

## Tech Savvy: Back to the Basics

In the years I've been writing this column, it has been pointed out to me that I have never covered any of the very basics; that all the articles assume a basic prerequisite knowledge. I of course disagreed, but in review of the articles, I realize that he was right. My apologies Pete, it is time to make amends.

The first thing to understand is what a computer is and isn't. A computer is a machine, a tool. It is no more self aware than your average screwdriver or toaster oven. The difference is that this tool can adapt itself to multiple uses. Think of it as an electronic swiss army knife. Also as with any machine, it is ideally suited to large amounts of repetitive work. Balancing your checkbook after a purchase or two? That's the job for your trusty pencil. Keeping your accounts balanced over the long term and separating expenses into types? That's the ideal job for a computer.

A computer is a tool which handles information. It stores data, manipulates it as you instruct, and brings it back in a way that you want to see it. It won't make decisions for you, but it will help you make them in a timely manner with correct information. The idea that stock trading computers yielded a run on the market is incorrect. It was the parameters with which they were programmed in the first place. The decision which caused a market crash happened months or even years before, and was made by a human. This highlights the power of the computer... power which can be used or misused.

Everything that hooks up to a computer is there for three possible purposes: To get data into the machine, to bring data out of the machine into a usable format, or to store information. Other than these functions, everything else is fluff and does not positively contribute to the machine's function. The different forms a computer can take simply integrate many of these devices into one case. For example, a laptop is simply a computer, mouse, keyboard, and monitor in one handy device.

The Internet is another tool, but it is misunderstood. While the connection of computers all over the planet started life as a research and communications tool, it was reborn as a powerful sales tool. It is an open air bazaar. Like such a place in real life, some real finds can be made, but watch your wallet. Thieves are in the minority, but they are present, and they are better at the tech stuff than the law enforcement sent after them.

Computers are nearly infallible as far as what they do, but the universe around them is not. If the dog knocks the computer off the desk or spills a can of soda in the laptop, there's a high probability that the computer won't work after the incident. The good news is that the computer is replaceable. The bad news is that the data may not be. Backing up your data is critical if you want to continue business as usual after such an incident. USB flash drives are cheap and easy to use. Use them to backup critical files and the impact of the event will be lessened (pun intended).