

KGB REPORT

July 5, 1999

*A Curmudgeon's Look at Business and Technology.
Featuring the Stuff You Need To Know*

Published by KGB Consulting, Inc. | 1512 Annette Avenue | Library, PA 15129-9735-125
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Cruel and Unusual Packaging: I rolled into the local Radio Shack to buy a microcassette recorder for personal note taking, since I've been traveling a lot lately and hate trying to write while I'm in moving vehicles. Also, my short-term memory continues to degrade as I age, and when I'm tired I have the attention span of a ferret on espresso. I've written notes to myself on my desk notepad that immediately disappear, becoming as accessible as the Dead Sea Scrolls. What was I saying? Right, so I buy their professional, top of the line recorder with the extended warranty and return to my car, where I notice I forgot to record on my master calendar the date for the vehicle's next scheduled oil change. No problem, I'll just make a quick audio note to myself. I open up the package and fire up the recorder. Nothing. Batteries not included. Okay, I dig a couple AAAs out of the glove compartment, pop them in and hit the record button. The switch won't move, since there's no microcassette in the unit. I look through the packaging in vain; no tape. A closer examination reveals that immediately beneath the package cutout for the recorder is another cutout which happens to be the exact size of a microtape. Oh well, this was a display model; probably just an innocent oversight. They took the tape out to test another unit and just forgot to replace it. Back into the store, where the otherwise accommodating salescritter says their recorders are sold *sans* magnetic medium. I point to the precisely-sized space in the box where the cassette should be located. "Shouldn't there be a tape here, or is this just a cruel joke?" With refreshing honesty, the associate replies, "I think it's a cruel joke." He does relent and hands over a tape. Kudos to the salesguy, who realized it was worth eating the cost of a cassette to save a sale. But are the packaging people at Radio Shack really that dense? *[Note: Ah, it's working. Write a letter to Tandy CEO Len Roberts commending the salesguy. And what was it I was it I wanted to remember in the first place?]*

Brand Larceny: It should come as no surprise that Duracell, Eveready and Rayovac, the big three battery makers, use their production lines to make just about all the other store name and unbranded batteries sold in the US. Independent testing labs say the big name batteries' built-in self testers and marginally longer life don't warrant the 50% or greater price premium they demand. The labs' advice? Ignore the name on the label, and always buy the least expensive alkalines you can find. And never buy regular carbon-zinc batteries, currently labeled "Heavy Duty". Virtually all battery-powered devices are now designed to use alkalines. *[Note: Duracell's parent company is Gillette, which sells expensive razors and blades; Eveready is owned by the Ralston-Purina company, which sells expensive pet food; and the advertising spokesman for Rayovac is Michael Jordan, who is just plain expensive. Point made.]*

Some Stupid Ideas Are Smart. Richard Landry writes in *NewMedia* that at first glance, the idea of connecting your refrigerator to the Internet seems really stupid. But consider: as you run out of stuff, you wave the empty containers' UPC labels under the built-in barcode reader. When it's time to restock, you press a button and the refrigerator uses the net to send your grocery list to the supermarket, where the order is assembled and packaged for one-stop pickup or delivery at your convenience. *[Note: What if all those magnets on the refrigerator interfere with the network computer and cause the device to transmit spurious orders? What are you going to do with 400 eggplants and a 55-gallon drum of tofu? And how do you reboot a Kelvinator?]*

Some Stupid Ideas Are Stupid. Then there's the British inventor and design student at the Royal College of Art in London, who's looking for backers for the "Techno Bra." Featuring a built-in heart-rate monitor, global positioning satellite (GPS) locator and wireless phone, *Wired* reports the Techno Bra can detect the rapid jumps in heart rate that denote sudden scares. It uses GPS to determine the wearer's precise location and notifies police via the cell-phone network. Sounds more like the premise of a *Monty Python* sketch, a variation of the classic "Nobody Expects The Spanish Inquisition!" Little Billy unexpectedly presents Suzy with an engagement ring. Suzy's heart goes all aflutter in pre-matrimonial delight. Moments later, a SWAT team bursts into the room and blows little Billy away. We'll pass on this one. *[Note: Keep an eye on it, though, and research the hardware requirements for a similar device intended for use by males. Different fear-sensing transducer probably required with different attachment point. Hmm. See if I can get a federal trademark for the term "Techno Weenie".]*

