

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF
PERSONAL COMPUTER USERS
WHO FREQUENT THE INTERNET,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON GIST
SUPPORT GROUP MEMBERS.

safe surfing

- ▶ ONLINE BANKING
- ▶ CELL PHONE & TV SERVICE PROVIDER CHECK-UP
- ▶ BUYING ONLINE FOR RESALE
- ▶ STUMPER CONTEST

Banking Online

As I've mentioned in great detail in a previous newsletter, PayPal, now owned by eBay, is the premier online banking institution, is virtually as safe as a brick and mortar institution and is far more convenient.

The single and, though serious, unlikely risk to PayPal users is fraud: for buyers, their money may be wasted on products that either never arrive or arrive different than described or expected; the risk to sellers, buyers can easily claim

misrepresentation and receive a refund directly from the seller's account. I use PayPal and consider it an absolute must because I sell online. Buyers want some assurance that they'll actually receive the product they pay for and PayPal is one of sites that will help them realize that level of security.

I predicted this a long time ago, and the development is pretty late in my opinion, but finally many (maybe even **most**) other banks are joining PayPal in offering online electronic transfers of funds. You can not only pay your recurring bills online, something that has been around for quite awhile, but at most bank sites you can now pay individuals. This development is long overdue. Banks have been trying to encourage people not to bother them by going in for service, but until now, they have not really "put their money where their mouths are." One final initiative and, in my mind, brick and mortar banks will soon be disappearing from our landscape: they need to accept scanned-in checks as deposits. The one bank I'm aware of that does this today has very restricted membership (military families primarily). Worse yet (from my perspective, since I qualify for membership), their scanning system does not work with some printers. I

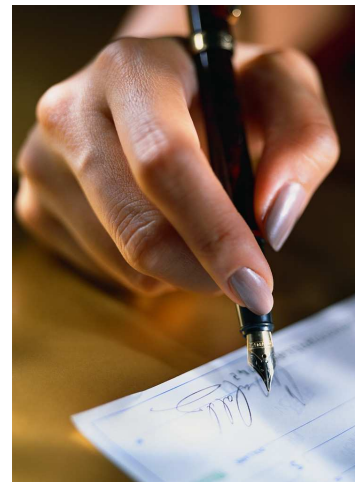


predict that other banks with an online presence will follow suit in the not too distant future AND that banks and other institutions without an online presence will not long endure.

If you're looking for a bank, or even if you're just in a position to be able to change banks, you owe yourself the best combination of services at the best cost. Features you

should seek, because they are available free from reputable banks, include free checking and sometimes free checks without a minimum balance and/or interest bearing accounts with low minimum balances, free online bill payment (and to individuals as described earlier), unlimited or very low-priced ATM use, and free overdraft protection, to name a few.

The internet seems oddly lacking in good, comprehensive information on this subject. The sites I've found that purport to compare services are either very poorly done or produced by a particular commercial institution and, therefore, completely slanted in their own favor. So you'll have to do the research in a more, but not completely, traditional manner: you'll want to visit each major bank in your area



(e.g., Bank of America, Wells Fargo, WAMU, etc.) plus any online banks you think might offer acceptable alternatives and compare their offerings. I recommend constructing a spreadsheet to make our comparison and I found an excellent one created by the State of Massachusetts right here (if you live in MA, the homework is virtually done for you):

http://www.mass.gov/Eoca/docs/dob/ccas_rep.xls

I'd like to be able to give you a few solid recommendations, but there are too many banks and too many different characteristics that each person may value.

Cell Phone & TV Service Provider Check-up

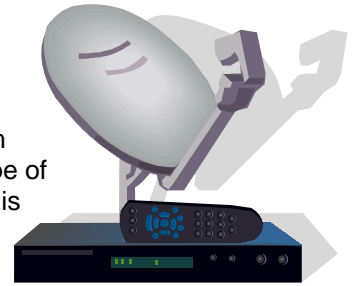


About every two years, in most cases, it's time to give both your cell phone provider and your cable or satellite TV provider a call. Two years is usually the length of the obligation you incur when you initially sign up and each time you add new promotional features or hardware. Once your obligation expires, you're free without penalty to seek another provider. First though, make sure you're well aware of what they're competition is offering. Check their newspaper and internet ads. Then call to tell your provider you're reexamining the competition and your options and that you would like to see what they can offer you to stay with them. That can be done in an inoffensive manner to great benefit. Some companies, like Verizon, have made the two year renegotiation part of their process. They automatically offer a new phone free every two years, but you still have to call if you want to be sure you get the best that's available, especially compared to other company offerings. The cell phone decision is always a fairly easy for me because I don't think there's a company out there better than Verizon, and their prices are never higher for comparable service levels.



The process with your television provider is more interesting. The industry is still extremely competitive so your opportunities for improvement are that much greater. Many companies offer new subscribers multiple receivers and/or digital video recorders (DVRs). And some are even offering High Definition (HD) DVRs, sometimes for multiple receivers and sometimes FREE. So you will often find you can have your hardware or programming level upgraded at no cost, sometimes without even an added monthly service fee, if the units you get replace other units. Always check DISH TV and Direct TV

against your local cable provider(s) (e.g., Cox, Comcast, etc.) and don't be shy about trying to play them against each other. That type of negotiating for the best deal is accepted and increasingly expected.



