

ACPCUG Newsletter

Stark Tech—
March 2004

Inside:

Page 1—Deals Guy

Page 5 –Ontrack

**Page 7—The Truth
About Mailin Rebates**

**Page 10-AOL Scam
Alert**

**Page 11-New Years
Resolutions and Your
Computer**

March Program:

***sendPhoto* by Jim
Carter**

***Introduction to eBay*
by Sandy Davis**

Q&A by membership!

March 2003

Akron-Canton PC Users Group

**From The DealsGuy For
March 2003,
by Bob Click, Greater Or-
lando Computer Users
Group.**

Dr. - Dr., Where Art Thou

I know this is not computer related, but this month I'd like to talk about what I feel is serious and plays on our complacency. Is your doctor really a doctor? Are the initials after his name MD or DO, or are they PA or NP? Most people know what MD means, and even DO, but how about all the rest! When my wife and I relocated to Orlando, we looked for a new family doctor. We selected a doctor from our "approved provider" directory and were seeing another doctor in that office for two years before we discovered he was not really a doctor. Since he was in that doctor's office, we thought he was a doctor. Finally, a nurse working in a lab told us he was not a doctor when we spoke about the "nice doctor." We were shocked and asked why. She explained the difference saying he was actually a Physician's Assistant, and that does not even come

close to having the qualifications to be a doctor, but sees you in lieu of the doctor. She said a PA is more or less a nurse with certain experience. I had noticed the letters after his name on the door were PA, but thought nothing about asking what it meant. In other words, I made an assumption I shouldn't have. After being enlightened, we started asking for the Doctor. I was told that the PA clears everything through the doctor when making his evaluations, but afterward, I remembered that sometimes the other guy (the actual doctor) differed with the PAs prognosis, 'when asked.'

Recently, I saw a cardiologist three times and when they were making the next follow-up appointment, I was told this one would be with a nurse (Nurse Practitioner). At least they didn't hide anything. When I asked if the office call would be cheaper, they said no. I said not to bother. If the doctor didn't have time to see me, I'd find one that did. I realize these people are under a doctor's supervision, but I don't agree with the concept that is designed to make more money for the doctor through our ignorance. When I'm paying for a doctor, that's who I expect to see for the price my insurance, or I, is paying. What are your thoughts, and has this happened to you? I am a volunteer in a retiree walk-in center who helps retirees with insurance problems. Insurance contracts do not pay for a PA or NP (don't know about HMOs), but that is rarely the way it is billed. I could write a book!! [bobclick@mindspring.com]

And Now For The Deals.

The Jaws PDF creator products deal ended Feb. 15. [<http://www.insight.com/jaws>] Also, you'll find three new groups listed on my Web site's distribution page that now read the DealsGuy column.

You Could Take This Keyboard Scuba Diving

Maybe I'm going a bit too far with that statement, but this one is designed for bad environments. I know most of you won't need this kind of keyboard at home unless you spill your coffee a lot. It's designed for the worst conditions. The following is their description:

"The 'CoolOne' is a water-resistant and contaminant proof keyboard. It's sealed and rigid surface is ideal for industrial and medical use, as well as other outdoor environments. It's a rigid keyboard with tactile feedback keys. It comes with a USB connector and an available PS/2 adapter. It's perfect for environments where there's a lot of dust (warehouses, outdoor use), where water or moisture is a problem (food processing plants, marine use), and where disinfecting is needed (hospital/medical and school use). It's also great for anyone who eats and drinks near his/her keyboard and has ever accidentally spilled something inside it. Check the specs further at

[<http://www.man-machine.com>]."

They offered me a sample product, and what a coincidence that the box was mutilated when it arrived. The box had been squashed and punched through, then repaired with plastic tape. The keyboard could also rattle around in the box. When I tried it, it worked just fine and I was impressed (I tried every character multiple times). On close examination, I don't see how anything, dust or liquid, could penetrate it's skin, it certainly is sealed. I plugged it into the USB port and Windows immediately installed drivers for it. It needs a slightly heavier touch, but I quickly got used to that. I do miss having legs on the back though.

