KGB REPORT

October 25, 1999

Online Secret: Some KGB Report readers like to review the newsletter on the kgb.com website before they receive their copy via US Mail. While the public version of the newsletter is abridged, subscribers can access the complete issue at http://www.kgb.com/kgbreport/kgbisyndicate.html But keep it to yourself.

Back on Schedule; Design Change: *KGB Report* is now back on schedule. We've also switched to two-column format on our print and pdf (portable document format) versions, which should make the newsletter a bit easier to read.

Online Ordering: Just in time for the holidays, we've implemented secure online credit card ordering on the www.kgb.com website. You can now indulge your heretofore suppressed impulses to buy gift subscriptions, pop-up calendars and our curmudgeon t-shirts. Experts say online ordering increases site sales up to 1000 percent. Let's not prove them wrong, okay?

Don't Play Where You Get Your Pay: We've mentioned this before, but it bears repeating. The absolutely worst place to surf the web or send personal email is at work, especially if you're concerned about privacy. A good rule of thumb is to ask whether you'd be embarrassed or in trouble if you discovered your boss or spouse was looking over your shoulder.

Windows based PCs aren't particularly secure. A savvy system manager can access any drive on a business' network, including that directory on the hard drive in your desktop PC where you think you've securely stashed your private files. Windows and Windows applications create and store a staggering number of log files and copies of data, for the most part without prior notification.

Unless you religiously clear out your web browser's history file, a complete record of your surfing activity is just a click away. And even if you do wipe out the history list, you've still left incriminating cyber footsteps behind.

Many users are unaware their browsers constantly and automatically cache data retrieved from the Internet. It's easy to overlook, since the directory in which the files are stored is relatively difficult to access. An adept user can browse through the cached files and get a pretty good idea of where you've been and what you've been doing.

Even paranoids who clear their histories *and* wipe out their caches often forget about cookies: text files transparently hidden on your system by many web sites. The cookies identify you to the systems you visit and store information that can be used to personalize the way the sites appear to you.

Most of the time, cookies are a good thing-they enable services like My Yahoo to bypass the username/password sequence and immediately position you on your personalized page. While you can set up your browser to refuse cookies, doing so severely limits the functionality of many web sites. Setting the browser to ask for your permission each time a site wants to send you a cookie also gets old very fast, since some sites update their cookies with every new page you view. Most users set their

browser to accept cookies and then forget about it, which means they're unaware their systems are still compiling a fairly comprehensive record of their browsing activity.

Much of the information in cookie files is program generated and for the most part unintelligible to normal human beings. Still, if your system manager opens a cookie and sees the following (emphasis added):

