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Computer rage on the rise

By **MICHAEL WOODS**

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You spent all that money, and now you can't get it to work?

The "it" may be a new computer, a digital camera, a DVD player, that home movie system, plasma TV, cell phone, or some other electronic device.

The answer, in a surprising number of cases, is an act of "computer rage."

Frustration and anger boil over, and consumers "lose it." They do something relatively mild (like cursing at the device) or more serious (like chucking it against a wall). Expensive equipment may get damaged and people injured.

By some accounts, computer rage is raging as electronic products become increasingly complex and difficult to operate.

Surveys by Kent Norman, of the University of Maryland, show that 80 percent of consumers have cursed out loud at a computer, 40 percent have mutilated CD-ROMs for skipping and other offenses, and almost 20 percent have thrown a computer on the floor in a rage.

Norman estimates that consumers may damage or destroy about 10 percent of all high-tech gadgets. He is a psychologist who tries to make technology more user-friendly.

Check Norman's online guide to relieving technology frustration safely and inexpensively (<http://lap.umd.edu/computer-rage/>). They include venting frustration on old computer gear.

We certainly do need electronic devices with features that are more intuitive, logical, and easier to use.

Why the "End Call" button to turn on my cell phone? Why is the "Play" button on my TV remote control unit the same size as a dozen others that I never use? Who decreed that "Home," "Delete," and other often-used keys must be in a different position on laptop keyboards?

Manufacturers are responding to consumer demands for products with more features and greater functionality. You want a cell phone that can take digital images, do e-mail, and access the Internet? Then expect more complexity than a handset that just makes phone calls.

However, there is a growing parallel demand for simplicity. Manufacturers miss many opportunities to meet it. Remote control units for TVs, DVD, and CD players, for instance, are cheap. Why not include two remote controllers in every box? One would be the simple version, with just On, Off, Play, Pause, Forward, and Reverse keys. The other controller would offer the full functionality that some consumers apparently want.

Much of the responsibility for computer rage may rest with consumers, rather than manufacturers.

Consumers invite frustration by refusing to read the instructions. Popular myth says it is a waste of time

because documentation is poorly written and impossible to understand. In reality, instructions often are easy to understand - especially the "quick start" leaflets included in more and more products. Consumers, however, often are too impatient to even try.

Buying technology online is another pitfall. Yes, it is convenient. However, shopping in local stores has a big advantage. It gives you the chance for a test drive to check for user-friendliness.

(E-mail Michael Woods at [mwoods\(at\)nationalpress.com](mailto:mwoods@nationalpress.com). Distributed by Scripps Howard News Service.)

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