The normal price is \$179.00 (US funds) and my readers will get \$20.00 discounted from that price when ordering from their Web site [<http://store.yahoo.com/man-machine-store/>], or by calling 301-341-4900. Also by e-mailing them at [sales@man-machine.com]. Shipping is approximately \$8.00 in the USA. Use the coupon code "click" when ordering for your \$20.00 discount. This offer expires April 30, 2003.

If you have a swimming pool you might consider putting one of these keyboards in the pool. That way people could send an e-mail for help if they are drowning. It is supposed to work in water, right?

You'll Come Clean With This One

I saw this at Comdex and liked it. Mine works great. The LENS PEN is a very efficient and easy-to-use optical lens cleaning system. It's designed for all optics including cameras, camcorders, telescopes, binoculars, riflescopes and spotting scopes. Containing a non-liquid compound that will not spill or dry out, the LensPen system is safe, user-friendly and its compact size fits into almost any pocket.

Then there is the MiniPro for smaller lenses. MiniPro is specially designed for digital and advanced photo system cameras, microscopes, pocket binoculars, and small eyepieces. The same LensPen cleaning system is employed in this great new product: a soft, natural brush to wipe away excess dirt, and a flexible cleaning tip with special cleaning compound.

These products are said to be safe to use on all lenses. Offers flexible cleaning tip, non-liquid cleaning compound that will not spill or dry out, reduces static built-up, prevents corrosion and fits easily into any pocket or bag. Check the product further at [<http://www.lenspen.com>]. The DealsGuy price on either the LensPen or MiniPro is \$9.95 in US funds plus S&H, which will be about \$6.00 in the USA. To order at that price, contact Leona Borsa

at 1-877-608-0868 and mention the DealsGuy column, or use the magic words 'Bob Click' when ordering. This deal is good until April 30, 2003.

Do You Need A Fix?

Don Singleton, APCUG Vice-president, alerted me to this one. It is called BigFix and is actually a free download. It analyzes your computer to see what fixes it might need, then guides you through them. It also alerts you of updates you need and does that for you. Here is their description:

"The BigFix solution leverages the reach of the Internet and the power of modern computers to create a mass preventive maintenance system that enables mass identification and elimination of computer problems before they cause failures. The BigFix solution can automatically monitor and detect a problem, proactively alert users or administrators to the problem before a failure occurs, and fix it on one or more machines at once with the click of a mouse. Because the BigFix solution can find and cure thousands, even millions of computers at once, it changes the nature and economics of technical support as well as desktop management. Unlike other available approaches, the BigFix solution simplifies maintenance, reduces support costs, and increases user satisfaction by finding problems before, not after, users experience a failure."

To download this product, go to [<http://www.bigfix.com>]. Don gave me the URL for an in-depth write-up by Richard J. deJongh of Tulsa Computer Society. [<http://tcs.org/ioport/nov02/bigfix.htm>] I have not tried it so I have no experience using it.

That's it for this month. Meet me here again next month if your editor permits. This column is written to make user group members aware of special offers I have found or arranged, and my comments should not be interpreted to encourage, or discourage, the purchase of products, no matter how enthused I might sound. Bob (The Cheapskate) Click [Bobclick@mindspring.com]. Visit my Web site at [<http://www.dealsguy.com>] for past columns. Also, I keep adding interesting articles (taken from user group newsletters) to my "Articles of Interest" page for viewing or downloading.

Keep your Hard Drive Driving by Chris Doyle, *Ontrack*

Here's a quick quiz: What takes a licking yet keeps on ticking? Right—your hard drive. The truth is that hard disks manufactured in the last few years last longer than that old clunker you're using as a doorstop.

Here's the surprise. You can squeeze a longer life—maybe even keep a faulty drive trucking—with a few easy tips.

- The silent killer of hard drives is heat—especially high-speed SCSI drives. My recommendation? Use a hard drive cooling fan with all hard drives. You can buy them direct at <http://www.3dfxcool.com> or at FRY's. I have cooling fans for both my IDE and SCSI drives. In the lab, we have cooling fans on the drives at all times.
- Optimize your hard drive on a daily basis. As much as a pain this may be for some, optimizing your drive has several benefits. Besides optimizing the files, this process also catches many minor problems that may manifest themselves into a major problem later.

