service can you perform that will make life a little better for somebody else?

GoodbyeSpam update

For many years, I was "bill@blinn.com". Simple. Easy. Too simple. Too easy. Spammers figured it out and before long that address became useless.

A month ago, I ran across GoodbyeSpam.com and decided to give it a try. Last month, I used this forum to tell you about it. For about $5 per month, the service has virtually eliminated spam. It works so well that I've been able to resurrect bill@blinn.com, an address I hadn't used for nearly 3 years.

Setting it up takes time and GoodbyeSpam must learn about you before it becomes fully effective. After several weeks, the service now routinely passes nearly all of the mail I want and kills at least 90% of the spam. The rest is put into quarantine.

Mail that GoodbyeSpam considers to be trash is held for 24 hours (and this may be expanded to 72 hours or 7 days for a small extra charge). I can glance at the trash occasionally just to be sure no good messages have landed there in error.

If spam is bothering you, check this out!

What to do with a bad website host

During the third quarter of 2002, I moved my Technology Corner website to a host that promised to do a good job. For a couple of months, it did. But when you call for support and you get a recorded message from the "new president" of the company saying that the company is not in danger of going out of business, watch out! Calls to "support" were unanswered; voice mail was ignored. On-line "chat" support sessions timed out without response. Faxes went into a black hole. E-mail to the "new president" weren't answered.

Unfortunately, the Internet's being "virtual" means that a website host can put up a fancy front, make all the right promises, and then fail to deliver. That, apparently is what happened with FeaturePrice.com. Unfortunately, I'd paid for a year's worth of service.

Many hosts want to be paid a year in advance. Well, nonsense! My current website host, Akashik.net, is paid month-to-month. That's the way it should be. The service is astonishingly inexpensive and it includes features that cost extra at most other hosts. Is this too good to be true?

FeaturePrice.com seemed good for a couple of months, but then fell apart. The new host I'm trying is an Australian company with a US presence. Their servers are in Seattle. The servers have been fast and reliable. All of the services work as promised. Support is there when I need it. So far, so good!

Akashik is, in fact, a "repackager". They buy blocks of services from a large network operations center and resell smaller pieces to people like me.

Currently I'm hosting *blinn.com*, *technology-corner.com*, *blinnks.com*, and *lizandrusty.com* for less than what it once cost me to host just *blinn.com*. The service? Akashik has a single support technician in Seattle, but he's good. And fast.

I've cautiously recommended Akashik for some clients and will probably recommend the company to others if the service continues to be as good as it has been. ß

Need an e-zine? Check these options!

You probably know that I'm the host of **Technology Corner** on WTVN radio. It's part of Joe Bradley's top-rated Sunday morning program.

Despite my best efforts, I haven't been able to kill off the audience in nearly 10 years. The numbers are nothing at all like they are Monday through Friday, of course, but the show is #1 in its time period.
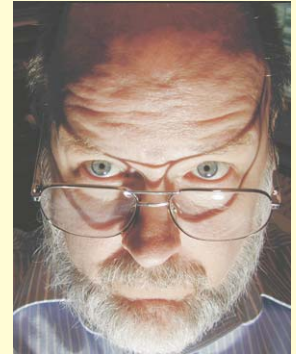
To let people know what's coming up on the show, I e-mail a brief message on Friday evening or Saturday morning. Some might call this message an e-zine. I wouldn't because it consists of just a few brief paragraphs. But it's similar in function to an e-zine.

At first, I used **Topica's** service, but the service seemed a bit unreliable. Then I discovered **Ezine Manager**. The service is free for up to 2500 messages per month. With about 300 subscribers, the Technology Corner notification list fit the free service. The problem was that messages could not be uploaded and sent out on the same day. The earliest I could send a message uploaded today would be midnight tonight.

When I recommended **Ezine Manager** for an AAA club in eastern Ohio a few weeks ago, I noticed that this policy appears to have changed. Messages may be uploaded and sent immediately. **Ezine Manager** doesn't have all the features of programs offered by **EmailLabs**, but the cost is far, far lower. Mailing twice per month to a list of 25,000 addresses would cost just $45.

What I use now is a mailing list feature offered by Akashik, my service provider. It's free. It's plain-text only (my preference for this particular list). It's quick. It's easy to maintain. People can subscribe on their own, without my intervention.

Keeping in touch with clients and prospects via e-zine has been quick and easy since e-zines began. Now it can also be surprisingly inexpensive. ß