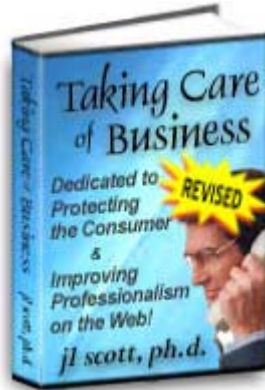


Taking Care of Business



Articles Written by the Founder of the

International Council of Online professionals

*iCop*TM

jl scott, ph.d., Director

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INTRODUCTION

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Millionaires in Undershirts?

So - you're sitting in the kitchen in your undershirt expecting to make millions online. You're going to send out some email on that \$400 bulk email program you were suckered into putting on your credit card - then go take a nap - while your snappy sales pitch does its job - and you become a (SNAP!) MILLIONAIRE!

Why not? That's what you've been told will happen! That's what some people want you to think can happen - so they can continue to sell you their "incredible secrets!"

I have this ongoing picture in my mind of thousands of people, sitting at computers in their kitchens. They are fairly drooling on the keyboard as they believe every word they read on that monitor. The ones in big fonts, I mean - the ones they actually read. The ones that say they can become "Millionaires in Undershirts!"

They accept having their natural rights stomped all over - they hang on the words of the Guru de Jour - they allow themselves to be treated like second-class citizens - all the while, waiting for that magical day when the rest of the undershirt slobs hang on THEIR words. The ones they don't bother to spell-check.

Now - may I make a couple of suggestions?

Unless you've had a frontal lobotomy - go put on a decent shirt and wise up!

How many millionaires do you know who sit on their butts in the kitchen all day? How many do you know who can't even be bothered to get dressed all day?

Realize one thing ... these millionaires who keep blowing their horns to get you to buy their products, didn't get rich selling those products in their bathrobes. They are out there in their Armani's doing speaking engagements to the tune of BIG bucks for a couple of days of their TIME. They get rich telling others how they got YOU to believe that you can do it in your kitchen in your crummy undershirt.

Oh! You think they started there! Uh-uh. No, they started downtown in their attorneys' offices finding out how to write "Terms and Conditions"

that will give YOU nothing - while they AGREE to nothing. Probably got dressed to go down there too.

In fact, there's no doubt in my mind that:

They used their heads right from the git-go!

They actually READ things before they made commitments.

They followed the directions of those with experience.

They thought about what their customers would actually respond to for the long-term - like contact information.

They weren't hiding their identity.

They didn't picture themselves rich in Fruit of the Looms!

Sitting around in your undershirt - spewing out garbage - hiding from every potential customer - isn't going to get it. You'll make it big with your online business in one way only. You'll learn to work in the world of professionals - you'll BECOME a professional - and you'll damn well get dressed!

Stepping Up to the Plate!

While I was growing up my daddy used to tell me, "It's your decision. You have to make it. But be prepared to take responsibility for whatever decision you make."

Yikes! Now, THAT will make a kid stop and think!

Stepping up to the plate to take responsibility is one of the things I look for in those I choose to do business with. There can be no higher ethical standard. In our online businesses, we make decisions every day.

We need to keep one thing always in mind. Even a small decision can come back and bite us in the butt. In fact, sooner or later, it most likely will!

We make mistakes. We make thoughtless choices. We sometimes get involved with online programs without thinking about the repercussions. Stuff happens.

The question isn't whether we're smart enough to avoid all that. We can't. The question is whether we're willing to be accountable when we screw up.

Is this about customer service? You bet it is! But it's also about how we deal with other businesses - as well as life itself. And it's about telling - and accepting - the truth!

Can you make money without accountability? Sure you can! It's done every day. But when push comes to shove, you'll be the one going over the cliff.

Those willing to step up to the plate when necessary don't hide their contact information. You don't have to try to beat them out of the bushes. You won't have to threaten them to get a refund. They tell you the whole story right up front.

If they're not willing to do that - they're probably not willing to be accountable should something go awry. They're probably not willing to say, "I was wrong. How can we fix this?"

The absolute best way to establish a sterling online reputation as a business owner is to, "Be prepared to take responsibility for whatever decision you make!" It's a matter of integrity - and it will earn you the respect of both your customers and your business associates.

There is no higher compliment!

An Ad by Any Other Name ...

Ezine Publisher Alert! Now, here's a new one. I recently received an email which began, "If you publish news releases ...". This seemed like an interesting line since very few ezine publishers DO publish "news releases." Maybe it was designed to make ezine publishers think they SHOULD print news releases - Gee, what if everyone else was doing it?

What followed was not only interesting - it was hysterical. I was being presented with a "news release" for an online product! The darn thing looked like one of those solo ads - URL and all!

This little missive wasn't even close to a news release! No news here - only self promotion. Nothing newsworthy whatsoever. Wouldn't have made it past a wadded-up ball of paper in the newsroom.

I'll give the sender one thing. This "news release" came in personalized to me as the publisher of MONDAY MEMO! Unfortunately, the former publisher of MONDAY MEMO! also received the same message.

Nice try - but no matter what you call it - publishers, online or off - charge money for ads. Trying to slip it by as a "news release" could have been downright insulting. I almost had to admire the audacity of it though.

Please note: an ad by any other name is still - an AD! Buy 'em or swap 'em. But, don't try to run them by me as a "news release!" Good Grief!

Taking Care of Business!

So you've set up your online business and you're ready to go. You feel like your online status has changed. Now, you get to call some of the shots. You feel like you've grabbed some of the awesome power of the Internet. Forgive me for laughing but it won't be long before you realize just how little power you actually have.

As online business owners, we are still online consumers. Only now, our very business is dependent upon the treatment we receive from other online companies. We need products and we need services - and they had better work if we expect our business to be successful.

We are often at the mercy of other online companies - and those who ride rough-shod over their customers are right at the top of my list of Internet Pond Scum. I write a whole weekly column just to expose them. But today, I'm going to tell you about one of the higher Internet life forms I've come in contact with lately. We could all learn a lot from this company.

A little background:

iCop™ was in the process of setting up its corporate structure. Since merchant account providers want contracts, it isn't feasible to contract with one until that legal entity was fully in place. In the meantime, we needed to out-source our online payment service. What a nightmare!

I have personally gone through four different services. Two disappeared into the night taking the money with them. One was sold and the new owners couldn't bother to answer email or return phone calls. Of these three - two of them were LARGE companies. The fourth was missing fraud control systems causing problems for clients due to some fraudulent transactions on the part of Internet thieves.