Examples? Cross linked or orphan files. Another good reason is that if you do have a problem accessing data on your drive, when a utility is run, such as Norton, nuts and bolts, tiramisu, the chances of recovery are much higher if the drive has been optimized recently. (By the way—Mijenix (<http://www.mijenix.com>) makes a great utility to perform this function <<Smile>>)

- Without questions, you must run SpinRite on all of your drives once a quarter—at number five, the highest. This is a personal recommendation. Steve Gibson's utility is excellent, and will find many if not all surface defects before they manifest themselves further. Trouble in Paradise, also known as TIP, is an excellent tool for Zip disks.
 - Should I mention backing up your data on a regular basis? Do it often, early, and often and early.
 - Examining your power supply is critical. It's not too difficult to tax a power supply in some systems if they are fully loaded. If possible, I recommend you make sure that the systems have a decent power supply—at least 250 watts or more. (PC Power and Cooling makes the best). Also make sure that your hard drives have their own independent power connection, not shared by other devices. An uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) is another good idea (and don't sweat, these things are much more reasonably priced than in the past).
 - Many people ask whether it's best to keep your computer running all the time—or better to turn it off and on. My recommendation is turn your computer on in the morning and off at night. I also think that disabling all power saving devices is best for hard drives. Forcing a hard drive on a desktop PC to spin down every 15 min of inactivity—and
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then waiting a minute or two to spin up—is worse than turning the computer off and on.

- Never, ever move the computer while it is up and running. (Try telling that to laptop users!) Any blow to the computer—it tips over, is dropped an inch or more—and that bump gets transmitted directly to the hard drive. Most of the time it will cause a minor head crash. Worst case? It will cause bad things to happen. No, don't ask. But you'll be calling Ontrack to get an estimate. <<smile>>
- Don't forget about static when handling drives. The newest and highest performing drives come with (hushed tones, please) Giant MR Heads. They're <M>*extremely* sensitive to static. Ontrack has redone all of our static procedures to handle this technology, and I can tell you from first hand experience that static will kill drives dead.
- Drives that make clicking, thunking, or grinding noise are experiencing a mechanical problem of some sort. No surprise, huh? But each time the drive is powered up, the more that damage is occurring on the drive. If data recovery is needed in this case, please <M>*please*, please—the less you do to the drive, (powering up or using utilities) the more data we can recover. And the faster we can recover it.
- If you think you have a problem with a drive, try going to the manufacturers Web site. Download the specific utility they make to check the drive. Since the utility comes from the manufacturer, they know how to check specific issues with their drives.

Here are some examples:

Quantum: QDPS

IBM: DFT

Western Digital: WD Diag

Maxtor: MaxDiag (I think)

Ontrack's Data Advisor: This tool will work with all drives And it's probably the safest tool to use to check a drive.

Here's a tip for tinkers, users that do a lot of testing of drives. In many cases, it's very difficult to get rid of a hard drive after installing a particular operating system or file system type. That's especially true when using programs such as System Commander.

Try booting up with Ontrack's Disk Manager. The utility has a feature that will write zeros to every sector of the drive. This puts the drive back into the shape it was when it came from the factory. After the process is done, it's easy to partition and format the drive. Don't forget, though, that this will destroy all information on the drive.

- Here's one for all of you SCSI users lurking out there (including me). Keep your drivers current. Driver and BIOS updates for your SCSI card can make a world of difference in how your drive performs. Don't forget to make sure you follow the specifications for cabling

and termination.

Okay, now that you have some new tools for preserving your hard drive, I have some bad news. I saw a 40GB drive advertised at FRYs for \$29.99 (after rebate). <<just kidding>>

OnTrack's Chris Doyle loves to hear hard drives happily humming. You can reach him at CDoyle@ontrack.com

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The Truth About Mail-in Rebates

By Roger A. Poverny, TUGNET

Mail-in rebates are a bonanza for retail computer stores: They can advertise a very low sales price (or even a free price, after mail-in rebates), and then charge buyers of these so-called bargains a higher-than-normal sales price. It brings in the customers who are looking for good deals, and who may purchase other items while they are in the store. It means higher sales figures for the retailer since these mail-in rebates are underwritten by the manufacturers, and they cost the retailers nothing. It also creates a cadre of unhappy customers. Why? Consider this: according to the Wall Street journal, up to 95% of people forget to claim the rebate. They end up paying more for the product than they would have without a rebate. For those who make the claim, there are a variety of reasons why the claims go unpaid. Some of these reasons are detailed below.

