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## Drinking from the Firehose

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# Drinking from the Firehose

## Death & Taxes: Life-Changing Events and Technology

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On February 3, 1996, **David T. Cook** of Greensboro, NC passed from this life. He was 77 years old and my father. He also was the owner of a 486 PC computer and a Prodigy Internet account he was just beginning to explore. When my Dad first sent me a message via the Internet, I was ecstatic; I ran around the library exclaiming, "My \*DAD\* sent me an e-mail!" Wow, was I excited. Not too many people I knew could say that, considering heck, lots of people I know still are afraid of computers in general. Not my Dad, he was always a gadget person. He started messing with computers back in the 1970's, starting with a Tandy tape drive that played chess and balanced your checkbook. Then he moved on to Commodores and then an IBM 286 and so forth. The best present he ever gave me as a child was a Princess phone with the dial in the handset. Tres cool in 1967; this was before push-button phones, but since he worked for Western Electric, which used to be the manufacturing arm of AT&T, he had access to such things. I dedicate this column to his memory, and I am proud that he stayed current until the end. In fact, his last communication to me was via e-mail, which is both good and also sad. It just goes to show you that e-mail is not infallible. If I had just checked my email Friday night instead of Saturday morning, he might still be alive. Of course, there is no way to know if that would have made any difference, and dwelling on it now will not bring him back.

Since my father's death I have found computer-aided devices both


a blessing and a curse. My biggest beef is with telephone menu services that companies have installed to control calls. These are basically hellish devices that waste the customer's time and keep you from being able to talk to a real human being. If you can outwit or outwait the system and actually GET to a person, you are SO grateful that you waste additional time either thanking or yelling at the real person because it took so long to get to them. Fortunately, many of these systems are tied to an 800 number so you are not paying to be put on hold or listen to countless options you do not care about: "If you are bored out of your skull, press 26."

Another fascinating adventure I encountered recently was the IRS online. In typical fashion, they make things more complicated than necessary. I wanted to download the file dealing with estate taxes. Now you would think that they would offer Joe Citizen some simple instructions for this. Perhaps an ASCII text file? BUT NO — you have to have fancy software in order to read these publications. Fortunately one of the computer gurus where I work was able to assist me in getting the Adobe Acrobat software I needed to read this thing. (Thank you, Tom!) I can't print it, but at least I can stay late one night at work and read it off my screen. This was faster than trying to order it using the IRS's voice menu system, which told me they would send it in 2-3 weeks. (Uh, that will be about May 1, which is NOT April 15: To stay on the line until the end of time, press 99).

Another run-in I experienced was with a prominent publisher of popular music products. My Dad had subscriptions with several book, video and music clubs. NOWHERE on the correspondence for this one was there a phone number for customer service. (Yet they had the audacity to state, "call or write for information" to the below address ... no phone number!) The first cassette that came in the mail I sent back with the change of address dutifully filled out, explaining the situation. The second tape, which came not a month later, had a World Wide Web site address listed. I checked out the Web site and — lo and behold — there was an 800 number! When I called it, I pointed out to the service rep that nowhere on the written correspondence was the number available. She apologized, but I had to wonder — what are these people thinking? This is a great example of the information overload and information gaps we have to deal with day after day.

My estate attorney is a wonderful fellow, in fact, an old family friend, but when he asked me in our initial interview if I knew anything about handling a checking account, I had to roll my eyes — gosh, you mean me, someone who is responsible for almost a million dollars in state money each year? I suppose he needs educating on what some librarians do. We do more than tell people where the bathrooms are and how to use the card catalog! In this case I would have done well to tell him I was in mergers and acquisitions (we serials people are, you know).

I am sure I will find numerous other ways to utilize the Internet before this phase in my life is over. For instance, I am linking to Barbie Web sites to see if that stuff in the attic is worth anything on the collector's market.

More personally, I have found the Internet to be a quick comfort as friends and professional colleagues are able to give their condolences along with the more standard sympathy cards, potted plants and flower arrangements. So, with the inevitability of death and taxes, comes the comfort of knowing that the Internet can handle grief and unexpected loss, if you know how to find the right menu option! 



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