Having gone through these harrowing experiences, I just spent a month researching online payment out-sourcing companies. Most charge exorbitant fees - hold back unnecessarily high amounts of your funds - for ridiculous amounts of time. Their "Terms and Conditions" are created to protect themselves and to hell with you. They'll do as they please.

Most of the services I tried to investigate couldn't even be bothered to answer my email - much less talk to me on the telephone! Remember the telephone? It's that thing that allows us to speak with someone right now. It's that thing we used to use to leave someone a message - knowing they would call us back! It's that thing that should ALWAYS be answered during business hours.

And, then it happened ...

I was hit by a breath of fresh air! I ran into an out-sourcing company run by what I can only call, "Real Pros."

Remember now that I was loaded for bear as I conducted my search. I ask the HARD questions and I expect answers. I want things to work and if they don't - I want them fixed. Here's what I found at one particular company ...

They have a toll-free telephone number and - SURPRISE! Someone actually answers the phone during business hours. I called them three times just trying to make a decision as to whether to hire their service. This is one of the mistakes people make when choosing online services. Remember - YOU are hiring THEM. You are about give THEM part of YOUR income. You have a right to have your questions answered.

This company knows how to use a telephone rather than trying to avoid contact with their clients. I spoke with three different people there - including a technician. All were friendly, patient and helpful. All questions were answered fully and without hesitation. I didn't find myself being "shined-on" a single time. Downright astonishing!

Their service is reasonable in every way - including cost. Everything is simple and everything is geared toward the client's best interests. "Terms & Conditions?" Fair and not bogged down in meaningless legalese. Add to that - people running the company who are truly interested in serving their client's success. What a concept!

I signed up!

My account could be set up instantly. During the course of setting up the shopping cart, I ran into one small glitch. I realized later that - being the techno-idiot that I am - it was my own error. At the time, I

sent an email to the company and the glitch was corrected - on THAT end - FOR me.

It needed to be fixed - they fixed it - and without comment that it was my own fault. Nor, did I receive any comment when I asked another question due to my own failure to slow down and read directions. I simply received their - very patient and very pleasant - answer to my question.

Now, here's the pièce de résistance. One evening last week a tornado hit the city where I live. Downtown Fort Worth being devastated by a tornado was newsworthy and it hit the wires. The very next day, I received the following email:

Hi j!,

Just checking in with you to make sure you're ok after the storm that passed through Ft. Worth yesterday. I heard on the radio this morning that three people were killed with over 100 people injured. Wow, must've been a big one! Hope you didn't sustain any damage.

Take care,

[Signature], Vice President, Operations [Company]

Now THAT, Dear Readers, is Customer SERVICE! It took him about two minutes to write it and it's going to pay BIG dividends for his company. Not just from me, but from every customer who receives this kind of treatment.

Yep - a breath of fresh air!

Let's Talk Email!

No one realizes better than I the incredible amount of time it takes to run an online business. What I don't understand is why so many online business owners can't be bothered to deal with their correspondence effectively. This is especially prevalent with some of the "big names" in the Internet.

I recently received a request from one of these people via email. I responded, granting his request and asking a couple of questions. When he eventually (three weeks later) wrote to me again, he told me more specifically what he wanted. Yet, he completely ignored the questions I had asked - even though he had copied my email (containing my questions) when he used the reply function.

I can only believe that this guy read my email JUST far enough to find what he wanted - and ignored the rest. I hope that's it. I'd hate to think he considered himself so important that he isn't required to answer legitimate questions. I mean I WAS important enough for him to ask for a favor. Apparently, just not important enough to deserve a response to my concerns.

So, let's talk about email ...

Do You Read Your Email?

Or, do you shove it into files to - read "when you have time" - or worse, be forgotten. I've seen online company owners complain that they didn't have all the information needed to make a decision when, in fact, they simply failed to read their email. Do you think Proctor & Gamble shoves mail into a drawer somewhere - only to be read when someone gets around to it?

I once heard a woman whine that she gets nearly 900 pieces of email a day (not counting spam) and everyone should just be patient until she gets around to them. Maybe if this woman unsubscribed from a few discussion lists - or used Digest Versions - she'd have time to run her business.

I wonder if even General Motors gets 900 pieces of mail a day. If you

actually get that many legitimate pieces of business email a day, you can darn well afford to hire an administrative assistant to deal with it.

Well yes, there is that "spam" thing. I'm not even going to get into that debate because it's a waste of time. If you have time to sit around screaming about what's "spam" and what isn't, you aren't spending much time building your business.

The bottom line with "spam" is - you know it when you see it. You don't have to waste time reading it. Trying to punish everyone who sends you an email (even for a legitimate business purpose) because of those who habitually abuse the system is extremely counterproductive - and will cost you money in the long run.

If you are going to run a professional business, you have to put your contact information on your site. If your contact information is on your site, you're going to get "spam." A gazillion other ways are out there to send "spam" and more pop up every day.

"Spam" a fact of Internet life. It isn't going to stop without corrective regulation. I'm sure you can find more lucrative ways to spend your time than trying to kill an elephant with a fly swatter.

I understand that, in some countries, people have to pay for their time on the Internet in time increments. I also understand that, because of this situation, people may consider "spam" to be theft - and I'm sure it can get expensive. But then, so are the security officers that many companies have to hire to protect their property. It's a cost of doing business!

One of the most costly things about "spam" is the filters that people install to avoid it. This can cost you business - sometimes business that's worth considerably more than the than the cost of the time and storage space you think you're saving.

People are not mind readers. They have no idea what kind of things you're filtering. A customer who is writing to you regarding a huge order may inadvertently use something in the subject line that you have your filter programmed to send to the trash.

Why the heck should I have to stop and try to analyze the subject line of every outgoing email? Why the heck do I have to spend MY time trying to decide if it will make it past a YOUR filter - when I'm writing for information on a product YOU are trying to sell ME?!

I do not support "spam" in any way - nor, do I use it. However, when you take a blanket stance that costs you money in the long run, you're defeating yourself. Bulk email ads that come from phony email addresses are easy to spot if you've been on the Internet for more than 3 days. A savvy business person will pick and choose what needs attention before automatically sending it to the trash.

Do You Answer Your Email?

I'm talking about legitimate correspondence from one business to another. If someone contacts you for a business purpose - or even sends you additional information, they deserve a response - even if it's a short note.

If you have changed your mind about something you were planning with another company - do you tell them so? Or, do you just ignore all further email from them. Or, even worse, do you change your email address without notifying them? This is the epitome of amateur behavior! Your time is no more valuable than theirs.

