Archive
from the February 25, 1999 edition

Software users of the world, unite!

James Turner, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON— I've been hearing a lot of talk lately about having Congress adopt a "Patient's Bill of Rights." After spending an interesting couple of weeks installing several operating systems and a slew of new software and hardware on my home computer, I think that while they're at it they should consider adopting a "Software Users Bill of Rights," too.

Now, mind you, I'm not what you'd call a typical computer user. Most people I know consider me an alpha geek. So when I'm going batty trying to make things work, I can only imagine the frustration and horror that faces a person new to computers. So here are my humble suggestions for some constitutionally mandated rights.

Article 1: All products sold will have a customer-support number listed clearly in the instructions. Such numbers are to be toll free and get you to a live person within 5 minutes of calling. Anyone whose music-on-hold consists of a looped 30-second promo shall be forced to spend a day trapped inside "It's a Small World" at Disneyland (this after having to listen to a promotional message from a cable Internet provider for 90 minutes about the upcoming World Championship Wrestling special, over and over and over).

Article 2: All products still on the shelves after the release of a new version of an operating system shall work with said operating system or be withdrawn from sale.

Article 3: If new software can't play nice in the same playground with the other programs, it should get a timeout in the corner, along with the numerous applications which failed to coexist on the same computer when it was installed.

Article 4: If new software doesn't work on a given hardware or software configuration, the software should detect this on installation and inform the user, as opposed to trashing the operating system. (By the way, if anyone needs help, I'm really good at installing Windows98 now.)

Article 5: Fixing bugs should take priority over adding snazzy new features to products. Moreover, it's not adequate to operate under the philosophy that if your product works for 90 percent of the users, you can just give the other 10 percent their money back.

Article 6: A software company's user base is not its quality assurance department. Test it before you ship it, and test it over a broad range of hardware and software configurations. There is no excuse for shipping software with major bugs still lurking.

Article 7: When a customer calls with a problem, assume it's the product that's broken, not the operating system, peripherals, the phase of the moon, the deodorant the user wears, or the grade received in high school algebra.

Too many customer-support people seem to take the attitude that if they can find something else to blame, they don't need to actually look at the problem. I have had too many service calls turn into an attempt by the support person to blame anything but the product.
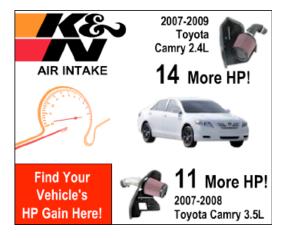
Postscript: After the third time Windows98 corrupted my new hard disk, I finally threw in the towel and installed Linux, a freely available version of the Unix operating system. It doesn't run everything I need (I've still got my Windows laptop for things like Quicken), but at least its lack of customer support is by design rather than by neglect, and it makes up for it by being rock-solid dependable.

*James Turner works on the Monitor's Electronic Edition.

30

LINKS OF INTEREST

Chinese toy recalls show need for stringent quality control

Crisis summit aims to save Iraq's Maliki

South African AIDS activists criticize firing of Madlala-Routledge

Hizbullah marks Lebanon war anniversary with pomp and piety

Democrats gain among US voters, but support is soft

Like the look of a traditional newspaper? Try the Monitor's Treeless Edition

MOST VIEWED

1. Obama wins over a Montana crowd on healthcare
2. The war on drugs needs a timeout
3. Truck bomb signals trouble on Russia's southern flank
4. Oops, he did it again: Jamaica's Usain Bolt sets new world record
5. Firefighters make progress against Santa Cruz fire
6. Riot shows difficulty of desegregating California prisons
7. As a CIA spy, I saw in Iran what the West cannot ignore
8. Review: 'District 9'
9. Obama's health ideas elicit support, skepticism in Colorado
10. Ahmadinejad blames West for fomenting Iran unrest