Let's start with this premise: manufacturers don't want to rebate money to you, so they put a number of obstacles in your way. Sometimes the rebate forms are hidden in the store or you have to ask the cashier for a copy. The rebate form lists the submittal requirements in great complicated detail so that a simple non-compliance error on your part will void your claim. You must include a copy of your purchase receipt (sometimes with the purchased item circled or underlined) along with the original UPC code from the package. Be careful here, as some packages have multiple UPC codes with different numbers. Then you must mail the completed rebate form, with inclusions, to a specified address (usually a fulfillment house hired to handle the rebate). There is always a window of opportunity; i.e. an "offer expiration date" and a "postmark before" date. Most mail-in forms tell you to expect your rebate in eight to ten weeks.

Very seldom will a rebate check arrive by the promised waiting period: you are forced to call their 800 number (although some don't have a toll-free number) to find out what the holdup is. The manufacturer is counting on you to forget that a rebate promise date has passed. If you do remember to call them, this is generally when the excuses start. Typical excuses are: "We didn't receive your UPC code or register receipt," "We never received your letter," "You didn't complete your rebate form properly," "The offer has expired ... or is no longer funded by the manufacturer." The fulfillment houses are experts at not paying, and as a matter of fact are hired by some manufacturers just because they are so tough. Many times you will get a postcard, not a letter, saying you were denied a rebate. Postcards are easy to lose or throw away in the trash, which is why many rebate checks are mailed in the form of a postcard. They don't even look like checks! Most people will stop trying once they have been rejected. The manufacturers count on this. At a FRY's the other day, a customer relations representative pointed at two 4-drawer filing cabinets and said they were full of customer complaints about rebates. That's eight drawers of unhappy customers, and they represent only that five percent (according to The Wall Street Journal) who actually sent in their rebate forms. After all is said and done, probably 2% of the customers receive a rebate check.

Manufacturers and retailers make more money from us when the items they are selling have mail-in rebates, so it doesn't seem likely that the practice will end any time soon. The number of items using rebates appears to be rising exponentially, and the customer is the loser. It is just plain unfair. How can we fight back?

Fighting Back

There are two ways to fight back: (1) Politically, through our Legislatures, Better Business Bureaus, Federal Trade Commission, Retail Store Managers, etc. We can write letters or call and complain; (2) The second method is to make it so costly for the manufacturers to offer these rebates that they will abandon the practice. We can do this by making sure we get every one of the offered rebates. If you follow the directions outlined below, you will get every one.

1. Make sure you have the rebate form before you leave the store. Check the form to be sure you fall within the offering's dates. Also ask the cashier for a second copy of the purchase receipt.

2. As soon as you get home, remove the UPC code from the container or wrapping before you throw the packaging away. If you intend to try out the product first to make sure you want to keep it, and don't want

to remove the UPC code yet in case you want to return it, see #7 below.

3. Read the form carefully so that you will comply exactly with their requirements. Read it a second time before you fill it in. Don't forget to circle or underline the item on the receipt if required to do so.

4. Make copies of everything you send, including the UPC code. This is where most people falter since they don't have copy machines. They set it aside to take to work or to a copy store and forget about it. But, most of us have scanners! Use them to make your copies. Even most fax machines will work.

5. Staple together all the pieces: receipt, UPC code, rebate form. Then they can't say they were not with your submittal, or must have fallen out of the envelope.

6. Mark the mailing date on your copy. Also mark the date when the waiting period ends, 8 to ten weeks later.

7. This next step will help you to remember. Go to: www.memotome.com (memo to me) and sign up for their free e-mail reminder service. Have them to send you an e-mail when the rebate check was promised.

If you are trying out a product prior to sending in the rebate form, ask for a reminder in a couple of weeks.

8. If you haven't gotten your check after the promised time, call the telephone number listed on your copy of the rebate form. Try to talk to a live person. Tell them the waiting period has passed and insist that you be paid. Keep on insisting if you get the brush-off. Ask to speak to a supervisor. Mark the names of those you talked to, the dates and excuses on your rebate copy. If necessary, send another copy of your submittal in case they deny receipt of all submitted items.

