

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF
PERSONAL COMPUTER USERS
WHO FREQUENT THE INTERNET,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON GIST
SUPPORT GROUP MEMBERS.

safe surfing

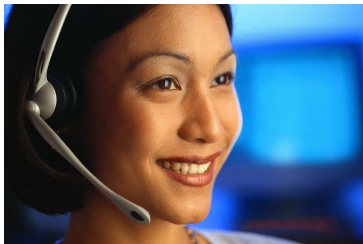
- ◆ MISCELLANEOUS RESOURCES
- ◆ UPGRADE REMINDERS
- ◆ STUMPER CONTEST

Miscellaneous Resources

Speed Trap Alerts: I certainly do not want to imply I support speeding, but here's a very useful resource for those of us that are not quite as careful about monitoring our speedometers as we should be:

<http://www.speedtrap.org/speedtraps/stetlist.asp>

As you'll see, the site is supported by its readers, and lists all states and virtually every city. I was amazed to find timely and relevant information right close to home!



Free Information Telephone Number:

Have you missed the free telephone information feature that we used to be able to get by simply dialing the operator? Now it's back

and, though ad-supported, the service gives you everything we used to get from the information operator in the old days. Just dial **1-800-YELLOW PAGES** (that's **1-800-935-5697**, the extra digits are just so you'll remember the number) and you'll get this: A one-sentence ad ("***This call is supported by....***") followed by a short sequence of questions ("***Do you want a business or a person?***" "***Do you want me to search by category or name?***"), to which you answer verbally, not by key press. I found the voice recognition to be perfect and the automated information to be amazingly accurate! I have only had to talk to a human once in five uses. This is a remarkable new resource, especially for cell phone users with voice prompt and Bluetooth capabilities. Just program the number into your contact list and you'll be completely hands-free **and** toll-free!

Check Voicemail Finger-Free: With this new trick I just learned, you can call your cell phone voice mailbox, enter your password and check your messages with one voice-prompted command. This, of course, assumes your cell phone supports voice prompts (which is something you should insist on because it's so much safer and, usually, free!). You should also have a Bluetooth headset, a REAL convenience, a significant safety factor and, in some states, the best way to comply with the law (see below for Bluetooth headset recommendations). In my case, I simply edited the number in my contact list for Voicemail to add two 2-second pauses (a selection available on most phones), my numeric password, a pound (#) sign and a "1," which is what my Verizon service requires to listen to voice messages. I don't worry about key presses normally used to save or delete the message I hear because the system will automatically save your messages if you just hang up, a single-button process with a Bluetooth headset. Y'know, I love my Bluetooth headset, and it's safer and extremely convenient but, **PLEASE**, someone shoot me before I turn into this dork→→→→→





Body Shop Alternative: I just discovered and used an alternative to the typical “highway-robbery” body shops. If you’re like me, you have a fairly large deductible on your automobile collision policy. So, if you have a “fender bender” that you are to blame for, you’ll be footing a pretty sizable body repair bill. But very often, in most large metropolitan areas, you’ll probably be able

to find someone trained in “paintless dent removal.” In Orangevale, California a wonderful little family-owned business called The Dent Shoppe takes care of those pesky little creases, dings (and more) at less than about a third of the cost you would expect at a traditional body shop. Although you may or may not find businesses like



this in the Automobile Body Repair section of the Yellow Pages, your insurance company will almost definitely be able to refer you to someone. I expect major insurance companies to begin waiving deductibles as a motivation to use such companies in the future, much like the resin injection process recently favored for windshield repairs.



