

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

safe surfing

- A WHERE TO SHOP FOR TECH
- B TELEVISION EVOLVING
- C WEB SITE FINDS
- D STUMPER CONTEST

Where to Shop for the Latest Technology



Sharper Image – NO!

Just my luck: the first time I decided to consider buying something at Sharper Image, they refuse to accept the gift card I intended to use (received as a bonus from Discovercard, my favorite credit card company). That, they say, is because they

recently filed for Chapter 11 protection and the courts require them not to accept their own gift, reward and cash cards. If that's not trying to have your cake and eat it too, I don't know what is. Update: apparently bowing to consumer pressure, Sharper Image has agreed to resume accepting the cards subject to specific conditions outlined at their website.

Sharper Image has never been a very good place to shop for deal-watchers, but they've always had some interesting gadgetry and technology. It'll be sad to see them go, but there are plenty of other places that can and will fill the gap.

Brookstone

There isn't close to the number or sophistication of items here as there are at Sharper Image, and their prices are inflated. But on occasion **Brookstone** there will be an interesting or even useful item. So I check out there inventory about once a year, often on a flight that has a catalogue featuring their items.

On occasion, both of the above offer clearance sales, but those are usually on items that are nearly obsolete.



SkyMall Catalogue

Some airlines offer the SkyMall Catalogue, and I'm often introduced to some

interesting and fun items in those pages. Their internet site now offers the same variety and pricing: www.skymall.com. Once again, though, this is not a place to find deals, only a good place to find that certain gadgets exist. Then you'll want to look somewhere else for a good deal on the item.

For example, while writing this edition I flew United a couple of times and got a chance to peruse the SkyMall catalogue. In doing so I saw this nifty remotely operated, rechargeable battery-powered gutter cleaner. Pretty pricey at about \$120, but I searched the 'net and found a very similar item for a lot less. Not enough less to convince me to buy it without an ironclad satisfaction guarantee (which I suspect I'd have to use), but at least I found out about the technology.

Circuit City and Best Buy

These are two of my favorite retail outlets for hands-on examination of goods. And occasionally they even come up with a good price on an item or too, but usually





that is limited to the rare loss leaders. They always have the very latest in technology, plenty of supply and their sales personnel are usually fairly savvy, especially at Best Buy. It is very likely

that you will be able to find something you like by touching and feeling it here, and then go buy it for less somewhere else. For example, check my favorite locations online: eBay and Amazon, or one of the following places in their stores or online.



Walmart

For some reason or other I always forget to check prices at the

world's largest retailer. Walmart is especially valuable when you want that specific, too popular gift that is not available anywhere else. And, thankfully, they do not jack up their prices as demand increase and supply decreases. Their inventory seems aimed at a lower to middle group of buyers and users, both technologically and economically.

Fry's

Fry's, on the other hand, has



technology that runs the gamut from batteries to the latest CPU (and don't forget to stock up on the beef jerky, candy and chewing gum while waiting in the sometimes-interminable the check-out lane). The store has some of the industry's lowest loss-leader prices and widest variety of inventory.

One precaution I've learned from experience: their prices are often so low because the buyers have made special deals with manufacturers that limit normal warranty processes. And there are times in the past when I have discovered they bought out entire inventories of inferior products, a large percentage of which were known to be inoperative. Many of my contemporaries suspected that Fry's was betting that only a small percentage of people would return defective items, assuming that they were at fault. And, in fact, that philosophy often worked. But when it didn't, Fry's just put the returned items back on the shelf to retry the philosophy over and over until the final return percentage became sufficiently small. This, of course, is just conjecture, but it's based on considerable evidence and experience. And I still shop at Fry's! That's because I sometimes have extra time to spend running around for the best deal, I have a fairly high risk tolerance and, although they do run you through a drill, they have never refused me a refund.

COSTCO and Sam's Club

These major big-box outlets have very good prices and the best return/refund policies I've ever encountered (along with Walmart, above). But their selection is very limited



and usually, but not always, aimed somewhere shy of the highly sophisticated leading edge. The real advantage, to me, of both



COSTCO and Sam's is that they'll take virtually anything back for almost any reason. This is very important when trying out new technology. Rarely will you be able to make a reliable and absolute decision on new technology based on reviews or ratings. You just have to try it out for your own application. If one of these stores carries something you've seen, heard or read about, even if it's not exactly the same model described, you won't find better place to buy it; they'll take it back if you're wrong with no questions asked.