9. If all else fails, go to the retail store where you purchased the item. Bring your paperwork and insist that they do whatever is necessary to get you the rebate check.

Roger A. Poverny is on the Board of Directors of The Users' Group Network (TUGNET) in Granada Hills, California. If you use this article, please send him an e-mail to let him know. rogerp@socal.rr.com Thanks.

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ED: My pet peeve, too. But do check website of software/hardware vender. Intuit's 2003 Turbo Tax deals are complicated. But going to their website made things easier and also traceable. This is an example of a responsible vender. Others are more complicated. The above article has many useful tips. Get educated!

Now if only Intuit got their copy protection done right! Later!!

AOL Scam Alert

Pass this on to all your AOL friends

By Steve Bass, Pasadena IBM Users Group

We all know someone--friends and relatives--who use AOL, and I suggest you consider forwarding this message to them. As you'll see, it's not a hoax but a real-life scam.

It started when my mother recently received a beautifully done AOL message. It's the kind of thing you read about but rarely get to see first-hand.

The message she received was from the AOL Billing Services Team. She forwarded it to the accounting department--moi--because I pay for her account (she has me to blame, I know). Read the message here: <http://www.pibmug.com/files/aolletter.jpg>

It took a minute to figure out something wasn't right.

Telltale Clues

For one thing, the e-mail header showed that the AOL Billing Services Team was blind copying her using version AOL 5.0. (<http://www.pibmug.com/files/aolheader.jpg>) You'd think they could use a more current version, right? There's more: The return address was Remindinyou@aol.com and the subject line had a misspelling.

I followed the Billing link in the message. At first glance I saw an AOL Welcome box. (<http://www.pibmug.com/files/aolwelcomescreen.jpg>) Take a careful look and you'll know why I was suspicious. Yep, lots of misspellings.

I went along with the game plan and clicked OK. Now I was staring into what looked like a remarkably authentic credit card payment form. Even if you didn't click the other links, you HAVE to see this one. It's worse than a loan application.

<http://www.pibmug.com/files/aolcreditcard.jpg>

Is it Really You?

To make sure it's really you, they also want your Social Security Number, date of birth, driver's license number, and mother's maiden name. With that, the scammers can get to "identity theft" heaven before you shut down your PC for the night.

But they're not finished. How about throwing in your AOL screen name and password, something even novices know AOL wouldn't do. To add a level of legitimacy, they warn you that, "For your safety, please do not download any files from strangers. AOL will never ask you to download anything."

Who Is?

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

I went to <http://www.samspace.org>, my favorite Web examination site, and backtraced the Billing link. (The site was closed by Hypermart so it now leads to an error page.) It's an obfuscated URL: <http://www.aol.com-billing:july-2002@072002.hypermart.net> that leads to <http://072002.hypermart.net>. It works because any characters before the @ sign are ignored. And all it took was a quick web search with Google.com to find locations loaded with AOL scamming files. You can view one site here:

<http://www.pibmug.com/files/aolhypermart.jpg>

I contacted one of AOL's security people I met years ago because of a story I did about AOL. Unfortunately, I never heard back from him. I also sent a message to abuse@hypermart.net and they responded in four days.

AOL Protection Strategy

Forward this to a buddy using AOL. They need to know that the best AOL protection strategy is to be alert to constant scams. You know, if it looks like a duck, smells like one, and occasionally quacks, there's a good chance it is one.

If you're unsure about a billing question, it's best to call AOL's billing services directly at 800/827-6364, or their Screen Name/Password line at 888/265-8004.

Steve Bass is a Contributing Editor with PC World and runs the Pasadena IBM Users Group. He's also a founding member of APCUG. Check PCW's current edition at www.pcworld.com/resource/toc/index.asp and sign up for the Steve Bass online newsletter at www.pcworld.com/bass_letter

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New Year's Resolutions and Your Computer

By Ira Wilsker

This is the time of the year that many of us make New Year's resolutions, promising to keep them, and eating black-eyed peas to insure our good luck and good fortune. Despite the many hours per week that a lot of us spend on our computers, we often neglect resolutions that can make the time we spend computing more enjoyable, productive, efficient, and secure.

Resolve to reduce Internet irritants, those pesky spam mail solicitations, pop-up ads, assaults on our machines from hackers, and attacks by computer viruses.