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gotoadlocation00
3166
cgi.sexswap.com/
0
1480903680
29301795
615830176
29301594
```

you can be pretty certain he or she can figure out you've been doing more than looking up the company vacation schedule on your firm's intranet.

How about email? Some people use encryption software to protect the content of the messages they send. But just like Superman doesn't need to see *through* a lead-lined container to suspect illicit activity, your system manager doesn't have to be able to read the message to figure out your electronic missive to britney@bodacious_tatas.com is probably not work-related.

Bottom line? Unless you have your employer's permission, do your personal Internetting from home through an account from a commercial service provider.

Cinematically Speaking: Instead of reading boring business books or attending self-help classes, you can improve communications with your customers by judiciously using dialogue from motion pictures.

It's a fact of life, especially in the software business, that your clients derive most of their philosophical and ethical inspiration from movies. It's probably a safe bet that the computer wunderkind sitting across from you has never heard of Ludwig Wittgenstein but can recite the complete filmography of Arnold Schwartzenegger entirely from memory.

If your customer is a movie fan with similar tastes, great... you've just bonded. If not, no harm done. Usually. If they have no sense of humor, you don't want to work for them anyway, right? Consider, if you will, the following actual conversation:

A salesperson is trying to convince a client to purchase a piece of equipment I don't like. The salesman boasts the machine has great capacity. "Its disk drive is 1.21 gigabytes," she says. "Great Scott! 1.21 gigawatts!" (*Back to the Future*) my client exclaims. Aha. We exchange glances. The game is afoot. Clueless, the salescritter continues. "This new workstation is diskless," she exclaims. The movie-savvy client looks at me with a gleam in his eye and asks, "Is this true?" "Yes," I respond in deadpan, "this workstation has no disk." (*Ghostbusters*) The salesperson backs slowly out of the room as the client and I bend over, convulsed with hysterical laughter.

This same client once delivered an unabridged rendition of the Colonel Nathan Jessup (Jack Nicholson) "You can't handle the truth" monologue from *A Few Good Men* at a tense point in a company planning session. He's a vice president, so it's obvious the approach works, although I think he now fears a transfer to Cuba.

Alas, opportunities to enact entire motion picture scenes with clients are indeed exceedingly rare. Most times you just have to go solo. For example, when a salesperson advised another client to make what I considered to be an unwise purchase, I also decided to go the Nicholson route. "Sell crazy someplace else", I snarled. "We're all stocked up here." (*As Good As It Gets*) On the way out of the building the salesman tried to stuff me down a garbage chute, which shows there's also a downside to this technique.

You get the idea. Here are a few common and practical examples:

The client has just proposed developing an in-house software application that would require a programming staff rivaling that of Microsoft. The room goes silent, and you realize everyone is awaiting your opinion. You respond: "You're gonna need a bigger boat." (*Jaws*) or, "That could take years and cost millions of lives." *(Animal House)* or, "Your request is like your lower intestine: stinky and full of danger." (*Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls*)

The client requests some ludicrous hardware configuration, complains about poor performance or bad design: "I canna change the laws of physics." (*Star Trek*) or, "Screws fall out all the time, sir. It's an imperfect world." (*The Breakfast Club*)

When working on software designed (badly) by someone else, you add this comment line at the top

of the source code: "Evil, pure and simple, from the Eighth Dimension!" (*Buckaroo Banzai*)

To suggest an employee is treading on dangerous ground or is out of his or her depth: "Someone with your qualifications would have no trouble finding a top-flight job in either the food service or housekeeping industries." (*Ghostbusters*)

To regain control of a meeting that is getting out of hand, stand and proclaim firmly: "Gentlemen, rest your sphincters." *(Blazing Saddles)*

When congratulating a colleague who has received acclaim for some blitheringly pointless work-related effort: "May I pass along my congratulations for your great interdimensional breakthrough. I'm sure, in the miserable annals of the Earth, you will be duly inscribed." (*Buckaroo Banzai*)

During a job interview for a position you realize you really don't want: "The details of my life are inconsequential." (*Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*) or, "I myself am ... strange and unusual." (*Beetlejuice*) or, "Qualified? Well, I attended Julliard, I am a graduate of the Harvard Business School, I travel quite extensively, I lived through the Black Plague and I had a pretty good time during that, I've seen *The Exorcist* about a hundred and sixty-seven times and it keeps getting funnier every single time I see it, not to mention the fact that you're talking to a dead guy...now what do you think?" (also from *Beetlejuice*)

At the end of a contract or during an exit interview: "It's like Vegas: you're up, you're down, but in the end, the house always wins. Doesn't mean you didn't have fun." (*Deconstructing Harry*)

Who Designs This Stuff? Comedian Steve Martin had a marvelous column in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* about Satan throwing a testimonial dinner in Hell for the guy who invented the near irremovable shrink-wrap on compact disks.

If not a dinner, a brunch at least is in order for the person who invented the modular connector used for linking telephones and computer networking equipment. They're known by the designation RJ, followed by a number. For example, the connector on your telephone is an RJ-11. It's a six-conductor connector. Typically, only four connectors are ever used. A normal phone only needs two. So where do they get the "11"?