Win One, Lose One? The U.S. House bill which includes the budget for the Interior and Energy Departments explicitly prohibits those agencies from using government funds to operate telephone answering machines during core business hours. Staffers inserted the language when they became peeved that they always got dumped into voicemail when they called the departments' offices. But before you get all warm and fuzzy about the government's dedication to human interaction, consider what they're doing across the Capitol in the Senate. Leaders there have purchased artificial intelligence software to parse the e-mail Senators receive from their constituents and automatically reply with an appropriate pre-programmed response, thereby eliminating the need for our elected representatives to actually read our messages. *[Note: Maybe tone this down a bit on final revise. After all, artificial intelligence is better than none.]*

"Oxygen. Leave the whole bottle." In order to boost profits, the airlines may cut back on the amount of in-flight air they provide their passengers, an action that can significantly reduce fuel costs. In a vote backed by Boeing, other aircraft manufacturers and the airlines themselves, the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers passed revised guidelines reducing the recommended ventilation rate in commercial aircraft from 15 to 5 cubic feet per minute per passenger. The air flow rate for trains, buses and public buildings remains at the 15 cfm level. Isn't it enough the airlines hike fares, use famed hyper-ectomorph Callista Flockhart as the standard for seat sizing, and refuse to give you a full can of soda? For more information, check out the Fair Air Coalition's web site at <http://flyana.com/spon.html>. FAC is a non-profit passenger rights organization. *[Note: Write a letter to the FAA demanding they ban passengers who wear excessive amounts of perfume. The Feds protect us from smokers and peanut eaters; they should also ban those who engage in olfactory assault. On a flight from Chicago last week, I sat next to a woman who smelled like the viewing room of a non-air-conditioned funeral home in mid-August. She could've gagged a honeybee.]*

Paper Planner: You prefer old-fashioned paper scheduling methods to computerized personal information managers (PIMs), but the traditional DayTimer/DayRunner format doesn't have the necessary space to keep track of everything you do? Call the Planner Pads Company at 402-592-0676 and ask for their information package. The Omaha, NE-based outfit sells planners featuring a wide-open, easy to use free-form design that doesn't require mastering an arcane organizational system. There must be a lot of computerphobes successfully using the firm's product. The Planner Pads Company has no web site or e-mail address.

Quotes of the Week:

"I'll resell NT when Boeing resells Airbus."-Scott McNealy, Sun Microsystems CEO

"We build our computer [systems] the way we build our cities: over time, without a plan, on top of ruins".-Ellen Ullman

"[T]he one thing you can't effectively outsource is blame."-Sean Gallagher

"Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from e-mail." - Unknown

"Porting a reliable application to NT is like playing a classic Steinway on the roof of a house of cards."-KGB

"Usenet is like a herd of performing elephants with diarrhea: massive, difficult to redirect, awe-inspiring, entertaining, and a source of mind-boggling amounts of excrement when you least expect it."-Gene Spafford

Useless Web Site of the Week: <http://www.mcs.net/~kvj/spizz.html>, aka Spizzerinctum, a site for lovers of bizarre words. Impress and/or befuddle your friends by spicing up your vocabulary with gems like coeline, rebarbative, venditation, iatric, dilaniate, dequass, begeck, besoop, sepilition and spiflicate. Don't bother to fire up the spell-checker on your computer; I couldn't even locate some of these in the Unabridged Oxford. What the heck, bookmark the site anyway. It might come in handy during a hotly contested Scrabble game, provided your opponent isn't too picky about reference sources.

Trivia: The first dial telephone or, more accurately, the first viable commercial automatic telephone exchange, was invented in 1888 by Almon Brown Strowger, a Kansas City, Missouri undertaker. According to the possibly apocryphal story, Strowger was puzzled by a sudden, inexplicable drop in his business. Upon investigation he discovered that the wife of the owner of the town's other funeral parlor worked as an operator at the local telephone exchange. The loyal spouse was routing *all* requests for funereal services to her husband's establishment, even when callers specifically asked to speak to Mr. Strowger. Although he knew virtually nothing about electricity or mechanics, Strowger took immediate action. He vowed to correct the gross injustice inflicted upon him and, with the help of a nephew, designed and patented a switching mechanism which eliminated the need for human operators to handle most calls. Virtually all public telephone companies used systems based on the Strowger Switch until the development of computer-based digital systems in the 1960s. *This week's question:* Digital Equipment Corporation's original series of computers were called PDPs, or Programmable Data Processors. Why didn't DEC just call them computers? First correct answer receives an official KGB Consulting pop-up calendar. Put our ingeniously useful tetradecagon on your desk! Amaze your friends!