GPS Anecdote

For example, we bought our third new model of automobile GPS at COSTCO online and discovered after using it a few weeks that it lacked a very important feature. I had done my homework before buying the impressive Garmin Nuvi 200W for my wife, but I was



not able to appreciate how important a "text-to-speech" feature is in actual operation. It truly took a few weeks of use to determine that the feature is critical, especially in a completely unfamiliar neighborhood. I simply took the unit back to one of our local retail stores, told them why I wanted to return it, and walked out with cash to put toward the \$150 more



expensive unit with "text-to-speech" (the Nuvi 680). I did not have to mail it back even though it was shipped to my home from COSTCO.com free of charge. GREAT way to do business!

Just so you know, "text-to-speech" means instead of the nice navigator person saying "Turn right in 50 yards," she says "In 50 yards, turn right on Madison Boulevard." This is not only a tremendous convenience factor, it is a distinct safety advantage in that you do not have to take your eyes off the road to look at the GPS to see what street you're approaching.

Newegg.com and Amazon.com

Aside from eBay, where you'll usually get the very lowest price but virtually no credible satisfaction guarantee or right of return, these are two of the best places to shop for the items you've researched. Here you get a unique combination, especially from most of the merchants at Amazon, of great price and satisfaction guarantee.

Newegg normally charges a restocking fee, unless you're successful, as I was recently, in talking them out of it by offering to buy a replacement from them. Some third party merchants at Amazon charge a restocking fee, but purchases made directly from Amazon (usually, but not always, the more costly purchases) do not require a

restocking fee and Amazon will often even cover the shipping both directions, very unusual online!



Bluetooth Headsets

Anecdote

You might be interested to know about the item I was unhappy with and had to return to Newegg. I had purchase one of the highest rated and most expensive Bluetooth cell phone headsets, the Blueant Z9. It is a very nice looking and comfortable fitting unit, but it did not

connect well with two different brand phones and gave the receivers fits trying to hear and decipher conversations. That really surprised me considering the high ratings from virtually every reviewer, but that just proves how important it is to insure you get comprehensive satisfaction guarantee and return or exchange rights. I was worried about exactly that, so I negotiated with Newegg before ordering so that I could return the unit if I was unhappy and avoid the restocking fee by buying a replacement unit from them.



My next attempt will be the Jabra BT8040 and I'll report on my experience

with that in a future issue. (If you're wondering why I did not order the very highly rated Aliph Jawbone, I'm not convinced I need to pay over 50% more considering that even that unit is reported to have some problems.)



Television Evolving

TIVO and DVR

By now everyone knows what TIVO means. That first-of-its-kind company has agreements with Direct TV and is rumored to be negotiating with Comcast to provide similar services for that renowned cable company. DISH TV has a very similar programming in its own DVR (digital video recorder) units.

Comcast and virtually all

other providers have their own version of DVR, and the device makes watching TV a lot more efficient than you can imagine if

you have never used one.



Slingbox

Another relatively new means of managing your television viewing is the Slingbox, now in three different versions from about \$100 to about \$200.

Any of the three models will record your programs and then send them to you wherever in the world you happen to be, via high speed internet, handheld or mobile telephone.



And we have seen the internet become more intent upon providing television content, as described last month, by major television networks, YouTube and, now, Hulu.



Hulu.com

Hulu, a joint venture with NBC Universal (owned by GTE) and Fox (owned by News Corp.), is a new and unique online video service that competes with Apple's iTunes and Google's YouTube services.

Hulu is the first major initiative by content owners rather than technology companies that must rely on licensing agreements with television, film and music providers for their content. Its partner sites, including AOL, Comcast, MSN, MySpace and Yahoo, allow you to view the same selection of premium programming available at Hulu.com.



But the real significance seems to be the major television and movie companies that are joining up to display their



content on Hulu. Obviously Fox and NBC and all their companies are participating, but we don't see networks like ABC, CBS, HBO, Showtime and Cinemax there yet.