I'm more certain of the origin of the "RJ" prefix. It stands for "Real Jerk." What was the guy

thinking when he put that fragile little plastic arm on top of the connector? You know, the thing that clicks when you insert it into the wall, the thing you have to press down in order to remove it? It's made of incredibly cheesy plastic and constantly breaks off, making the jack practically useless.

I nearly crippled myself for life during a business trip, thanks to an RJ-11. First I stepped on it with a bare foot, causing the plastic arm to imbed itself in my sole. With the plastic arm missing, the connector kept springing back out of the wall socket, breaking the connection between the phone line and my laptop's modem.

So I had to assume the position of a demented modern dancer: laptop perched on my lap, right leg fully extended, big toe securely holding the damaged connector into the wall plug.

There's a maid who worked at the Holiday Inn in Ambler, PA who's probably still in therapy after entering the room unannounced during one of my online sessions.

Thanks to that mutually harrowing experience, I now always carry two spare jacks in my laptop bag.

And I quit writing in the nude.

Y2K-A-Rama

Survive Y2K?
How About Surviving *Until* Y2K?

At least we know what the Y2K problem is and when it will arrive. Unfortunately, unexpected crises that emphasize the infrastructure's fragility whack our technology dependent society upside the head on an almost daily basis. Some recent events of note:

Hat Trick Meltdown: Charles Schwab's online brokerage service customers were unable to transact business for several hours on three separate occasions last week. A system failure knocked out the firm's website for two hours on Wednesday; AOL and Microsoft Network users were unable to reach Schwab's site briefly on Thursday; and on Friday, both the website and the automated "TeleBroker" touchtone phone system went belly-up between 3:30 and 11:20 am eastern time.

The technical details of the failures weren't disclosed. Schwabbies can trade

stocks over the phone with human brokers when the company's electronic services tank, and are charged the less expensive online rate of $29.95 a trade.

Related topic: Perhaps it's not surprising that while the number of online stock trading accounts has increased 58% since January, online trading volume has dipped ten percent since April. *Forbes* attributes the decline to a similar drop in the performance of Internet-related stock issues.

Online banks, those without brick and mortar offices, aren't faring that well, either. During the past year, 3.2 million persons opened accounts at Internet based financial institutions. The bad news? 3.1 million persons closed their accounts. Research firm Cyber Dialogue, Inc. claims netbanks have only 6.3 million active customers and that other sources claiming higher customer numbers include inactive accounts in their tallies.

The majority of consumers close their netbank accounts because of complicated procedures and poor customer service. Aside from the usual glowing reports in the trade magazines, I've yet to encounter a satisfied netbanking customer or to read an independent media report that wasn't an unabashed horror story. For the time being, stick with banks with local branch offices.

Putting on the Brakes: According to National Accounting Resources, Inc., a Boston consulting firm, Internet performance isn't good enough to support the complex transactions offered by application service providers (ASPs), and things aren't going to get better anytime soon.

The situation has developed because of the rapidly increasing number of routers, the devices that control the flow of information on the net. As ASPs add more systems in order to boost capacity, the number of routers increases as well. Every router adds another layer through which data must pass, further degrading network response times.

Since 1995, the size of the average web page has increased 120 percent and the average page download time has been cut in half, from 12 seconds to six seconds. NCRI says download times will increase to nine seconds over the next three years.

Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Input Data Errors: The Immigration and Naturalization Service revealed it has accidentally granted as many as 20,000 temporary visas to skilled foreign workers because of a "computer error".

Friday The First: October 1 marked the start of the US Government's 2000 fiscal year, and while the President and Congress are still haggling over the budget, the bureaucracy's computer systems hummed along without incident.

Sound Advice: The best take I've heard on Y2K to date comes from PBS' Robert X. Cringely: "The important thing to remember here is that physical devices are designed by engineers, not programmers. So these physical devices are designed to cope safely with failure, unlike computer programs, which just bomb. Engineers know that things will fail and that failures can hurt people.

"Engineers try to anticipate problems and prevent them. Programmers do not. They just re-boot the computer. This is a vital philosophical difference."

Cringely's hope for Y2K? "I'm just hoping for a few days off, and perhaps the total extinction of the Department of Motor Vehicles."

Trivia

Answer to our last question: Kirby Grant Hoon, Jr. began his long career in show business as a violin prodigy and musician but turned exclusively to acting after serving as a pilot in World War II.

As Kirby Grant, he was *Sky King* in the popular series of the 50s and 60s. Born in 1911, he died from injuries sustained in a 1985 auto accident in Florida. Ironically, he was on his way to view a space shuttle launch and to receive an award honoring him for his contributions to popularizing general aviation.