KGB in the News: The first time my name appeared in *The Pittsburgh Business Times* was to announce to God and everyone that the Feds had whacked me upside the head with a tax lien equal to the gross national product of post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan. The second time, reporter Maria Guzzo graciously printed some inanities I muttered about the Microsoft/Xerox software test facility in O'Hara Township. The third time, as they say, was the charm. Ethan Lott wrote a comprehensive feature on KGB for the Advertising and Public Relations section of the paper's July 2-July 8 issue. Mr. Lott accurately captured KGB's somewhat skewed operating philosophy and photographer Diana Scott also accurately captured (unfortunately) my similarly-skewed countenance and the high-tech grunge which is KGB Central. For those who collect KGB arcana (hi Mom!), the article provides the first documented account of my years as a newspaper reporter. I did spare Mr. Lott my Baxterian autobiography ("It all started at a small 5,000-circulation daily newspaper in Homestead, Pennsylvania), which is probably why he didn't hang up the phone immediately. By the way, forget about finding a copy of the *Times* anywhere in the South Hills. I cleaned out all the vending machines at the T stations, the Giant Eagles and the big Borders Books. You can find the article on their web site, though: <http://www.amcity.com/pittsburgh/stories/1999/07/05/focus2.html> [Note: Thank goodness that photo isn't on the web site. I look like a cross between Jabba the Hut and Steve Bucsemi.]

Y2K-A-Rama

No News Is No News. July 1, the start of fiscal year 2000 for 46 state governments and most large corporations, came and went with virtually no notice by the general media. I was hoping for a story about owners of stores that sell survival supplies panicking in the streets and dumping their inventories of beef jerky below cost.

What, No Leg Irons? *PCWeek* recommends the following steps for corporate Y2K preparedness: no vacations immediately before or after 1/1/00; book hotel rooms now for staff covering remote sites; set up on-site child care or make certain your employees have babysitters lined up in case you need them to work an extra shift or come in on a moment's notice; get a backup generator *now* for your

mission-critical systems, and arrange to have a fuel truck on the premises in case of extended power failures; pay bonuses for extra time worked and make some token gesture to your employees' spouses for disrupting their holiday season; and have lots of good food and non-alcoholic beverages on hand for those working when Y2K arrives. *[Note: Suggest to KGB clients they arrange to have key employees arrested and convicted of minor offenses, then bribe the judge to sentence the workers to house arrest at their places of employment.]*

Y2K Predictions: Perhaps the most interesting predictions concerning the year 2000 can be found on the NBC TV show *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*. They're no more outrageous than what I've been reading in the trades. Some of *Late Night's* more intriguing divinations:

- After a horrible accident in India, the Today Show promotional stunt "Where in the world is Matt Lauer", will be changed to "Where in the tiger's stool is Matt Lauer."
- No longer embarrassed about his religious upbringing, Dr. Pepper will begin using his real name, Dr. Sheldon Weintraub.
- In one of the most negative, ruthless presidential campaigns ever, candidates will run ads accusing their opponents of coming up with the idea for Jar-Jar Binks.
- Viagra will no longer come in blue diamonds, but in orange moons, yellow stars and green clovers. *[Note: What happened to the pink hearts? They were my favorite...]*

Personal Ramblings

Keeping It Simple: Life today is too complex. Nothing is taken at face value. We spend an inordinate amount of time pondering the non-obvious implications of even the most rudimentary business decisions. Relax! Give yourself a daily 15 to 30 minute period in which you forbid yourself to engage in any critical, analytical or intellectual thought. The time should be dedicated solely to relaxation. Lean back in your chair; count the dimples in the ceiling tile; listen to some favorite music.

Example: I found a new CD called "Superman: The Ultimate Collection". It features the major theme music from virtually all of the Man of Steel's media incarnations. These are original arrangements with full orchestra, recorded in 1999. There's no way to confuse them with the tinny, low bandwidth distorted original soundtracks that squawked from the two-inch speaker in the old Philco.

The real gem on the disc is a superbly scored new version of the original 1950s TV show's introduction and fanfare. I don't think there's a kid on the planet who was born between 1951 and 1976 whose brain isn't permanently imprinted with that 15 second eruption of horns, harp, strings and timpani. Many of us hummed it loudly, mostly off-key, as we ran through our homes with arms outstretched and bath towel capes tied around our necks. Ah, the uncomplicated joys of childhood.