If you are asked a question - do you answer it? Or, did you just skim through the email looking for what you wanted - ignoring the rest? How long can it take to type a few lines of response?

Why would anyone believe that if a customer can't get the answer to a question in a reasonable amount of time, he, or she, won't click right on to the next web site that offers the same product you offer? Why should a potential customer - or even a potential business contact - wait for me to "get around to them?"

This is one place where business on the "outside" is different from business on the Internet. Understand that a reasonable amount of time for regular mail is too long to have to wait for an answer via email.

This is a fast-paced medium and you'd better keep up. I've spent several hundred dollars at a time on software with the next company on my list because someone couldn't bother to return a phone call or respond to an email message in a reasonable amount of time.

Thirty days is not a reasonable amount of time! If you can't answer an

email in less than two or three days, at the very least apologize to the sender for the tardiness of your response.

If you're getting too much email to handle by yourself, you have a couple of options. Get help - or find a way to cut down on your incoming email. You may have to establish some priorities.

I've received email from people claiming to be on my web site when they had simply sent a "spider robot" out through the Web to pick up email addresses. These people do not deserve a response. They are wasting your time!

As a professional, you must use professional criteria in deciding how to spend your time. This does include email responses - however, you must be careful. Please don't ignore legitimate email - or questions!

Silence is Acceptance!

I'm sure you've heard the statement, "Silence is acceptance." I think they use it on the anti-drug commercials. And, I'm pretty sure they stole it from me. But, that's okay. At least I know I could be sitting on Madison Avenue instead of in front of this lousy computer.

Ever think about that statement? Ever think about how many things it could apply to in our lives? Ever really think about the number of things we accept by our silence simply because we don't want to make waves? Hey! What's a little wave?

Let's look at it another way. Ever think about the really mammoth size waves we create by our silence? I'm talking tidal waves here!

Someone may not want to make waves over the suspicion that a kid is using drugs. What kind of a wave do they have when the kid ODs? Tidal? You bet! That's what silence will get us.

A tidal wave is exactly what is now sweeping the Internet. It's a wave of unprofessional businesses that are drowning the rest of us in the murky water of their race to get-rich-quick. It's a wave of online companies with no concern for the customer other than how to get their money in the quickest way possible.

It isn't just the new online business owner - who may still be an inexperienced amateur. It's even the giant corporations. In the past, they handled their business professionally. They bent over backward to make customer service a top priority. I guess when you can market to the whole world you don't need to bother to take care of the individual customer, eh?

How did this become a tidal wave? How did it get out of hand? You guessed it! We've gone along with it - especially if we were new to the Internet - because we didn't want to make waves! We've accepted it by our silence.

Every business owner on the Internet is also a customer on the Internet. If you're struggling to run a professional company, I know darn well that you keep running into service - or product - providers who don't appreciate your business. They often act like they don't even need the customer in order to their keep their company afloat.

Fair enough. If that's what they think - let's tell other potential customers about it. These companies will no doubt thank us when they NEVER have to think about another customer!

It's time to stop staying silent. In fact, it's past time! Let's spread the word. Maybe a little pressure will push back that tidal wave that's threatening to drown us all. Maybe a little pressure will encourage some of these people to start running their companies in a more professional manner.

We have several ways to do that ...

First, we need to pay attention. Never mind what their PR says - never mind what their affiliates say - are you getting what you're paying for? And, are you being treated like a VALUED customer, as you should be?

If not, we can begin - by stopping. STOP accepting unacceptable treatment from online companies. STOP doing business with those who promise one thing and deliver something less. STOP doing business with those who have no regard for considerate customer service.

And finally, we can start. START realizing that silence truly is acceptance! And, START telling everyone you know why you stopped doing business with these companies.

Here's where they think they have us. They think we're AFRAID to do anything other than stay silent. Me? I knew years ago that silence is acceptance. It's time we made some noise!

Who ARE These People?

I was recently asked to take a look at two different marketing programs. One was Network Marketing and the other was an affiliate type program. One of the programs was offering a very hefty commission. BOTH of these programs are owned by people well known in their fields. Sounds like the "pros," eh?

We could only hope.

I went to both web sites to read the marketing material. Plenty of that there. What I didn't find was any contact information - other than the names of the heads of these programs and some generic email addresses. Now - why is this a problem? If these people are so well known, why do I believe it's an issue?

Think about it a minute. Are you going to join a program - work your tail off to sell someone else's product - earn your commissions - then, not even know where your money is? *Who* is holding your fees? *Where* are they holding your fees?

If something runs amuck, how are you going to contact someone about the money that's owed to you? What if it's a lot of money? Are you going to call them? No phone number on the site! Have your attorney send them a letter? No physical address on the site! Not even in their member agreements! How legal is that?!

One of the programs I mentioned above paid \$225 commissions. If you sold one of these products a week, you would be owed almost a thousand dollars in a month. I repeat - where is your money? It simply isn't good business to allow someone to hold that much money when you don't even have contact information. This would never happen off-line! Why would you put up with it online?

When you sign up for any online marketing program - remember this! Not only do you have a contract with that company. They have a contract with you! You have a right - in fact, an obligation to yourself - to know exactly *who* they are - exactly *where* they are - and exactly *how to contact them* by regular mail - and by telephone.

They certainly get that information from you! And, if you live in the USA, you may even have to provide your social security number. If

they're a legitimate company (in the USA), they have a Tax ID number. Try asking them for it - and see what happens!

No one is such a professional that all they need to provide to their business associates is their name! NO ONE!

Not even Oprah.

CEO of What?

I became quite upset with the Executive Vice President of a bank last week. An iCop member was speaking with him regarding her new business. The business is a sole proprietorship - so she was wondering what title to give herself.

I repeat - her company is a sole-proprietorship. She is not incorporated! Yet, the V.P. told her to use the titles, "President and CEO."

UH?

This lady is very serious about her business and was seeking information on a number of things. She didn't need this kind of bad advice!

This is a good question for everyone, however, since titles are so misused online by people trying to throw their importance around. I am underwhelmed and unimpressed with it. Good grief! Who cares? Don't these people know how it makes them look to anyone who is business savvy?

Please don't make yourself look unprofessional in your online business by using phony titles! "CEO" (Chief Executive Officer) and "President" indicate an organization which has formal officers. The President may, or may not, be the CEO.

If your business is not incorporated, with formal officers of the corporation listed - don't use them! Even a Limited Liability Company (LLC) does not have officers.