Bluetooth Headsets: Soon, in California at least, nobody will be allowed to use a cell phone in their car unless they have a hands-free device connected. The simplest of these, wired headsets, are also a pain in the you-know-what to attach and

detach. Most new phones also have a speaker feature, but using that method in the car introduces an unreasonable amount of ambient sound. So the best and most audible solution for the car (and even in the office when you need two hands) is a Bluetooth headset. I have personally used only the Motorola and the Plantronics Bluetooth brands. I believe the Motorola has an edge from a standpoint of operation, but the Plantronics fits better, the in-ear versions are somewhat easier to hear and may be clearer at both ends. An important subjective issue is whether the unit fits your ear and feels good in use for long periods of time. I did not like the in-ear style of Plantronics as much as I did the on-the-ear style of the Motorola (Motorola also now makes an in-the-ear version) because it felt intrusive and

seemed to reduce the audibility of other sounds. And although the Motorola had a habit of falling away from the surface of the ear at times, that did not seem to hamper reception for me. The most affordable units are usually the Jabra, Plantronics and Motorola brands. They will all give good service, but the far more costly Aliph and Epoc brands are generally rated higher. Don’t bother to get a model with a boom. Even though they would appear to offer an advantage, the boom won’t significantly improve the reception of your voice. Shop for a good price and a guarantee of a full refund if you are not happy with the unit’s performance. COSTCO and SAM’S always guarantee satisfaction, but they do not have a very wide selection. Best Buy and Circuit City offer a great variety but I cannot vouch for their warranties.



Sacramento Area Crime Mapper: For those of you lucky enough to live in my beautiful area there’s a great new service offered by the Sacramento Bee. Simply visit the following link, enter the address that interests you and a map showing reported crimes for up to the past two years will be displayed for you:



CRIMEMAPPER
An interactive map of crime reports in the Sacramento region

<http://crimemap.scoopytube.com/crimemap/map.html>

Upgrade Reminders

Technology improves so rapidly that it’s hard to keep up. Of course all industries are affected, but two of the clearest examples are digital television and cellular telephones.

Television Service Providers: Satellite (basically DISH and DIRECTTV) and cable TV service providers’ equipment changes so rapidly that you are almost always out of touch with the latest advancements. About a year after you either initially contract or extend your contract with your service of choice, newer hardware and software is released that makes your current hardware almost obsolete. With most services you can



yourself of free or nearly free upgrades to the newest technologies by extending your contract by a year or two. But sometimes improvements are particularly significant

and so recent that they have not been well-promoted. So sometimes it pays to keep up with the advancements by consulting the companies' web sites, reading their ads and calling their customer and technical support people to determine the latest.

In my particular case, I can tell you that DISH TV had two new and significant developments that I was willing to pay more money but that research and perseverance (i.e. nagging customer service all the way up the chain) permitted me to get at the lowest price. First, both their software **and** their hardware for High Definition (HD) services had improved so much that I was basically being denied dozens of HD channels and productions by not having the latest equipment. All of the new HD receivers permitted the increase reception, but none of the older ones (mine included) did, even though the monthly fees were the same. By extending my term of service at the end of my existing contract, I was able to take advantage of a greatly reduced price on vastly upgraded equipment, including two dual HD Digital Video Recorders (DVR), enabling us to record four different shows simultaneously. The degree of improvement in the quality of the reception and of the recording software really surprised me. It was well worth the money (especially since it wasn't much money)!



Another video-related advancement I had not fully appreciated until I actually researched and bought it is a product manufactured by Archos called the PocketDISH AV700E. The device is only fully usable by DISH TV subscribers, but a similar product,

the Archos 705WiFi, is available that offers comparable benefits to all avid TV watchers/recorders. Both models are basically portable video recorders (PVR) with beautiful 7 inch screens that permit you to record or copy your own TV shows, movies, photos or music and carry them with you wherever you go. They also include a TV tuner for use with an optional external antenna and the ability to upload to or download from a computer as well as from other devices like cameras, camcorders and satellite/cable receivers. The DISH software on their product allows very rapid, highly compressed copying from certain DISH DVR receivers to the PVR. The non-DISH PVRs will only copy (or download) the recorded video in real time with no compression. Newer Archos models have also incorporated WiFi capability and much larger hard drives (80 or 160GB as compared to the much smaller 40GB hard drives on the DISH units), For some inexplicable reason, Archos stopped producing the PocketDISH models and they are virtually impossible to find. Neither DISH TV nor Archos can (or will) tell what's planned, but there are rumors of an improved model coming soon. There also appears to be a new development in the form of software to be downloaded that will allow DISH TV users to convert the newer Archos products to perform as PocketDISH units. Additionally,

