

RANDOM

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

THOUGHTS

Is Earth is being taken over by stupid people?

2003:08

Last month I wrote a little filler piece called *The Lost Art of Thinking* in which I described an intersection in Columbus where workers had installed four *Sidewalk Closed; Use Other Side* signs – one on each corner.

The evidence seems irrefutable. Idiots seem to be taking over tasks once handled by intelligent folks. We can't beat them; making something *foolproof* only produces better fools. We're outnumbered!

The bank job

I've had a credit card with one of the big New York banks for 10+ years. I use it when I travel and for business expenses. Late in 2002, I changed website hosts and, after the first charge went through, the next month's charge was declined.

The card has a limit of something like \$15,000 and the balance (it was about \$900 at the time of the charge) is paid in

full each month. "A minor mix-up," I thought. I called the bank and told them that the charge was correct, I knew about it, and it would occur each month. They seemed to understand.

Next month, same thing. Another charge declined. Another call. Another apparent understanding.

Next month, same thing — except that the billing company terminates the account if the payment is declined 3 times. I called the bank, a little more hostile this time. Explained very carefully that this is a recurring charge, it's only \$17.95 per month, I wanted to be very certain that it would not happen again. I was told it would not happen again.

I understand the need to curb fraud, but I have to wonder just how many frauds are committed by setting up a recurring \$17.95 transactions for website hosting. Many years ago, I had a credit card number stolen and found that the number had been used to purchase several high-priced items (not services) in California during a time when I hadn't been out of Ohio.

But I digress.

Next month (you're beginning to see the pattern aren't you?) same thing. This time I was told that there were lots of notes on the record about this particular charge, but "it's all automated and nobody looks at the notes." One might be tempted to ask *Why, if nobody looks at the notes, do you bother to type them?* I was tempted to ask the question, but I was so sticken by the sheer idiocy of the statement that I couldn't form a coherent reply.

In the interest of brevity, I'll leave out a couple of months worth of annoyances.

In the meantime, I wrote to the bank's chairman, who passed my letter off to someone with a "manager" title (meaning that he's been working at the bank for at least 7 days). The reply was polite but told me that the policy would not be changing. It did note that the bank valued my 10+ years as a loyal customer. Sure it did.

On July 20, I received an e-mail from the payment company. The charge had again been declined. I called the bank and spoke with a customer support representative. "I can't help you," the support guy said, "You'll have to talk to the people in fraud

Improving your visibility

For about 10 years, I've been doing a weekly radio segment on the news/talk station in Columbus. Sunday morning show host Joe Bradley and I started doing the segment when I was still working at the station (16 years, ending in about 1999); we've continued the segment and WTVN even still trusts me with a key to the place.

Initially I gave Technology Corner's website low priority. Show information was in "blinn.com/wtvn" – not a horrible URL, but not a very good one, either.


Later, I set Technology Corner up as a subdomain and the URL changed to "wtvn.blinn.com". That got rid of the "slash", which is particularly a problem in speech.

Then I set up "technology-corner.com". That's a longer name, but it's the name of the show. I needed the hyphen because somebody already had the all-one-word version.

This month I added "610tech.net" and "tc610wtvn.net" so 3 domain names go to the site. Around Columbus I can use "610tech.net" because "610" is what everyone calls the station.

Those outside the city might need an additional reference to the station's call letters, so I registered "tc610wtvn.net".

For regular listeners who have bookmarked the website, the new domain names aren't important. Technology-corner.com may turn out to be the best option because it is the show's name. But 610tech.net is easier to type.

When it comes to getting people to come to your website, an easy name is definitely advantageous. 

Random Thoughts or Dead Trees?

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.

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prevention.” He asked if he could connect me, I said that I’d like that, and he went off-line to make the connection.

Apparently the fraud prevention folks didn’t want to talk to me. The customer support person returned and said, “They say there’s nothing they can do about it because the charge is from a foreign country.” Should that matter? If it’s a charge I know about, if it occurs every month at about the same time, and if I have given my approval for them to pay it, why should they care whether it originates in the US, China, Australia (where it did originate), or the planet Mars!