Hulu's service, which opened to the public on March 12, includes full-length films and clips, and full episodes from many current TV shows such as The Simpsons, Prison Break and House. Hulu will offer free video content on an ad-driven basis. The only drawback right now is a rather rigid set of conditions established by studio owners that restrict when, where and for how long you may view the content.

Web Site Finds

Recalls

An excellent resource, Recalls.gov consolidates recalls reported and/or directed

by six different government agencies: CPSC, NHTSA, FDA, USCG, USDA, EPA.

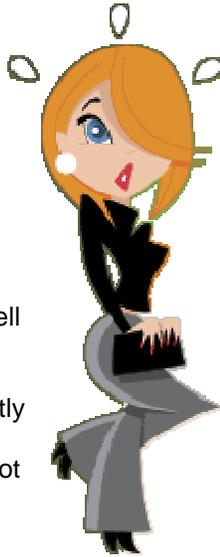


Your Online Resource for Recalls

Gotta Go?

Believe it or not, there's now a web site that will tell you where to go! A boon to elderly guys with enlarged prostates and mothers with young children, just type in your address Mizpee.com and you will be shown the address of the closest public toilets, their distance, ratings and if a purchase is required. You can ask for the information to be text-messaged to your cell phone too.

You know, I loved this idea, but it apparently only works in selected cities around the country (only six in California) and it did not work at all for me when I tried it out a few times in the last week or two. They have some work to do to bring it up to snuff.



POPSCI.com

This site is kind of a combination of the first feature (**Where to Shop for Tech**) and this one (**Web Site Finds**). Just like the friendly, easy to read Popular Science magazine I always like to find in waiting rooms, this site is fun to scan.

The very day I discovered the site, they announced a news release I had not seen anywhere else that falls squarely into the feature above (**Television Evolving**). TIVO had just announced a partnership with YouTube



that promises access to the site's millions of clips from your television set. That could be a big improvement over calling folks to

take turns peeking over your shoulder to view the latest clip on your laptop screen. No additional details available right now, but this is a very interesting development for TIVO owners and subscribers. And, potentially, it could be good news for Comcast and Direct TV viewers as well. As a DISH TV subscriber, it's unlikely I will be enjoying TIVO/YouTube clips any time soon; DISH TV and TIVO are pretty adamant adversaries right now.



Stumper Contest

Once again I must have miscalculated the interest there would be in last month's stumper.



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Here's what I asked:

You've decided to take a stab at bidding for something on eBay. You've done your homework and you know how much you want to spend. The bidding has been slow, and that excites you because that may mean the item hasn't generated too much interest. You're afraid to bid too early and get the juices of the other bidders going, but you don't want to be too late either. How can you bid, or is there a program you can use, so as to keep bidding down yet not miss having the last word up to your limit?



There are a number of programs written to help you with this quandary, along with more tasks that you may not have even thought about. For example, I'll bet you didn't know there was a program that could tell you how many other items your competition is bidding on! And there's a lot more information a good program will give you that will help you bid on eBay.

The short answer to my question is "snipe." That is, get a program that is either designed to snipe or that has a built-in sniper module. If you're not familiar with that term, sniping is bidding at the very last second (actually that's controllable in most programs from 1 second to about 5 seconds before auction ending time).

Most programs cost something, but, if you don't snipe more than about 15 times per month, here is an excellent free program called **Prospector**, and it's free: <http://www.moxieproxy.com/download.htm>

The program contains a sniper module that makes it easy to beat out your competition. Best of all, the writers of this program offer the very best customer service I think I've encountered from any software development company! I've written them with my questions many times and I have had thorough answers and comprehensive solutions in just minutes. The kinds of problems I've encountered would probably not bother the normal user (like using the program on multiple machines simultaneously). Next time you don't want to miss that chimpanzee costume on eBay, try it!

For next month, what are some setting changes that can be made to your system to enhance your computer's performance?

True story:
Last week we visited our middle daughter in our Nation's capital.

We stopped at a Mexican restaurant and I asked the waitress "Do you have a pitcher of Margaritas?"

She opened the menu and pointed to this photo.

