

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

Buy or bye-bye: Let your fingers do the walking

I'm old enough to remember having to go to a store to find out if something I wanted was in stock. That meant getting into a car (or hopping onto a bike or walking) and going to the "business district" (all stores were downtown in those days).

Then the telephone company (when it was The Telephone Company) told us to let our fingers do the walking. They suggested we could call ahead and ask if something was in stock. It saved time, gas, and driving at a time when driving was fun, gas was cheap, and I had all the time in the world.

But I'm not a fan of the phone. And I detest "shopping".

Maybe it's that *male vs. female, hunter vs. gatherer* thing. Once I know what I want, I'd like that thing to appear instantly on my desk. I don't want to go to a store, find it on a shelf, schlep it to a cashier, stand in line (or *on line*), and take it home.

When my antique Sony Clie organizer started showing signs of needing to be replaced, I did a little research on-line. It didn't take long for me to decide that the right organizer for me would be either a Palm (formerly PalmOne, formerly Palm) Tungsten T5 or a Palm TX. The T5 has more memory and a lot of features I'd be unlikely to use. The TX costs less, has less base memory, but seemed to be the better choice for me. I've looked at Pocket PC devices, but I've never been able to justify the re-learning that would be required to switch from Palm to PPC. So I knew that I wanted a Palm TX.

Who gets the sale?

My favorite physical/virtual store is CircuitCity because I can place an order on-line, and pay for it on-line. When I go to the store, all I have to do is show a photo ID and the credit card I used. The clerk hands me whatever I ordered and I'm on the way home. Even on the day after Christmas, this step took less than 10 minutes.

Compare this to CompUSA, which is equally close to where I live. The on-line part of the process seems to be the same, but no order is actually placed. The device I want is supposedly "reserved" but I've never found it at the customer service counter. Sometimes it takes CompUSA clerks 20 or 30 minutes to find what I "ordered" on-line. Sometimes they don't have what I ordered even though the website says it's in stock. And I have to pay for it in person. Even though the CompUSA website takes my credit card information, nothing happens. Bah, humbug!

Columbus is MicroCenter's hometown and two of their stores are about 10 minutes from where I live. Their website doesn't seem to allow me to order anything on-line for in-store pickup. That's too bad because I like working with MicroCenter.

When I decided that I wanted a cradle for the Palm TX (remember when these used to be included with the device?) I tried CircuitCity (not stocked), CompUSA (available only at a distant store), MicroCenter (hopeless), and Buy.com.

On December 31, Buy.com told me they had the cradle and the aluminum case I'd been looking at in stock and that they qualified for free shipping. I placed the order and selected the "free shipping" option, which displayed a warning that the order might not ship for 5 to 9 days. That was OK. These are accessories and the Palm TX was working just fine without them. I placed the order.

About 3 hours later, I received an e-mail from Buy.com. "Just wanted to let you know that the item(s) listed below from your order #12345678 have shipped and are on the way to your door." It's the last day of the year and it may be that everything not "in stock" at the end of the day isn't taxable. Maybe tax considerations are why the order was processed so fast or maybe Buy.com is just uncommonly efficient on the final day of the year. No matter, the order was on the way.

And my point is?

My point is that those stores (whether bricks-and-mortar, on-line, or blended) that serve their customers best will succeed.

MicroCenter once employed only people who understood personal computers, but the company had to compete on price when CompUSA came to town, so now many of the employees aren't subject matter experts. CompUSA has clerks. CircuitCity employs sales people. Buy.com has a "customer service" area on the website, but is careful to point out that "our agents do not have more specific product information than what is listed on our site."

Most electronic devices today are commodities and buyers are looking for the lowest prices from stores that provide adequate information.

When it came to buying the Palm TX, CircuitCity was the clear winner. The price was competitive, I could order it on-line, it was in stock, and I could have it the same day. I found

slightly lower prices, but might have had to pay for shipping and wouldn't have had it until January.

For the case and the cradle, no local store was able to compete with Buy.com: CircuitCity didn't carry one of the items and the other was out of stock, CompUSA had both items but only at a distant store, I couldn't figure out whether MicroCenter had either of the items, BestBuy had both but only for prices substantially higher than elsewhere. So that left Buy.com with reasonable prices, free (slow) shipping, and everything I wanted in stock.