My solution: I fired up a Web browser and went hunting for a good credit card deal. Thirty minutes later, I had filled out the on-line application. After 10 years, I will move my business account to another bank. I’m still an optimist. Maybe this bank will still have a few people with functional brains.

Even the Library of Congress!

I have a little newsletter called *Random Thoughts* for clients. You’re holding one in your hands. I mail it monthly and post it on my website. Because it’s a “serial” publication, I thought it might be fun (although not particularly useful) to have an ISSN. Since it appears in two formats (on paper and on the Web) it needs two ISSNs, one for each format.

I obtained the appropriate forms from the Library of Congress and filled them out. Someone at the library responded by telling me that they needed to see copies of each and that I should send one along as soon as I could.

So I opened the website version and printed one copy and then I grabbed a copy of the previous month’s newsletter. I attached the website printout to the *electronic-format* form and then I attached the printed copy to the *print-format* form. I put them (and this is probably a serious breach of bureaucratic protocol) in the same envelope. I figured they were going to the same place

Bad thinking on my part. I assumed the person who received it would be a sentient *homo sapien*. Most librarians I’ve met are smart people. In this case, though, that assumption was a serious overestimation.

The electronic version was approved and now has an official ISSN, but then I received a “reminder” from the Library of Congress. They wondered if I was still producing my newsletter and, if I was, wouldn’t I please send along a copy for their records.

So I grabbed another copy from the stack, stapled the reminder on the front so the person who opened it would have some idea why I was sending a copy of *Random Thoughts* to the Library of Congress and mailed it.

Several weeks later, I received another letter from the Library of Congress. “It’s the ISSN,” I thought. Instead, it was the reminder I had sent previously with my newsletter still stapled to it. Another reminder said, “We need to see a real copy of the newsletter.”

In fairness I have to say that what I received back from the Library of Congress didn’t look much like my newsletter. Apparently fearing an anthrax attack, the LOC must bake all incoming messages. Because my newsletter is produced on a printer that uses a wax-like ink, most of the words had run together.

But that’s all I could send them. I grabbed yet another copy and wrote a reply to explain that what I’d sent previously was

September at TechX NY


Once upon a time, I had hair. Then I got married, enjoyed watching 2 daughters grow up, and started going to New York City every summer for what used to be called PC Expo.

Whether any of this had an effect on my increasingly hairless state, I can’t say. But if I hadn’t been going to New York City for the past dozen summers, I suspect that I might have even less hair.

Technology changes fast and it’s hard to keep on top of things. When someone does what I do for a living, he’s expected to know what’s coming. In a dozen years or so, I’ve learned the ins and outs of the show, which events to attend and which can be skipped.

Each year, I make my *intelligence report* available to clients at a cost that’s far less than even airfare to New York. See the enclosed note if you’re interested.

I remember the year that Intel was showing a sneak preview of the “blazingly fast” 486 (how slow they seem now), when the first personal organizers started showing up (long before Palm), and when Linux was going to take over the world (didn’t believe it then; don’t believe it now).

What’s going to be the next critical trend in the industry? Watch for more connectivity (Bluetooth, USB2, Firewire 800) and more networking abilities (WiFi), along with further integration between computers and mobile phones. Your next desktop computer may be a notebook! **If you’re wondering about these things and want the straight story, make sure you reserve a copy of my report.** 



the real copy, but that I was enclosing one more copy for their records.

Fast-forward to Friday, July 19. Another letter from the Library of Congress arrived. This one was too thin to contain more than a single piece of paper. This had to be the ISSN for the print version. It just had to be!

Not quite. The message didn’t mention the previous submissions, but reminded me that the Library of Congress *really* wanted to see a copy of *Random Thoughts* and that they would really appreciate it if I would stop clogging up the system and send it along before they had to cancel the number.

I think I’m going to tell them to call CitiBank for a copy. 

CORNER on the market by A.J. Stinnett.

“One of the most difficult tasks an executive or manager has to do is tell an employee that his or her performance is not acceptable. The task has become even more difficult in the present business climate that is saturated with people and groups who have acquired or demanded a lengthening list of *rights*.”