In your role as a consumer - look at the company name. Is it followed by, "Inc." or one of the other indications of incorporation? If not, and the sales pitch is signed by a "CEO" or "President" - you're dealing with someone who is either trying to convince you their company is something it is not - or someone who doesn't have much knowledge of the real business world.

There is nothing wrong with, "Owner." At least it's honest!

Dealing with Thieves on the Internet

Sometimes I wonder if it's possible for ANY organization to even make a dent in cleaning up the Internet. So many scams - so many "business owners" who have no intention of treating their customers with anything other than contempt - so much BS ... and so much theft!

In the past month or so I have personally known three online business owners who have had their web sites stolen! Their ENTIRE web sites - good GRIEF!

The first question is - WHY? Any 10 year old can build a simple web site with an hour of training. It may not have forms, fancy graphics or cgi scripts but it can be functional - and it can work. If the learning curve is just too steep, how many sites do you think there are where you can find free templates? Lots!

There is no necessity for stealing someone else's web site! Neither design, nor content. Of course, if you're using the same 'ol hype on your site that everyone else is using - it's sometimes a bit difficult to tell who stole what from whom. Let that be lesson number 1!

Unfortunately, the theft itself is only the beginning of the problem. One victim was advised by several people to, "just leave it alone, let it go."

In a pig's EAR! For one thing - why do we bother to copyright our work if it isn't going to mean anything? For another - she could soon find her own products stolen right along with the site design.

If your site is stolen - you need to get that stolen site OFF the Web! In one of the instances mentioned above, the product WAS actually stolen - right along with the entire web site - and was being sold by the thief. He even used the same credit card provider as the real owner!

In addition to all this, the thief then proceeded to market the product using "spam." Is this something you should just "leave alone?" I don't think so!

Yet, even with all this - the thief's web host REFUSED to ban the stolen site. Even with undeniable evidence that the owner had both his domain name and his site up first! Even though the thief had been reported for "spam" by an outside source! What do to next?

Start moving toward the Internet backbone. Even dedicated servers have to get their connections someplace. Go to <http://www.dns.com> and find out the next step toward that backbone. Then report everyone under that connection who is refusing to do business in an ethical manner.

Each Internet Service Provider is accountable to the provider above them. Don't think a web host has carte blanche to do as they please! Moving toward the backbone is exactly what it took to get this web host back in line. The stolen site came down.

At least it came down from THAT web host. The thief could have just put it back up with another hosting company. Not that it wouldn't be easy to find with the domain name in place. So, the job wasn't finished.

The merchant account provider also had to be put on notice. Think THAT was easy? Of course, at first the victim was just blown off. Again - it took moving up through a hierarchy to get the job done.

Once the right person was informed that the merchant account provider could be held liable for assisting the sale of a stolen product - they paid attention! The thief's account was canceled.

Now granted, all this took a lot of work - a lot of energy - and a lot of stamina on the part of the victim. This victim is a Charter Member of iCop. When he became aware of what had happened - he wasn't sure how to proceed.

So - he asked for advice. More importantly, he followed the advice. And most important of all - he hung in there until the job was done!

Let it go? Well, I suppose you could. But how much are your web site - your products - and your reputation worth to you?

WHAT? No Telephone?

I saw an interesting shop down the street yesterday. Today, I tried to call to see if it carried something I wanted. But, I couldn't do it. The shop had no telephone number listed.

Do you believe that? Well, don't! It wouldn't happen with an off-line business.

Every brick and mortar company has a telephone number for receiving business calls. Can you even IMAGINE a business with no way for customers to contact them by phone? What kind of business is that? Yet, what do we have on the Internet?

We have people setting up home-based businesses. Then, they seem to feel that since they are working from a home office, they don't want to provide a telephone number on their web sites. What's the thinking here?

Some online business owners believe that they will be inundated with hundreds of calls per day and receive telephone calls from cranks. Not true. Only a TINY percentage of your web site visitors will EVER call you. And you'll probably get just about as many crank calls as you would with an unlisted private number from cranks dialing randomly.

If you DO get a crank call? That thing in your hand is a receiver - hang it up!

Some people work online during hours that may not be considered "business hours." They don't work 9 to 5. So what? Any business can set its own business hours and they can be anything you wish. Post your hours - and the time zone!

Oh, they'll just call anyway - day or night? So turn on the answering machine after hours. What's the problem?

One person actually told me that they "hate the phone." This person objected to answering the same questions that were answered on the web site. All I can say to that is, "Then, get out of business." You can't build a company without customer interaction. If you don't like people, then you'd better get out of marketing!

At least in the USA, most telephone companies have a service called, "Personalized Ring" - or "Distinctive Ring." They give you a second number for about \$6 per month. It uses your main line - but when a call comes in on that number, the telephone rings differently from your main number.

Hark! A business call! You can now answer your telephone with your company name - and you don't even have to answer at all "after hours."

How can you run a business without allowing potential customers - or business associates - to contact you personally? You can't. If you refuse to provide a telephone number, trust me, smart people will refuse to do business with you!

If you expect your business to be taken seriously, you need to take that telephone seriously and provide a number on your web site. If you refuse to provide a telephone number, don't try to tell me you even HAVE a business! You don't. No legitimate business hides from potential customers and/or business associates!

Same ol' rule of thumb: How do they do it down on Main Street? Are you in business - or not?

Can You Say, "Preposition?"

As the publisher of an online ezine, I seem to be losing my patience lately with the article submissions I receive. Maybe I'm more picky than some, but I believe my subscribers deserve to have high quality articles. And, Friends, that covers a whole lot more than just content!

First of all, I often receive advertisements which are incorrectly - and blatantly - presented as "articles." Nothing will send a submission to the trash folder quicker on my computer.

I don't even read the submission until I scan through it to see if it contains URLs anyplace other than in the attribution statement where they belong. If I find one in the body of the "article," I look to see if it has relevance to the article - or if it's simply a self-serving link to a product/service of the author. Then I do one of two things. I read it - or I dump it.

Articles are meant to inform - not to sell. If you want to sell something in my ezine, pay for an ad like everyone else. Don't try to slide it past me by calling it an "article" - I don't care what kind of information it contains. You are more than welcome to put your links in the attribution statement. Don't attempt to waste my space trying to place a free solo-ad by calling it an "article." An ad by any other name is still an ad.

We now have ebooks out there encouraging people to build their ezine subscriber lists by submitting articles to other ezines. Okay - that'll work. But, **ONLY IF YOU CAN WRITE!** If you don't know how to write, get someone who does to write your article - or don't submit it to me.