Of course, as an adult I listened with a different perspective. Heard with the clarity of digital reproduction, composer Leon Klatzkin's true sagacity was finally revealed to me. After initiating the de rigueur giubilante glissando for harp and strings, Klatzkin used the signature two-bar/five-note dominant ending phrase of *Flight of the Valkyries* from Wagner's *Die Walküre* cycle of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, regressed to a clever contrapuntal bis tre battuta leitmotif, segued into an echoless three note run, and then, as if leaping a tall building in a single bound, perfectly executed a maestoso crescendo with two bars of paired sequential triplets, ending with a stunning poco rallentando and sforzando caesura. (For an rather droll Wager/ superhero divertissement, refer to <http://www.cardhouse.com/g/w/sg/spaceghs.htm>).

Thoreau was right. Simplify, simplify.

[Note to self: Ask analyst at next session if he concurs with my mother's assertion I initially became a newspaper reporter because of my obsession with Superman. Discuss further the possibility that adopting Superman's moral values results in an overdeveloped superego which suppresses the "killer instinct" some claim is essential for success in business. Maintain the modeling of behavior after a fictional character is harmless, provided one can distinguish between reality and fantasy. Also, call

tailor for appointment. Cape still makes an annoying bulge when I sit. Hmm. See about adjusting medication.]

Shameless Self-Promotion: Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Also, properly attributed *KGB Report* items make handy and entertaining column fillers and broadcast media spots (hint, hint).

The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ Now Available! Nobody knows what the dickens is really going to occur on Y2KDay, but the odds are about a million to one that anything bad will happen to you personally. You say that's not good enough, bunkie? Step right up, here's the answer to your problem! Through the miracle of modern mathematics, you can virtually eliminate the chance of any Y2K calamity visiting upon your person by purchasing and wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™. It works by exploiting the elegant if little understood concept of statistical probability. Now here's the deal... The odds of getting personally zapped by a Y2K bug, according to various generally reputable mass media sources, are, as we previously noted, about a million to one. But the odds of getting zapped... while wearing The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™... are virtually incalculable! Do the math yourself! See what we mean? In order for The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ to maintain its statistical validity, it's necessary to restrict the seeded universe (the number we sell) to... wait a minute... carry the two... say, 100,000. At a mere 20 bucks, it's the best insurance you can buy! Each beanie is unique, hand-modified to further increase the odds against personal catastrophic happenstance! No two are alike! Beware of inferior, mass-produced Y2K Remediation Headgear™... those duplicate beanies may save you a few bucks, but do you dare tamper with the delicate mathematical balance of our pristine calculations? Don't muck around with celestial mechanics, my friends! Accept only The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™! Plus, it'll be a great way to break the ice at that New Year's Party! The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ is more attractive than a lampshade, not to mention far more functional! Order The Official KGB Y2K Beanie™ now, save your butt, beat the odds, and make a timely fashion statement! Call KGB Consulting at 412-854-2550, fax us at 412-854-4707, or e-mail us at kgb@kgb.com. Act now! Visa and MasterCard accepted! Quantities will be strictly limited to the number we can sell, so hurry!

All About Us:

KGB Consulting, Inc. publishes the *KGB Report*, a somewhat curmudgeonly-skewed weekly look at business and technology-related issues. Our main business is database publishing/automated typesetting system design. We create systems designed around the Datalogics DL Pager® composition engine that can take raw database information, manipulate and convert it into material that can be set into type, published on web sites, or "purposed" for just about any task. We also provide mailing list database services, which includes designing, cleaning up and maintaining your lists. We perform Year 2000 compliance auditing for small businesses and help companies adopt appropriate computer-based systems if needed. ("Three by five cards don't crash."-Ian Shoales.) We design home automation systems that can get you about 90% of the way to a "Star Trek"-enabled residence, including security, lighting and entertainment systems. We operate the www.kgb.com website, which contains an online version of this newsletter, additional information about our company and links to other interesting places on the Internet. We're members of the Pittsburgh Technology Council and the Home Automation Association. Paid subscriptions to the print version of *KGB Report* are \$50/yr. Fax and e-mail subscriptions are also available: call 412-854-2550 for additional information. The paid print edition contains material not available in the online version. Advertising space is available for all media. *[I wonder if anyone really reads this?]*