Buying Online for Resale



Now that most people I run into are at least conversant with personal computing, the most common questions I get regard how to sell online. I have provided many tips in this newsletter over the past months and all of that advice is still quite relevant (e.g., precautions to use on eBay, opportunities on Amazon, the necessity of registering with PayPal, etc.). If you have an item you are considering selling online, you may want to reread the March 2007 newsletter issue here:



<http://www.gistsupport.org/media/computerstuff/SafeSurfNewsletter0307.pdf>

Soon your experience with online selling will almost certainly evolve to the point that you say to yourself "Hey, self, that was EASY! Why don't we do it again, but this time for a little extra spending money and with something we buy specifically to resell?" When that happens, you will begin to focus on how best to buy online, not just how to sell. Although that single issue could easily be the subject of an entire newsletter issue (and it IS the topic of several books), I want to give you a few tips this month.



First, take my original advice about considering eBay as one of your best sources for goods, second only to garage sales, flea markets and estate sales (in that order). Secondly, if you have not done so already, get accustomed to buying on eBay by shopping for fairly inexpensive items, primarily so you will feel more comfortable and more "risk tolerant." A key part of that process is to register with PayPal to reduce your risk.



Then download Prospector here:

<http://www.moxieproxy.com/download.htm>



This nifty, free program will allow you to save complicated searches for particular items you may want to buy or sell, to hide items you've already seen in your searches, to "snipe" other bids (i.e., bid at literally the last second in the auction so as to "steal" the item from other bidders who cannot "snipe," and to see what else your bidding rivals are bidding on and when they close (so you can judge how far and long they might go in their bidding against you). These are all valuable features, but the "sniping" feature is the best (and sneakiest).

The free version of Prospector has some limitations that the paid version does not have, but they are not going to trouble you until you become a "pro," virtually making your living by bidding online. Not only do I find the program immensely useful, but the customer service is the very best I've encountered, ESPECIALLY for a free program! Whenever I've had a question or issue (maybe five times in the past year or longer), the same individual has responded to me via email on the very same day I've emailed the company. I'm not sure if he's the programmer/author/owner, but he sounds and reacts like it. He could not be more helpful.

Finally, **research** your purchases before you buy them if at all possible. That is, just because you see something you've heard can a lot of money, don't assume that's accurate. For example, the return on a book or coin in mint condition But you may same book or condition could Another friend wanted the value of a of stroller that BEAUCOUP years ago. I did strollers were higher than I nowhere near she had paid originally and certainly not as high as if the stroller had been brand new in the retail packaging. That latter issue (new, in retail packaging) is a big deal in resale value.



may be huge. find that the very coin in only fair be worthless. example: a good me to examine particular brand she had paid bucks for several find that the valued quite a bit expected, but the amount that

The humongous eBay is far and away the best source of "street" value because you can easily examine what people are asking for a product, how much demand there seems to be and what they are actually selling for! Other, albeit inferior, sources of market value information include StreetPrices.com, PriceGrabber.com and Pricewatch.com, in increasing order of usefulness.

Barry Codron, a U.S. Air Force retiree, still lives (with his wife and doggie and near his children and grandchildren and their doggies) in the Sacramento area. Although technically fully retired, he enjoys writing and consulting in areas including technology and music, among other fields that pique his interest from time to time. He welcomes your questions, comments, ideas or corrections at barry.mart@sbcglobal.net.

Once you feel you have a good idea what something is worth **in the resale market** (as distinct from the retail market), consider what you think would be a good profit margin (I would never want less than double the cost, and prefer far greater multiples) AFTER remembering that you will usually be paying for shipping on the original item, sometimes sales tax that you won't be able to recover (unless you have a reseller's certificate) AND your sale will be subject to expenses like listing fees, special advertising feature costs and final value fees, These can often exceed 15% of the value of your sale. Be sure to adjust your cost basis for these expenses before applying whatever markup you consider appropriate.

There **many** other factors to take into consideration when you decide to enter the world of online commerce. But these few will get you started. If there seems to be interest (based upon your feedback to me on this column) I will try to address a few other issues from time to time like when to pay for the "Reserve Price" and/or a "Buy Now" feature or any of the other special features on eBay. Also, I have a very strong prejudice as to when you should sell on eBay and when Amazon might be better. We can get into that too.

Stumper Contest

We had three people answer the August Stumper, and all three were exactly right! Joan Marie from Pensacola, Florida, Mike Blake, from Southern Ontario, Canada and Leeann South, from Pennsylvania all answered the question correctly:



To set an audible alert indicating you have pressed the CAPS LOCK key, Windows

98 users click the Start button, Settings, Control Panel (XP Users, hit the Start button, Control Panel). Open (click on) the Accessibility Options Icon (Vista users click "Ease of Access" and Make your computer easier to use"). On the Keyboard tab, click the "Use toggle keys" checkbox.

For next month I expect that almost everyone will be able to tell me how and why to do this:

I want to send or forward an item I think a lot of people on my address list will appreciate. However, I don't want everyone to see the email addresses of everyone else on my list. How can and why should I be sure send it to everyone without everyone else seeing the other email addresses?