

How to Avoid Spending Money on Software you don't need

By David Brewster

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What could be more simple than the telephone?

At its most basic level, the telephone works in exactly the same way today as it did 100 years ago. In fact, you could plug an antique telephone into a modern wall socket and it would function perfectly.

Of course the modern telephone looks very different from its antique counterpart. The telephone on my desk has 45 buttons on it, a little display screen and countless electronic components inside. It includes a whole raft of features, including memory dialling, hands-free, call diversion, caller ID, last-number redial, access to message bank and even a clock.

But it is still a telephone. Its purpose is clear: the making and receiving of telephone calls. And, despite all the features, few people would need to be 'taught' how to use my telephone for this purpose. We might say its complexity is 'optional'.

What's more, if I don't want the fancy features, I can still buy a simple, no-frills telephone for around \$20, plug it in and start making calls.

Sadly, the same cannot be said of the majority of today's computerised 'productivity tools'. The software industry - and more recently the World Wide Web - has spawned a whole new approach to product design, which shuns the concept of 'clarity of purpose' that we see in the telephone.

Many will remember the first word- processing programs (Word Perfect was one). These programs were very simple and aimed to do not much more than emulate the typewriter they were trying to replace.

Over time, features were added to make these programs more 'sophisticated'. Menus, buttons and toolbars were developed in an attempt to make these features more accessible. While all these features and navigation tools make a program like Microsoft Word more functional for those of us who love to fiddle, first-time or infrequent users could be forgiven for giving up and searching out the old Olympus.

With each new upgrade, the original purpose of many software programs becomes lost in an increasingly murky sea of features. Meanwhile, most users use the same handful of features they have always used - usually a tiny fraction of those available.

As for the software equivalent of the \$20 telephone? The major players in the software game aren't interested. There are, in fact, a number around but ironically you need to be fairly proficient at searching the internet to find them - in which case you probably don't need them!

Ultimately it is purpose, not features, that we buy software for. Remind yourself of this before you next upgrade - thinking of your computer as a telephone - and you might save yourself a lot of money.

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