This week's question: name the character actor who portrayed the sidekick of another aircraft pilot from a 50s television series, but who is best remembered from his 60s sitcom roles as a nightclub owner and a handyman. You have to name all three shows as well. First correct response gets a KGB Consulting Y2K Compliant Multi-Dimensional Tetradecagon Pop-Up Year 2000 Calendar, a $5 value.

Quotes of the Week

"Being afraid of monolithic organizations, especially when they have computers, is like being afraid of really big gorillas, especially when they are on fire."-*Bruce Sterling*

"When it's three o'clock in New York, it's still 1938 in London."-*Bette Midler*

"I think, therefore I am. I think."-*George Carlin*

"Nobody on his death bed ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'"-*Paul Tsongas*

"In what is widely thought to be the largest leveraged buyout to date, Donald Trump announced that if everyone in the world will lend him all the money they have, he will buy everything they own."-*P.J. O'Rourke*

"I am a man of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times."
-Everett Dirksen

"The theory seems to be that as long as a man is a failure he is one of God's children, but that as soon as he succeeds he is taken over by the devil."
-H.L. Mencken

"What is most important for democracy is not that great fortunes should not exist, but that great fortunes should not remain in the same hands."
-Alexis de Tocqueville

"Last night I played a blank tape at full blast. The mime next door went nuts."-*Steven Wright*

"I don't know which is worse... that everyone has his price, or that the price is always so low."
-Bill Watterson, Calvin & Hobbes

"But the fact that some geniuses were laughed at does not imply that all who are laughed at are geniuses. They laughed at Columbus, they laughed at Fulton, they laughed at the Wright brothers. But they also laughed at Bozo the Clown."-*Carl Sagan*

"High tech people are worried about their computers keeping an accurate date, yet their VCRs have been blinking 12 o'clock for ten years."
-Kevin Barkes

The *KGB Random Quotations Generator* has about 3,800 entries and is frequently updated. Visit it online at http://www.kgb.com/cgi-bin/kgbquote.cgi, and be sure to try the online search feature. Many of the quotes are also available on our Curmudgeon Tees... check out http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html.

Useless Web Site of the Week

http://www.cheese.com/, where you can search an online database of 652 cheeses by name, country of origin, kind of milk used, and texture.

Miscellany

According to legendary Firesign Theater member Phil Proctor, the following TV listing actually appeared in the *Marin (CA) Independent Journal:*

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"Love Me Tender" (1956) Elvis' first
film finds him in the Civil War South,
where he grows increasingly upset upon
learning that Percodan and doughnuts
have yet to be invented.
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Suffering from low self-esteem? Feel inferior to all those powerful big shots in Washington, DC?

Don't.

The web-based news outlet *Capitol Hill Blue* (http://www.capitolhillblue.com/criminalclass082199.htm) compiled some interesting statistics about *current members* of the U.S. House and Senate:

- 117 members have been in charge of at least two businesses each that have gone bankrupt;

- 71 have credit reports so bad they would be unable to qualify for American Express cards if they applied under their own names. (But they still have Amex cards, thoughtfully guaranteed by the federal government);

- 53 have personal and financial problems so serious they would be denied Department of Defense or Department of Energy security clearances if they applied for employment as private citizens;

- 29 have been accused of spousal abuse in various criminal and civil proceedings;

- 27 have DUI arrests on their driving records;

- 21 are defendants in current lawsuits;

- 19 have been accused of writing bad checks;

- 14 have drug-related arrests on their records;

- 8 have been arrested for shoplifting;

- 7 have been arrested for fraud;

- 4 have been charged with theft;

- 3 have been arrested on assault charges; and

- 1 has been arrested for criminal trespass.

Capitol Hill Blue has a series of in-depth articles loaded with specifics. The feature begins with an especially appropriate observation from Mark Twain: "There is no distinctly American criminal class -- except Congress."

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Speaking of Twain, the aforementioned Phil Proctor in *The Funny Times'* "Planet Proctor" feature recounted a possibly apocryphal report that's just too good to pass up. Proctor said a Houston area school board banned the classic *Huckleberry Finn* because of its portrayal of racial stereotypes. The affected school? Mark Twain Intermediate.

KGB in the News: KGB's opinions on working with non-Y2K-compliant systems after January 1, 2000 were included in a feature written by Ethan Lott that appeared in the October 22 issue of the *Pittsburgh Business Times*. KGB was also quoted in an article that examined the spread of "cyber speak" into everyday conversation. Ken Zapinski contributed to that piece, which was published in the Sunday, October 24 edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

More Shameless Self-Promotion: Culturally enrich your employees or clients by getting them a subscription to the weekly *KGB Report*; quantity discounts are available. Items from *KGB Report* may be used in other media with proper attribution. And for heavens sake, buy a calendar, will you?

They're Here! As seen on *ABC World News Now*, (Hi, Sharon!) the KGB Consulting Y2K Compliant Multi-Dimensional Tetradecagon Pop-Up Calendar is now available! Visit our newly designed and interactive *Desperate Sideline Enterprises* web page at http://www.kgb.com/tshirts.html, which also features our Curmudgeon Tees, now with new lower prices and secure online credit card ordering.

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!

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