I've seen articles with great content that I have to completely edit before I'll put them in front of my readers - or I won't run them. And, frankly, I'm getting tired of doing the writer's work! If you don't want your article edited when you send it to me, you had better be sure it is correct.

Since I believe my readers are entitled to high quality content, I also see no point in offending them with poor grammar, incorrect spelling and punctuation or sloppy sentence structure. Good publishers say this all the time but maybe some online article "writers" don't know what we mean.

Allow me to give you a few tips on the more grievous of the errors I receive. (For convenience, we will use the USA rules of grammar, punctuation, etc. I understand they may be different in other countries.)

1) Quotation marks go outside the punctuation mark. I don't care how you think it looks - they go **outside** the punctuation mark. Always! It is **not** (".) - it **is** (.") - it is **not** (",) - it **is** (,") - **always!**

2) A quote within a sentence is **never** followed by a period. It is **always** followed by a comma, even though it may be a complete sentence by itself. That's the rule!

3) Cutesie characters before, after or within your sentences make you look like an amateur, or a 5th grader writing a valentine. Don't use them! I can accept the occasional :-)) or but don't give me silly designs (^*~*^^*~*^) to muck up your text and make it unreadable. Spend your time creating a good article and save the art work for something appropriate.

4) When you use periods to leave a thought hanging or to connect to another thought, they are **not** connected to other words. They **replace** words and therefore, stand alone with a space between them and the word before or after them. It is **not**, "Think about it...." It **is**, "Think about it ..."

This is a typographic symbol. It is a sequence of **ONLY 3** periods and substitutes for an unlimited number of words.

5) Unless it is used as a header - a lead-in - or is part of a quoted conversation - one sentence does not constitute a paragraph. Take that sentence with 40 words in it and break it into more than one sentence. The only other exception is when you need to use a very **SHORT** stand-alone sentence for emphasis.

6) Can you say, "preposition?" Don't end a sentence with one! Do you know what a preposition is? As far as I'm concerned, you don't even need to know the definition, although it's easy to figure out. With a preposition, you are pre-positioning something. Until you tell me what it is - you haven't finished your sentence.

I'll be happy though, if you'll just learn know how to spot one. Here's how you can test for it ...

Put the last word of your sentence in front of the words, "... the box."
If it makes sense - it's a preposition. Try these words: to - over -
with - up - from - before. Get it? To the box – over the box – with the
box – up the box – from the box.

Add "the box" behind those words and you can clearly see that they
are prepositions. If you find any one of hundreds of prepositions at the
end of your sentence - you haven't finished your sentence. To what?
Over what? From what? Finish it!

7) Don't give me passive sentences! They are boring and they don't
DO anything! "There are millions of people on this planet," tells me
nothing. "Millions of people live on this planet," gives me the action.

The clue? If you begin your sentence with "There are ..." you are
about to write a passive sentence. Put the subject of your sentence at
the beginning - then tell me what it is doing. If you begin your
sentence with a qualifier, be sure it is also active!

8) Learn the difference in how to use the words "that" and "which."
The word "that" is an indicator, or locator. It points out something
specific. The word "which" is a describer. It is followed by a
description.

"This is an article **that** helps aspiring writers," is **incorrect!** "This is an
article **which** helps aspiring writers," describes what the article does.

9) Learn the difference in how to use the words "that" and "who." The
word "who" indicates a person. The word "that" indicates an object.

"He is the man that wrote the article," is **incorrect**. A man is a "who"
- not a "that." The trick? Use common sense.

10) Why do I even have to say this? You have Spell-Check. Use it! Or,
don't send the article!

Now, I don't mind the occasional mistake. I make them myself. And, I
don't mind the deliberate "mistake" which is used to add emphasis or
color. What I mind is having my email box jammed with the unusable
articles of writers who either don't know how - or don't care enough -
to write me a printable article.

Yes, I know - it's a lot of work. But, being a writer is more than
creative output. You must also be a technician. Why do you believe my

readers would want to subscribe to your ezine if you won't take the time to give them quality material?

And yes, I know all about the exceptions to the rules. But, before we worry about the exceptions, let's learn the rules!

Now, here's the easiest trick of all. When in doubt - go look at a non-self-published printed book and see how it's done!

Picture Your Business Down on Main Street

I receive more questions - and complaints - regarding what is truly professional in online payment systems than any other single subject. Over time, it has become clear to me that online business owners are falling victim to the erroneous belief that business is "different" on the Internet.

Business is business; it is what it is - online or off! The only difference with a business online is its ability to reach world-wide customers at little expense and the speed with which it may be conducted.

If you want to offer online payment on your web site in the most professional manner possible, all you have to do is picture what you would do if your business was down on Main Street. Think about it.

What payment options would you offer if you had walk-in customers? Cash certainly is not a viable option for Internet sales, since the customer isn't standing in front of you. So we can lay that one aside.

Credit cards, of course, along with the ability to have the charge accepted or rejected on the spot. Online, we call that "real-time processing." Off-line, we call it normal procedure.

The option most rigorously argued - and resisted - however, is that of the online check payment option. Down on Main Street, you would also accept checks from customers. You might even have a service that verifies the funds for the check on the spot. Would you tell customers they couldn't write you a check to pay for merchandise? Won't be in business very long if you do!

And, what if your customer is also a business owner who wishes to pay you for a business expense with a company check? Will you insist that (s)he use a credit card? If you do, you may be contributing to that business owner breaking the conditions of his/her contract with the issuing bank.

Without an online check payment option, other online business owners often use their personal credit cards for business expenses on the Internet. This is done in violation of their contracts with the issuing banks.

If you are a business owner - and you are paying business expenses online with your personal credit cards - please, listen up! In some instances, your credit cards can be revoked - and immediate payment in full demanded for the balance! Want THAT on your credit report?

For the most part, only credit cards issued to corporations, or to a registered company name, may legally be used for business expenses. Business owners who are aware of this do not use personal credit cards for business expenses.

Without the option to write an online company check, they must send their payments via regular mail. These business owners, who are upholding their credit card contracts, should also be given the option for quick payment.

Although many banks now issue Visa or Master Card debit cards, many fail to do this for business accounts. Even more importantly, many business owners do NOT wish to use a company debit card online!

While we're on the subject, no savvy small-business owner is going jack up their business expenses by paying that incredible interest on credit cards. What kind of business sense is that?

Daily operating expenses (not business loans) should be paid in full every month. A personal credit card is not a business loan! Then, if you pay even a business credit card (except American Express) in full every month, the issuing bank may cancel your card because they aren't making any money (interest) from you. It's a catch-22 situation.