It's a split decision: CircuitCity for the PDA and Buy.com for the accessories. **R**



The shape of things to come

In 1982, I went to work for a company that operated 5 Digital Equipment Corporation 11/73 systems running the RS/TS (resource sharing/time sharing) operating system, but we still had a Honeywell 200 that was used to run a single application. The DEC 11/73 systems had floor-mounted hard drives that were 40MB devices. The Honeywell had several tape drives and its core memory was really core memory – circular magnets on a matrix of wires. Each 64KB module was about 9 inches wide, a foot tall, and maybe 18 inches deep.

I started thinking about that when I glanced down at the desk and noticed a 128MB SanDisk SD card. It probably cost me \$50 or so. I have no idea what the 64KB Honeywell memory modules cost, but I'm sure they were at least \$1000 and to get 128MB of core memory would require 2000 units. So the memory module (less than an inch wide, about 1.5 inches long, and about 1/8 of an inch thick) sitting on my desk would have, in 1982, consumed more than 2200 cubic feet of space and would have cost at least \$2,000,000.

I'm still hoping that somebody perfects time travel so that I can take some of this stuff about 20 years into the past and become extremely wealthy.

In 1984, I bought a Zenith personal computer. The base unit came with a monochrome monitor (no graphics), 256KB of RAM (I paid extra to boost that to an amazing 320KB), and 2 floppy disk drives. The cost was well over \$1000. Today there are watches with that much memory.

Later I added an external 16MB hard drive (about \$1200) and later expanded to a 40MB hard drive, then an 80MB hard drive, 2 80MB hard drives, and so on.

Today, the computer I started using in 2003 has 2 120GB internal drives, 2 external USB drives (200GB and 160GB), and a 200GB network-attached drive. Depending on which other computers are turned on, I may have access to an 80GB drive and a 120GB drive on my younger daughter's Mac, a 60GB drive on my notebook computer, and another 60GB drive on an Apple Powerbook.

In the 1980s, this would have been millions of dollars worth of storage space. Today I can buy a 120GB Seagate drive for \$100. Or I can buy a pocket-size USB hard drive that requires no external power supply because it receives its power from the USB port – 30GB for \$100 – that allows my younger daughter to move important files between her home Mac and

the Macs at the Columbus College of Art and Design (CCAD). Only a few years ago, the only portable devices were Zip drives (\$10 per 100MB) or solid-state drives (\$50 for 16MB).

Yes, there's a problem

Hard disks are far more reliable than they used to be, even those manufactured by companies with a less than stellar reputation, but they still fail. Backup has become a serious problem. CDs and DVDs are sufficient in some cases, but external hard drives are increasingly becoming the solution of choice for many people.

I keep two external hard drives at the office and bring them home once per week to backup my primary home machine and the computer Kaydee uses for CCAD homework. There's no substitute for backup. Even if the disk drive in your computer doesn't fail, you might delete or modify a critical file. Backup will save the data and the day.

If you've ever had to recreate a document that you lost, you probably felt that the replacement was a pale shadow of the original. Recreating documents wastes time. Even worse, it's extremely frustrating. If you're not backing up the files on your computer, now is the time to develop a backup strategy. The real value of your computer is not the hardware and the applications on the hard drive; the real value is in the files you have created.

Backup is not an option. **R**



Google news ships

Four years in beta, Google News finally "ships". We need a new word to describe on-line applications that are deemed to be good enough to be taken out of beta. There's nothing to "ship", so they can't be "shipped", but that's the best we've come up with so far. We also "dial" phones and a lot of people have never seen a phone with a dial.

In any event, Google News has some new features and is no longer "in beta".

Google introduced the service in September 2002 with the goal of giving users a broader perspective on the news by pointing to many articles on the same topic. Now Google News has 22 regional editions in 10 languages.

The new features include personalized news headlines and the ability to receive "recommended news stories" that are chosen based on your previous searches. You'll also see a new section in the left column shows the most popular recent stories in the Google News edition you're using. **R**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

*"Somebody who knows how
will always have a job.
Working for someone
who knows why."*