although it is uncertain as of this writing, a newer model called the Archos TV+ may also be able to record from any receiver at compressed speeds. In any case, all models other than the now defunct PocketDISH require an additional docking station to be purchased at a cost of about \$100. With the higher-end models costing about \$500, this product line is not cheap. It's just great!

As wonderful as their products are, the Archos web site is



very unfriendly and it is very difficult to decipher product availability, capabilities and technologies under development. Additionally, trying to contact someone to ask relevant questions

is nearly impossible. I'd make a joke about the company being French, but I'm afraid I'd offend someone. Sacré Bleu, that wouldn't be PC!

Cellular telephone:

Advancements in this industry occur constantly. There have not been so many significant developments in the past year that you absolutely must upgrade your telephone to keep up, but there have been many. Phones are much sleeker and more compact than they were just a year ago. Their cameras offer higher resolution, video clip capability and many PDA functions (notes, voice recording, calculators, scheduling, etc.).



Almost all offer features soon to become, if not already, a must like Bluetooth compatibility, voice prompting and speaker phone functionality. Basically you have to decide if you want your phone to focus on entertainment capabilities (MP3, photo, video and now even TV)



or business-related capabilities (internet/email, PDA functionality). Many of the features come with virtually all of the phones, but a QWERTY style keyboard is usually peculiar to phones with email and internet capabilities. Although many services and phones offer internet access that does not need a QWERTY keyboard, that feature is very beneficial if you plan to do a lot of text entry. Also, many services offer limited internet access at a rate far lower than their full high speed access, like Verizon's VCAST for \$15 per month.



Review your company's offerings and consider upgrading if the new advancements warrant the additional cost you would encounter. Most companies will give you a huge discount after a couple of years (up to \$100 in Verizon's case) but they will also offer a somewhat lower discount

after only a year. So, if there has been a development that intrigues you, upgrade early rather than waiting the normal two-year upgrade period.



Google Earth:

This was a delightful little program when it was introduced years ago, and now it's not much short of amazing. It can be used as a full-blown mapping program and still contains all the wonderment that first made it noteworthy. You can take a trip to tour the world's major sight-seeing attractions, view your own or anyone else's neighborhood, use the program's new astronomy feature or even fly a simulator manually. In most cases, you will be using NASA's unbelievable satellite photography and the detail is mind blowing.

Having awarded all that praise, I have trouble imagining what practical application the program has in the real world. Other map programs are more effective for



directions (including Google Maps) and Microsoft still makes one of the best flight simulators for gaming. However, you must experience this nifty program. Go to <http://earth.google.com/> and click on the "downloads" link at the left.

Stumper Contest

I skipped the Stumper question last month. This month let's look at something in

Windows that is often an aggravation. Do you constantly get a pop-up window asking you to sign up for or into Windows Messenger? I did before finding this solution. So the question is "**How do you get rid of Windows Messenger?**"

All correct responses will get honorable mention and the very first one will get a year's subscription to my world-famous **Safe Surfing Newsletter!** Of course, as famous as it may be, it's still free, so I hope that doesn't detract from its value in the eyes of the lucky winner. After all, if it really IS the thought that counts, then my intentions are truly pure and worthy.



Happy New Year!!!!

Barry Codron, a U.S. Air Force retiree, lives (with his wife and doggie and near his children and grandchildren and their doggies) in the Sacramento area. Although technically fully retired, he enjoys writing and consulting in areas including technology and music, among other fields that pique his interest from time to time. He welcomes, no **encourages**, your questions, comments, ideas or corrections at barry.mart@sbcglobal.net.

