



ASCII Stupid Question, Get a Stupid ANSI

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Editor's Note: Several years ago, an old friend tried to get us to start a column called "Stupid User Tricks," which would be dedicated to the amusing—and no doubt embarrassing—anecdotes of users. We considered the idea, of course, but rejected it because we felt we would be laughing at the expense of others. But what if in the column, we poked fun at ourselves and network supervisors as well as at users?

This article introduces what we envision as a new column that focuses on the lighter side of networking. Because this column is based (at least in theory!) on real-world experiences, we need your help. We need you to turn in yourselves, your colleagues, and your users. Send us amusing stories about your network support experiences. The names will be changed to protect the unknowing. (Send your stories to editors@ncmag.com.)

In elementary school, I was taught that "there is no such thing as a stupid question." Obviously, my elementary teachers were not preparing me for a lifelong career as a network support technician.

Believe me, I have heard my share of stupid questions. We all have. In fact, my colleagues and I sometimes sit around swapping stories about the amazing questions people have asked us. I'm afraid, however, that some of these stories have assumed a life of their own—becoming folklore in the network computing society. We've heard these stories and retold them so frequently that we may even start to believe that some of these stories actually happened to us. After all, people really couldn't have asked us questions like these, could they have?

- Can I put 60 nanoseconds of RAM in this computer?
- I have 300 MHz of RAM. Is that good?
- The computer told me it had contagious memory. Does it have a virus?
- Where is the cursing flasher?
- I want a 56 kilowatt modem. Do you have any in stock?
- I don't use DOS. Can I delete that directory?
- What version of DOS does UNIX run on?
- Does this cup holder come with a warranty (referring to the CD-ROM drive)?
- The printer has been acting up. Could the printer be making our backups fail?

THE EXPERT'S EXPERT

No doubt about it, users sometimes provide comic relief for what can be frustrating work. As you know only too well,

however, sometimes the so-called experts are not any smarter. This reminds me of a joke that I heard recently: What is the difference between a used car salesperson and a computer salesperson? The used car salesperson usually knows when he (or she) is lying!

If you have ever listened to the computer salespeople on the TV shopping channels or at a local computer store, you know that this is no joke. For example, I have heard salespeople make statements such as the following:

- This machine has good RAM. Pentium makes the best RAM—not like that cheap RAM other places make.
- This computer comes complete with a scummy card.
- This file server will support up to about 16 pods, all on the same network.
- Yes, you can record DVD movies on this 32x CD-ROM drive.
- MMX means you don't need a sound card.

THIS CALLS FOR A GENIUS

Of course, putting aside all the silliness and downright incompetence of users and these so-called experts, I have encountered my share of perfectly excusable technological mishaps that are amusing nonetheless. For example, several years ago, I received a call from a man who was not one of my current clients. This man told me he had received my name and telephone number from a friend who said I was a "genius" with computers. He wondered if I could help him with a particular computer problem. He then proceeded to describe the problem to me.

The man said that when he turned on his computer, all it did was click. When I asked him to explain exactly what he meant, he continued, and for some reason, he slowed his speech—almost as if he were talking to someone who spoke a different language: "Well, after I turn on the computer, all it does is click. After about 10 minutes, the computer finally stops clicking, it starts up, and everything seems to be fine."

Searching for more clues to help me solve the problem, I asked, "Does the computer do this every time you boot it?" "Yes, every time," he responded.

At that point, I couldn't help but ask my share of stupid questions—the questions every network support technician is trained to ask—even if those questions are not relevant to the situation: What kind of computer is it? What operating system is the computer running? What type of network



interface board is in the computer? (Okay, I really didn't ask that last question, but I swear if a network support technician were trying to troubleshoot a problem on the space shuttle, the first questions out of his or her mouth would be—What kind of network interface board is the space shuttle running? What drivers is it running?)

At this point, I was baffled. I began to mentally list and discard possible causes to the problem: It couldn't be the power supply, and it couldn't be the hard drive. Could it be the fan?

Then I began to wonder if calling me a computer "genius" was just bait. Could this man be part of an elaborate trick? I even quickly scanned my desk and office to see if I was on Candid Camera.

Failing to find any camera, I told the man, "It might be a fan, but I'll have to actually look at the computer to see what is happening." I set up an appointment and then exhibited another innate behavior of a network support technician—I showed up one day late. (After all, I needed to let the man know just how busy I was and to perhaps reestablish that I was a computer genius.)

When I arrived, the man quickly took me to the computer and turned it on. Amazingly, the man was right—all the computer did was click and click and click. In fact, the computer clicked for what seemed like 10 minutes, and then—just as the man had described—the computer continued to load Windows, and everything worked fine.

For a quick second, I couldn't help but break out of the innate network support technician behavior: I smiled. The problem was easily remedied.

The man had an old 386 computer with 512 MB of RAM. (I told you this happened several years ago.) At some point, the computer had evidently been a server. The BIOS in the computer was set to an audible memory count, and it couldn't be turned off. When the computer booted, it audibly counted all of the 512 MB of RAM.

As you can see, it didn't take a genius to figure out this problem, but I didn't tell the man that. I simply replaced the memory, giving him 32 MB of RAM. Of course, the computer took substantially less time to count 32 MB of RAM than it took to count 512 MB of RAM. I therefore left my new client with a more "reasonable clicking" and

suggested that he upgrade his computer in the near future.

CONCLUSION

I wish I could solve all my clients' problems this easily, but as you know, most network problems usually require the expertise of a trained professional—or at least an eighth-grade computer junkie. If this were not the case, I (and

likely you) would soon be out of a job.

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Send your stories about humorous networking mishaps and misunderstandings involving users, colleagues—or even yourself—to editors@ncmag.com. ●

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