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Senior Real Estate Matters

Monthly Newsletter – Sept. 2010

Computer Doctors On Call

By Elyse Umlauf-Garneau

"I transferred photos from my camera, but I can't find them on my computer."

"The toolbar vanished."

"My e-mails are gone."

These are some of the common complaints help desk experts get from senior clients.

For computer gurus, such problems usually can be solved quickly. For the rest of us, the fix sometimes is arduous and may entail a web search for resolutions, along with lots of trial and error or a lengthy conversation with a help desk technician.

And frequently that conversation just brings more frustration.

David Levy, owner of Fort Washington, Pa.-based Software Maintenance Inc., (www.smiweb.net) recalls one of his clients who called a support line and dealt with a less-than-patient technician who asked, "Are you retarded?"

Levy, who specializes in delivering remote assistance and in servicing and providing computer systems and training to U.S. Veterans, observes, "Calling tech support can be non-productive and embarrassing to people,"

It's one reason some people turn to remote computer assistance, provided by companies like Levy's and by a service, FLOH Club (www.flohclub.com), launched by Florence Henderson of "The Brady Bunch" fame.

And when you use such services, you don't have to learn how firewalls work, the meaning of things like DVD+R or USB or be able to distinguish between ROM and RAM

And you don't have to ask for help from your kids, who, too, are sometimes short on patience. "It's often easier to get help from a stranger than a blood relative," observes Levy. "There's always that interpersonal dynamic that comes into play between a parent and child."

How remote assistance works is straightforward. With your permission and by using a security access code, the technician connects to your computer remotely and can see everything you can see.

Clients have a very hard time explaining in sufficient detail what their computer problems are, according to Levy. "When I connect remotely, I can say, 'Show me what you did when you had this problem.' It's easier for clients to go through the steps than it is to explain what happened. A lot of problems are very easy to solve, but hard to explain," he comments.

He or she then identifies and fixes the problem. Typically such experts can deal with everything from a minor glitch to something catastrophic. They can also help with routine maintenance, downloading security patches, and performing program upgrades.

The cost and plans for remote computer assistance vary. Annual memberships with FLOH, for example, run \$249.99, and six-month and one-time plans also are available. SMI offers a three-year package for \$375 that includes unlimited support. It also charges a one-time \$125 fee for the purchase and installation of disaster recovery software.

Find your social networking niche

According to an August 2010 Pew Internet & American Life Project, social networking use among internet users ages 50 and older nearly doubled from 22 percent to 42 percent from April 2009 to May 2010. Many such users, according to the study, rely on social networks platforms to manage their daily communications, such as sharing links, photos, videos, and news.

Whether your interest is connecting with friends, chatting about hobbies, learning about medical conditions or doing a genealogical research, there's likely a social networking site devoted to your favorite topic.

Here are a handful of sites to get you started:

- **Boomer- and senior-specific sites--** An array of spots, including <http://boomster.com>, www.eons.com, www.rezoom.com, www.snabbo.com, and <http://www.vibrantnation.com>, all are aimed at connecting baby boomers with one another and offering articles and discussions on topics ranging from investing and real estate to wine, pets, and yoga.
- **Career sites--**Whether you're still working or have started a business, sites like www.linkedin.com, www.plaxo.com, and www.retiredbrain.com can help you make new contacts and find opportunities.
- **Special interests--**There's almost no end to the number of sites that cater to people's special interests, whether it's books (www.shelfari.com), genealogy (www.genealogywise.com), knitting (www.ravelry.com) or rock music (<http://rockandrolltribe.com>).

If you do your own Google search that combines your favorite topic with the words "and social networking," you're likely to find an enormous number of interesting sites.

Safe social networking

Though social networking can broaden your world, the activity isn't without its perils.

Everyone, not just seniors and baby boomers, need to be cautious about privacy and to not reveal too much information that can get into the hands of scam artists and criminals lurking online.

Alexis Moore says "There's no 'totally safe' anything, but you *can* minimize social networking risks." Moore, a real estate practitioner with Town Center Realty Group, Inc., El Dorado Hills, is an expert in stalking, identity theft, and privacy protection. She's the founder of Crime Victim Organization Network, president and founder of Survivors In Action national crime victims' organization, and host of Taking Action Radio.

Here are some strategies:

- Don't offer a play-by-play of daily or future activities. Even a posting like, "Hey Joe, I'm going to the grocery be back home at 3 p.m." offers too much information. After all, you're announcing that your house will be empty for a certain period of time. The same goes for upcoming vacations. Facebook and Twitter updates about the fabulous views from the Grand Canyon offer a heads-up that your house is empty. So brag about your fun once you've returned.
- Be cautious about listing birthdays, home addresses, phone numbers, and other identifying personal information that can assist burglars or identity thieves. Offering such details counteracts any privacy measures you're implementing, warns Moore. Also, be a bit vague about where you live and list the largest nearby city, instead of naming your town, she suggests.
- Accept friends with caution. "Not all of your online friends have your best interests at heart, and a friend of a friend may not have the standards and same idea of security that you have," comments Moore. Accept friends on

social networking sites with caution. Decline friend requests, even from family members, if they put your private information or security at risk. After all, even if you're cautious about broadcasting your upcoming vacation, just a post by a cousin, saying, "Enjoy Italy, Lizzie. See you in two weeks," thwarts your best efforts at privacy.

- Be cautious about posting photos. Be sure your home address doesn't show in pictures and try not to show pricey jewelry and home electronics.

- Verify old friends' identities before striking up an online relationship with them. Is your old Navy buddy, Joe Johns, the same person who's contacting you today? According to Moore, many seniors have had old friends try to connect on Facebook and only later learn that the person wasn't the same Joe Johns, but a savvy criminal trying to invite themselves into seniors' social networks. "Don't oblige friend requests without first asking some questions or learning if, in fact, the friend is really your friend," says Moore.

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