Keep it Simple

LOCAL SUPPORT

The Moms and Pops of the world need a source of local support.

BY JON "MADDOG" HALL

My mother and father, "Mom&Pop," are rather infamous in the world of electronic devices. My father was an airplane mechanic and has often taken the car engine apart, repaired it, and put it back together again, with no lost or leftover parts, and my mother ran several stores in her life – including keeping the books for these stores. If you put something electronic in front of them with more than two buttons, my parents seem to fall apart.

Over the years I have purchased many gifts with varying numbers of buttons that I thought they would like. The device with the fewest buttons (two) was an automatic coffee maker, and these two buttons stepped you through the process of setting the clock to turn the coffee maker on in the morning. I had installed this coffee maker, set the time of day, and set the unit to the time that they woke up every day, then I put the instructions in the kitchen drawer. Unfortunately, I had not anticipated the loss of electric power that left the clock blinking "12:00" for six months until I could get home again to re-set it.

My father told me that he had followed the directions exactly and still could not reset the clock. When I then reset the clock (without the instructions), he said, "I did exactly that and it did not work."

A microwave oven and a bread-making machine met with greater success because my parents had the incentive to use them and they sometimes took classes on how to use the new gifts. My parents went to two years of "microwave cooking school," where Mom learned how to cook and Pop ate the food the instructor cooked.

It began to dawn on me that the real key to success was twofold:

- make things easy and intuitive to use
- reduce the actions that the end user performs to those things that they really want to do and will do often.

When Mom&Pop were given a computer, I rather expected that there would be trouble, but they rapidly learned how to read email (something they wanted to do) and browse the web (something else they wanted to do). Because they did these things often, they retained what they had learned.

However, my father's idea of "backup" is something you do with the car to put it into a parking place. My mother's idea of a virus is something you treat with chicken soup. Mom&Pop think that SPAM is a luncheon meat that comes in a can. Such things as installing software, updating virus programs, and filtering SPAM are not things they would do. Unfortunately, their secondary "support mechanism" (me) lived 500 miles away, and their primary "support mechanism" (the local computer club meeting in their retirement community) often created more problems than they fixed.

Now flash back to 1969, when I worked on mainframe computers. If I had a problem, I could turn to the person in the next office, who also had a Master's degree or PhD in computer science, and ask a question. Or I could go down to the computer room and find many more people trained to know about computers.
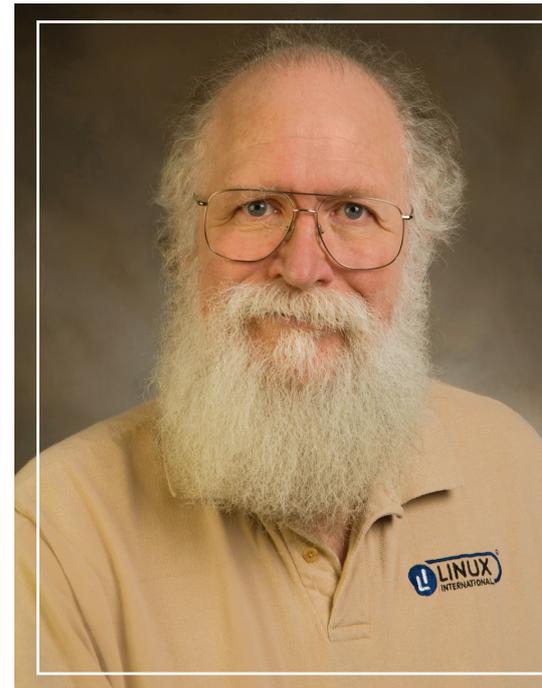
The mainframe changed into "departmental mini-computers" that ran time-sharing systems. With all of the programs and data in one place, operators were hired and trained to do backups, restore files, and take care of other maintenance tasks, and the users could concentrate on running the programs and doing their jobs. Life was sweet.

In the late 1970s, the advent of the "personal computer" moved the mainframe computer from the computer room and placed it on everyone's desk. As the prices of computers began to drop, the chance that a manager would send an employee to a $3,000 class to learn how to use a $300 computer became less and less likely. At the same time, local support for Mom&Pop became a help line in India or West Texas. Mom&Pop cannot understand either one.

I was reminded of this recently when a friend of mine was trying to transfer files from a PC to an OS X system using a USB flash memory stick. Like Mom&Pop, this man was not "stupid," but he could not figure out how to get the files from the memory stick to the OS X system. I remarked that, "OS X is supposed to be easy to use," and he replied, "OS X may be easy to use, but I do not know how to use it … I use Windows."

These examples illustrate why the Mom&Pops of the world need local support; then they can concentrate on sending email and surfing the web. ■