They are in business to make money from that interest on your failure to pay in full each month. And, you won't be in business very long if you pay it. It WILL come back, sooner or later, and bite you on the ol' wazoo!

Now yes, it is difficult for online companies outside the USA to set up online check options. But, not impossible. Companies in the U.S. do offer this out-sourcing service even though they usually only accept U.S. checks. Since almost 90% of online buyers are in the U.S., why should this be a big problem?

Next issue ... If your customer down on Main Street paid you with a check, would you tell him/her to come back and pick up the merchandise after their check clears the bank? Nope! Yet it's done all

the time for Internet sales. Deliveries delayed for check clearance. How professional is that?

You may have to eat a check once in awhile - but all businesses do. Online or off - it's a cost of doing business.

It never ceases to amaze me how many online merchants seem to think that they can run a business without ANY of the same "costs of doing business" that they would have down on Main Street. Obvious inexperience.

I don't do business with them. In the long run they are going to cost ME, as the customer, more than I'm willing to pay in terms of things other than money.

And finally, what if your company down on Main Street sells a service wherein you never need to see the customer? Would you tell customers that they can't send you a check? Of course, you wouldn't! Why then do so many online merchants fail to provide for payment by regular mail? My guess is that it's because they don't want you to know where they are. What does that tell you about the advisability of doing business with them?

So, there it is. The criteria for professionalism hasn't changed just because it came online. The next time you're wondering how to treat - and what to offer - your customers, picture your business down on Main Street. Then, act accordingly.

Why Do Alligators Eat Their Young?

I can remember lying in bed one night as a child, listening to the "grown-ups" in the dining room playing cards and telling jokes. I was so young that I only understood one joke - and for some reason, I have remembered it all these years. The joke:

"Why do alligators eat their young?"

"Because if they didn't, we'd all be up to our butts in alligators!"

Yuk, yuk, right? Well - THEY thought it was funny. Must have been the cocktails ...

I can't help but think I remembered that for a hundred years because I was going to experience it. Where, oh where, are the mother alligators? I'm up to my butt in online alligators - all trying to sell me their hype! Sometimes, I swear I can hear them snapping at my chair.

What's another word for, "hype?" Wellllllll, we could try "con" - or we could call it what it is - just plain ol' BS.

Now, I understand that sales material needs to be written in a certain way. When I didn't know how to do it, I went to some of the big names online and learned everything I could. However - this whole thing has gotten out of hand! Every sales letter I read is the same ol' thing. Come on, People - don't we have any imagination here?

It's SO bad that I refuse to read 99% of web sites any more. I can tell by the first paragraph what it's going to be. Why read it? I've read it thousands of times before. I already KNOW what it says. The only thing I don't know is, "How much does it cost?" And I probably won't find that out until they have me on the secure order page.

It's hype - pure and simple! Nearly ALL of it! It's crafted to make you think things it doesn't say - and I mean CRAFTED! Excuse me, but is this not a con? Everything can't be that good!

Which shell is the bean under? NONE of them - it's an old-fashioned con game! And we're turning into nothing more than online carnival barkers.

I'm wrong?

WHAT? Am I going to get excited and send for your "free report" just to find that it's another sales letter - or even WORSE - a series of autoresponder messages for the next nine months? I don't think so. Oh, goody - a "free" ebook! Uh-uh - loaded with ads.

Free software? Sure, but if you want it to work, you'll have to buy the "Pro Version." Oh, I see, I get a discount! The same discount you started with three years ago which is **ONLY GOING TO BE AVAILABLE THIS MONTH!**

Or maybe, you're going to un-tip the board and allow me to win that big teddy bear. What a testimonial that'll make! You give me the bear and I walk off down the midway ...

"Wow! Where'd you get the teddy bear?"

"Oh, I won it over there - from the guy with coke bottle game."

I believe that's called a "shill."

The good news is - I believe that online consumers are catching on to this nonsense. I, myself, used to be a sucker for the stuff. You wouldn't believe all the useless junk I bought!

Did I ever try any of these tactics? Yes, I'm ashamed to admit that I did. Until I learned not to trust the "experts." That's the saddest part of all. The so-called experts selling us BS and making us believe it's the thing to do online. Luckily - I got past it reasonably quickly.

It's about time all us online alligators got together and started eating our young! We're a little late. We're already up to our butts in alligators - but maybe we can keep them from going for our throats.

Oh, NO! Exclusive Mailings!

One of the complaints ezine publishers hear regularly concerns "exclusive mailings" - or "solo ads." These are emails sent to the ezine subscribers which usually contain an ad or other information. Frankly, I'm tired of hearing about it.

Let's think about this logically. I subscribe to TIME MAGAZINE - and I pay for it. Yet, TIME makes their money mainly from advertising. They routinely send me extra mailings with special offers - in addition to the regular ads in each issue. Those are solo ads!

If I don't like it - they are not going to give me my money back. In fact, I would be lucky if I could make them stop sending the magazine before the subscription ran out.

Online ezines are published to build a mailing list. This is no secret. Most publishers don't do all that work out of the goodness of their hearts. They are in business! The subscriber base is a controlled list of possible buyers for whatever product/service the publisher is marketing.

For the most part, publishers try to give good - and valuable - content. Very few charge for their ezines so this information is FREE to the subscriber. Can you imagine what you would have to pay for the information you receive in a free ezine if you purchased it in training courses?

As a publisher, I have repeatedly refused to accept "Solo" ads to send to my readers. I only send out extra mailings if I believe it's something my readers really need to know about. However, I have no problem at all with publishers who DO accept solo ads. Advertisers want these ads because they are more likely to be read than a small 5 line ad in the middle of an ezine.

A couple of minutes of my time to read an extra ad sent by a publisher who is providing me with valuable information and/or entertainment every week is a small price to pay for what I'm getting without charge.

Putting out a good ezine every week is a LOT of HARD work! Expecting an ezine publisher to teach us and/or entertain us - then complaining about the occasional extra ad (or even "too many" ads in an issue) is

like the people who go to a free Happy Hour buffet - eat \$20 worth of free food - then complain because they have to serve themselves.

Ezines were not designed for the sole delight of the subscribers who receive this information for free - then complain about it. They were not designed by publishers to have something to fill up their time - make them crazy - and give them a lot of guff.

An electronic magazine - as with any print magazine - is a vehicle for profit. The trade off with a free ezine is MORE than fair to the subscriber! You get the free information - the publisher gets the exposure for advertising. Extra ads are part of the deal unless otherwise stated.

