

ndulge me this month.

Please.

You see, I have a problem. Before you jump to conclusions that this column is my problem and that I'm hopelessly lame, let me explain.

If you've been a careful reader of MacSense and Blue Sunshine, you may know that I'm technology manager at a newspaper.

Big deal. Oh sure, I get to play with some really neat things with blinking lights, but other than that it's just a gig.

A really fun, way-cool kinda gig. That is, until some boneheaded Wintel geek comes out of the woodwork and starts mentioning that there are a zillion users groups in my town for the Microsoft Monolith and, as if to add insult to injury, there are a bazillion organizations devoted to furthering the Fourth Riech's (Windows NT and Novell combined) reach into the Corporate network world.

It's always the same. Kinda feels like someone kneed me in the groin. I know they've got me. You see, this town is a Windows kind of town. Macintosh is a dirty word that only "those" people use. Apple is something for kids and misfits. Not fit for Corporate Life.

Oh, what's a Macintosh manager supposed to do without a User's Group or a dedicated Macintosh Manager's Association? Woe, woe, woe. Corporate America will never buy into anything without an Association of some type to join, and that's a fact. MacWeek columnist Don Crabb said recently that Apple had better come up with an organization, or else.

Good idea, Don, but I'll take it one step beyond.

HEY, APPLE. LISTEN UP. WE MACINTOSH MANAGERS HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!

Now that I have your attention, I think what we're trying to say is that with the demise of MacIS almost a year ago, the average Mac manager has been on his/her collective own. No professional support organization. No respect from our Wintel peers. No help from Apple.

I know that last line may come as a shock, but let's get real. How many times have you called 1 800-SOS-APPL and known more than the guy on the phone. Happens to me often. I've even called in just to . . . well, perhaps I shouldn't tell that tale. But the point is that Macintosh professionals are a different breed than the average home user and the above average Windows sloth.

And that's not to say that the average home user doesn't need a strong support organization either, just a different type of one. But hold that thought.

Professional Macintosh managers worry about the limitations of the AppleTalk packet size; the lack of AFP services over TCP and the god-awful sin of not supporting the LaserWriter Bridge software under Open Transport. OK, that last one's a cheap, but personal shot. What I'm saying here is that professional systems folks who specialize in Macintosh have very different needs than just about everyone else.

Novell and WinNT users and abusers can run down to the local bookstore and get their fill of networking protocol guides, how-to manuals and whatnot. On the contrary, the Macintosh manager must first find a bookstore with a decent Macintosh section and then begin searching out the elusive titles that are mentioned here and there. Usually the effort is wasted and the book has to be "ordered." I ordered a Macintosh networking book in May and am still waiting for the vendor to get around to filling my order.

About the only good Mac networking books out these days are published by NetFrontiers as part of the Certified Apple Server Engineer course. The books are good, but simple. The classes are expensive and since Apple is the only place where being a Certified Server Engineer matters, what's the point? The bad news is that many of the Net Frontiers books are under development and not due until very late this year.

So where does that leave us? With crappy documentation from Apple in terms of the hardware and software it's selling us and sometimes less than helpful, though friendly, staff on the support line. Geez, if they didn't make such cool hardware and software . . .

Now the home user. That's another story completely.

Not too many years ago, Apple had a User's Group organization that was second to none. From the User's Group Connection to staff dedicated to helping small bands of Mac Maniacs organize into successful User's Groups, it was truly something to be proud of.

And then came the Performas. While these "consumer class" machines were a boon to the average family wanting a Mac, they effectively killed the User Group concept. And Apple missed the marketing opportunity of a lifetime.

The way I see it, Apple should have cultivated really strong User Groups in every major metropolitan area before launching the Performas. And, when someone bought a Performa,

the company selling the machine should have had an incentive to promote that local user group. Call it a partnership or a rebate or whatever, but Apple should have made it financially appealing to the vendor selling the Mac.

Who would have won? Simple. Everyone.

Apple would have gained even more loyalty from its users and the vendors would have had a reason to promote the Macintosh in advertisements. And the Mac community could have been 100 times stronger today than it is.

How many people had problems getting System 7.5 Update 2.0 when It first came out? I'd love to see the FTP logs from Apple's servers. If the User Group organization had been strong, Apple could have had a million CD-ROMs of the update available as the disk of the month when it first came out. The Internet would have breathed easier, the users would have gotten the software and Apple could have taken a proactive role in supporting its customers.

But did that happen? Nope. Instead, people complained loudly that Apple was letting them down. And think of the shear number of calls Apple could have saved to the support center in Austin, Texas, if duly educated users had been given good, solid advice about installing that update.

But, sadly, the User Group Connection, MacIS and the hopes of many Macintosh managers went the way of the Lisa and the MacTV. Off into never-never land only to join QuickDraw GX, Dylan, the LaserWriter Bridge and countless other good ideas forsaken by Apple.

Oh, and by the way, if anyone has any ideas about re-kindling the idea of MacIS or something similar, drop me a line. We need to talk.

[jim Hines](mailto:jhines@iglou.com) explores the darker side of the Macintosh and PC culture in 'Blue Sunshine' Write to Jim at jhines@iglou.com, or simply 'Jim Hines' on America Online.