Resolve to follow the three most important words in computing, which are: Backup, Backup, and Backup.

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

Resolve to finally dump those big national Internet providers that so many of you subscribe to and complain about, but never get around to canceling.

Resolve to subscribe to a local provider.

I hate the spam mail that I receive. I am tired of the solicitations for personal physical enhancement, cheap prescription drugs (often without a prescription), Nigerians offering to make me rich, home refinancing, and lonely females offering to make me happy. Harvesting our email addresses from a variety of sources is something that we can do little to prevent. Checking with out internet service provider (ISP) and software publishers on their privacy policies, and selecting the possible option to "opt-out" of their giving away or selling our personal information may help reduce future spam, but will do little to stop the spam we are currently receiving.

Sadly, some of the largest national ISPs default to "opt-in", meaning that if subscribers do not explicitly tell them on an annual basis that our information is not to be sold, then they will imply our consent to sell our personal information. Many software products (and many other consumer items), solicit our email address with the product registration.

(Continued on page 13)

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Software Evaluation			

Upcoming Computer Shows:

**Peter Trapp on Sunday, March 16th at Tadmor Temple
Exit I-77 South at Exit 120, Arlington Road, right at Jarvis, onto
Right at Krebs**

(Continued from page 12)

Reading the fine print will typically offer the choice to opt-out, and hopefully prevent the company from selling our information to third parties.

Many of our local ISPs now offer email filtering as either a part of their basic service, or as a nominally priced premium service. Using the SpamCop blacklist, or third party filtering provided by companies such as Postini or BrightMail, our local ISPs tend to filter out more spam mail than do some of the large national providers, many of which offer no spam filtering service.

As a bonus, some of the email filtering services also remove many of the email born viruses before they can reach our computers. Either as a freestanding product or as a supplement to ISP filtering, third party spam filtering services or software should be considered.

If using broadband Internet, such as cable or DSL, it is imperative that a good software firewall be utilized. For dialup users, a firewall would also be a good idea. A firewall can make it more difficult for hackers to get access to your computer while online, and can help reduce the chance of a "back-door Trojan" or spyware from sending personal information from your computer to unknown outsiders. As had been discussed in an earlier column, Zone Alarm (www.zonelabs.com) and Outpost (www.agnitum.com) are excellent firewalls, and free for personal use. In addition to a firewall, an antivirus program, frequently updated, is a necessity for all computer users. To try to eliminate the spyware that may be infesting our computers, and transmitting our personal information to unknown parties in cyberspace, the use of a spyware killer is also important. One of the best ones available is the free Ad-Aware, available from www.lavasoftusa.com. Be sure to keep firewalls, antivirus, and spyware utilities current, as their publishers often post updates to the software.

Another way to help secure the Windows PC is with the "critical updates" released by Microsoft. In 2002, Microsoft released about 70 critical updates. These updates typically close newly discovered security flaws found in browsers, email programs, media players, operating systems, office software, and other vulnerable products. These updates can be freely obtained and installed by going online, and clicking on START - WINDOWS UPDATE and allowing Microsoft to send individualized updates. One warning to users of Windows 95; check for updates immediately, as Microsoft is about to cease all support and updates for that version of Windows.

Hard drives are machines. They all do eventually wear out and fail. A full backup of the hard drive, with periodic incremental backups of new files, will enable the disaster of a hard drive failure to be easily recoverable. At an absolute minimum, critical data files should be backed up frequently. Backing up to writable CDs or DVDs, or an external hard drive, using any of a variety of backup utilities, is great insurance. One step in recovering

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from page 13)

from a hard drive failure is often booting off of a floppy; now is a great time to make that bootable floppy, sometimes called a "rescue disk".

Most of us spend a great deal of time online, and many of us also overspend on internet services that bog us down with ads, spam mail, slow service, busy signals, and frequently knock us offline when least expected. Many of you also overpay for the inferior service that some of the large national carriers provide. Switching from the national carrier to a local ISP, such as Eonet, advertised on this page, can be a great move in terms of improved service, as well as a big money saver. Local ISPs may save those who use the national services over \$200 per year, providing better service for far less money.

Finally, resolve to stay informed by continuing to read this column every week, and listening to my twice-weekly radio shows on KLVI.

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