Is there anything you can do about it? Yes - there is. Learn to live with it or stop taking the gift of the free information the ezine offers you.

The Mythical "Creative Temperament"

It doesn't take much to see that the Internet is a creative medium. LOTS of creativity involved. Web sites are creative efforts - marketing is a creative effort - software design is a creative effort - not to mention all the writing that's done for various reasons. So, needless to say, we're constantly working with creative people online.

I was raised in a family of creative people - people from the entertainment business. I was trained to be a performer from the age of 3. By age 15, I was a "professional" in the sense that I was a member of the American Guild of Variety Artists and was paid outrageous sums for a teen-ager dancing in musical productions.

I put "professional" in quotation marks because although my membership in AGVA made it formal, I had been taught professionalism from the cradle. I ultimately became a choreographer, married a choreographer and spent the next 16 years in one of the most creative industries there is. Entertainment.

So, what does that have to do with the Internet? Well, during the course of my career in the entertainment field I learned a few things about professionalism. I also had beau coup experience with prima donnas. Now, I find some of that experience being repeated on the Internet.

Bear in mind that a "prima donna" may be a woman (diva) but may just as easily be a man. Would we then call him a "prima danna?" I don't know, but I do know the urge to be temperamental to the detriment of a project is not limited by gender.

Think of your current Internet project as a production. If it is your own project, consider yourself the director. As the director, it is most likely your idea - your reputation - and your money on the line. It is also your absolute right to ask for what you want from those involved and expect it to be delivered in the best interests of the production.

Now look at the people involved. Here's how you can tell the difference in whether you are working with a professional - or a prima donna. And remember, it's actions - not words - which will tell the story, no matter what the claim.

Professionals show up - and show up on time, if not early - in case there are problems to correct.

Primas show up when they please - usually late - and expect everyone else to wait for them. Nothing can happen without the prima's permission, you see.

The professional's first concern is for the production. The very basis of professionalism is everyone showing up and doing whatever is necessary to get the show on - in a timely manner. That includes everything from making creative changes without complaint - to mopping up a stage if that's what is necessary.

The primas' first concern is for their own fragile ego. (S)he usually considers him/herself a unique edition of some talent which precludes doing anything outside this "specialty."

Professionals don't fall in love with any creation until it does the job it was created to do. Needed revisions are done calmly - without complaint - and in a timely manner.

Primas create something - fall in love with it simply because it IS their creation - and want to call it finished. Any needed changes are looked upon as a personal affront which will, in turn, bring about extremely rude behavior. The prima will also not hesitate to make personal revisions - without consulting, or even informing you - which could disrupt your other plans completely.

The professional neither claims, nor accepts that, "It can't be done," without even trying. (S)he will look for and/or experiment with an answer before giving up the idea and turning to a completely different solution. This is simply a matter of willingness.

The prima will ALWAYS claim, "It can't be done," rather than change a tiny detail of their beloved creation. It would never occur to an

Internet diva that if a graphic can't be optimized small enough to load in less than 6 minutes - you throw it out and create another graphic.

Professionals are willing to admit errors. They make necessary corrections with appropriate apologies. They have no problem accepting responsibility for their mistakes.

Primas never MAKE mistakes. If anything is not as it should be, responsibility will be shoved off on someone else. Or - you will be challenged as to whether the mistake even exists.

The professional will follow direction and make necessary changes in the manner outlined by the director of the project. This will be done quickly so the project can move on without unnecessary hold-ups. These people are time-savers.

The prima will ignore direction and proceed to try completely different ideas, rather than what was specifically asked of them, in the effort to prove their position that, "It can't be done." Getting the requested revision will waste hours, if not days, of your time. As the director, you will end up doing not only your job - but the prima's job too.

Professionals are a joy to work with due to their attitude and flexibility. If they have an idea, they will share it - along with solid reasons to implement it into the production. If they see a potential problem with a request from the director, they will explain their reasons in a logical and non-confrontational manner.

Primas are a drain on the time and energy of everyone who has to work with them. Anything other than their own ideas are met with the childish temperament of whiny, snippy remarks - if not temper tantrums. Temper tantrums may even take the form of passive-aggressive "mistakes" which create further chaos.

As the director, you cannot run a professional project if you are having to expend time and energy on someone who holds things up with

temperament rather than getting the job done as needed. You actually have a duty to your project if you expect it to succeed.

Sometimes, we make mistakes in our choice of people to help us with our projects. It is not unusual to completely miss the prima donna attitude until you are already deeply involved in your project. Often, it doesn't appear until revision time. When it surfaces, decisions may be called for - and the sooner the better.

You do not need anyone's permission to have things done the way you want them - and you certainly don't need it with any "attitude." When the time for revisions comes, the prima donna will sabotage your project with the mythical "creative temperament."

Why do I say it's mythical? Because, after many years of working closely with both professionals and primas, I have come to a solid conclusion. Creative temperament is nothing more than the childish behavior of someone who needs constant attention and will demand that attention without regard to the consequences to your project - or to themselves.

If you are involved in a project where you are NOT the director - and wonder if the prima donna descriptions in this article might be describing you - I can only say this. If you think they are - you're probably right. You might want to consider growing up.

Special Offer Con Jobs

In the USA, we have laws regarding "truth in advertising." For instance, it is against the law to advertise a "Going Out of Business" sale unless the company is actually going to close.

This is, of course, to protect the consumer. However, it is also an issue of honesty - not lying to the public in an effort to make them think they are getting a "special" price.

Funny - this is done on the Internet routinely and even casually. Of course all web site owners aren't in the USA - but that isn't the point. It's a matter of integrity.

Here's the one that bothers me the most ...

You're reading a sales letter online and you come to the paragraph that FINALLY tells you the price of the product or service. You may read, "This special offer is ONLY good until November 1, 2000."

Now, I can guarantee you that 99% of the time, you can go back to that site on November 2, 2000 and find the same "special offer" with a NEW date in the future. You can go back in a year and still find it!

Of course some site owners are slicker than others. Instead of the blatant lie above, you may read, "Order before November 1, 2000 and you will receive the special price of ..."

See the difference? Is one more honest than the other? Technically, yes. In reality, no - the lie is still implied. Unless, of course, the offer is going to be changed after the designated date.

Now I understand that we need to create urgency on the part of a potential customer. But, do we have to lie to do it?

The crazy thing about this is that we already know that the buyer has to see something several times before turning loose of that money. What I can't understand is why anyone who sees that time-dated offer several times - with different dates - will still consider doing business with the business owner who is using this tactic! Dishonesty in one area usually means dishonesty in others. Want to take that chance?

