
BUYER BEWARE!

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When I was manning our user group's booth at a computer fair last year, I was approached by an elderly gentleman. He said, "I just bought this Commodore 64 and printer. Now what do I do with it?"

This surprising question pointed out something that I've noticed for quite some time — that consumer awareness with regard to computers leaves a lot to be desired.

Everybody wants to be the first on their block with a new wonder toy. And who can blame them, considering the glamorous images of computers depicted in ads, especially on TV?

Computers in real life tend to be a somewhat different proposition. We've all suffered through wretchedly written, ungrammatical manuals full of facts and figures which make sense only to the person who wrote them. There are quite a few varieties of books available which supposedly explain how to run the doggone things, but at \$20-\$25 a crack, collecting these tomes becomes an expensive proposition.

One of the biggest areas of concern for computer owners is incompatibility. Products made by the computer company tend to work pretty well together . . . well, sort of. When you start buying second-party software, and hardware like printers, modems and other plug-ins, then the fun begins.

Unfortunately, finding sales people who are knowledgeable about what will work and what won't — especially in stores which sell things other than computers — can make your life even more miserable.

There are a couple of cardinal rules to follow when buying something for your computer. First, ask the salesperson to show you that it works, and with the same combination of equipment that you have. If they don't have the same equipment, then you might consider bringing your computer to the store and experimenting on your own. Or else try another store. Remember: one phrase non-existent in many computer salespeople's vocabulary is "I don't know."

Another thing to do is read the manual. This may sound rather obvious, but some

people (yes, even me, once in a while!) like to plunge right in and create music or design sprites or whatever else without knowing what the heck they are really doing.

Recently, I had a lot of problems with a music program even after following the manual. I phoned a friend who also had it and he said, "Oh yeah, you have to read in the 'Addendum' (a fancy word for a list of mistakes) . . . it tells you what to do." And after doing this, my problem was solved! In this case, it would pay off to read the errata list first.

It's quite surprising that there hasn't appeared anyone in the world of computers similar to Ralph Nader, who earned much of his reputation attacking the Detroit automaking giants. Like the auto industry, computers are a billion-dollar enterprise, full of user complaints, product failures, poor design, and so forth. Despite the fact that the world of computers is relatively fragmented compared to that of cars and trucks, there certainly is a need for such a person! *TPUG*