In defense of NEW online business owners, I have to recognize that sometimes this is done out of inexperience. I'll admit that I used that same tactic when I first started doing business online. I listened to the "gurus" and bought right into it without even thinking.

It wasn't long though before I realized that it was an outright con. I was showing absolutely no respect for my potential customer. The only goal was to manipulate them into thinking they were getting a special deal IF they hurried and ordered NOW.

I stopped doing it. And I stopped listening to the gurus.

If you must create urgency, using a targeted date - fine! Just don't lie to your visitors. When you change the date - change the offer. Add something - take something away - change the price - change the bonus package - but for Heaven's sake, stay in integrity as an honest business person. If you don't, sooner or later - they WILL catch on and your reputation is right down the tubes with the rest of the online con jobs!

Let's do something different! Start changing those offers. Be the online company people can trust. Wow! A whole new breed of truly ethical online businesses. What a concept!

Free "Stuff" on the Internet

This won't be a real long article. Hopefully, most of your time will be spent reviewing your own sales letters after you read it.

At the risk of being drawn and quartered, I'm going to say - once again ... The erroneous idea that everything should be "free" on the Internet has done more to pull down levels of online professionalism than any other single idea. It has also done more to harm online commerce than any other single idea.

I could send you to a bazillion web sites to prove my point but I'll settle for one. YOURS. If you are an online business owner - you're selling something. You probably have a "sales letter." You've been taught that the only way to get people to buy your product/service is to give away the farm for that \$20 sale. You've been taught that you'll never have a successful online business if you don't deliver the moon. You'll go broke!

And, online customers have been spoiled rotten by this. They actually believe if they spend \$20 with you, they should receive \$2,000 worth of free stuff! They expect it! They demand it! What is wrong with this picture?

Remember the last time you visited a department store? Did they have anyone standing around offering you a whole aisle of free stuff if you would buy just one \$20 product? Did every product have a price tag that promised to GIVE you 14 other products if you would just PLEASE buy this one?

I'm not talking about the cosmetic companies that offer you a whole bag of goodies at half price if you'll buy one \$40 product. That isn't free. That's a back-end sale and it isn't worth any more than the "half price" they offer.

I mean FREE! Come on - we all know that the only thing you'll get free at an off-line establishment is a smile when you walk through the door of Wal-Mart. They pay people to stand at the door and give away a "Hello," and a smile! FREE! And it works! But, products? Not bloody likely! Think they're going broke? So why should it be any different for an online business?

Okay - I know you're not going to take the free stuff out of your sales letters. But maybe we could use a little reason here. Maybe we could just be a bit more realistic.

Is that piece of software you're giving away REALLY worth \$499? Who ever paid that much for it? Has anyone ever actually paid you \$1,000 for that 60 minute consultation you're offering for free?

And, that free ebook. It's really worth WHAT? The time it took you to download it? When's the last time you read ANY book that contained "thousands of dollars worth of information" you couldn't get somewhere else for next to nothing?

Of course, at the grocery store, you MIGHT get a free loaf of bread if you buy their lunch meat. That's IF you buy six packages of lunch meat. But they don't try to tell you that the 99 CENT loaf of bread is worth 99 DOLLARS. For six packages of lunch meat, you probably deserve a loaf of bread. But do you deserve a whole new kitchen?

When I see a sales letter with inflated prices for the free stuff - I lose all respect for the merchant immediately. Who really believes that you are going to give away thousands - or even hundreds - of dollars worth of free stuff for that lousy \$20 sale? Not me!

If you know who Andy Rooney is - try this. Read your sales letter and pretend he's the one reading it. What do you think you would hear on "60 Minutes" next week? I don't know about you - but that scares me!

I only WISH I had the whole answer. All I can say is that we've turned into a community of enormous greed. The consumer demands everything for nothing - and the merchant promises everything when it is, in fact, very little. So why are we surprised at the amount of theft - scams - libel - and illegal activity on the Internet?!

Presentation is Everything!

I recently saw a question asked on an email list. I'm paraphrasing here:

Isn't a Multi-Tier Affiliate Program the same as Multi-Level Marketing? So, why don't the MTAP programs get all the same criticisms of MLM?

Before I even start to answer this question, let me assure you that I KNOW there are good legitimate MLM companies. So don't bother to send me flaming emails about it.

There's a REASON why people go ballistic at the mere mention of MLM. A lot of people have a LOT of experience with it - and it goes back years!

Okay - here we go ...

Yes, a multi-tier affiliate program (MTAP) has the same payment structure as a multi-level marketing program (MLM). You have down-lines - you earn commissions on what is sold in your down-line. But that's about where the similarity ends.

The difference lies in the presentation and what you believe you are doing!

With a MTAP, you'll earn a few bucks here - a few bucks there. This is not a career - nor, is it presented to make you rich. Okay - well, a few online scamsters may tell you that. But who believes them? Not many!

The problem is - MLM has earned (note, I said EARNED) itself a bad reputation. And it happened before the Internet ever came into existence. Some of the things that caused this can't even be done on the Internet. For instance ...

Years ago, my then-spouse and I were invited to a dinner party by one of his work associates. It was a bring-a-dish get together of those working in the same office. That's ALL we were told!

Well, after dinner we all got to sit in a circle and listen to the "FABULOUS MLM Opportunity" the host couple had found. The GUESTS

paid for the dinner and were rewarded with being trapped to listen to three hours of the damndest hype I ever heard! Was that slick, or what?

Have you ever seen the contract of an MLM program? It looks like you're doing a multi-billion dollar corporate merger! And it STILL won't give you all the details. At least not all the details that affect your pocketbook.

You can bet there will be hidden costs. For instance, you may have to pay for telephone updates weekly. And you will be required to use a telephone card you buy (from them) to do it. Even if the call is only across town!

Well no, you don't HAVE to do this but - if you want to make the BIG money ... yada, yada, yada.

That's just one little scam. Not all companies use the same ones.

And no - they are NOT going to GIVE you anything! Even the pink Cadillac that one company gives away is just an advertisement for the company. You have earned the right to drive around in THEIR AD. Did you ever SEE one of those things?

If you were looking for a career in sales, you would need to have certain qualifications. You might even be tested to be sure you have them. The only qualification you need to sell an MLM product is ... do you have the money to buy in?

Okay - the law has now made that illegal in the USA. No problem - you can join the program for free - BUT you'll get a different compensation plan. And, they'll tell you right up front that you can pretty much forget about making any real money. Why do they admit this to you? Because they want you to BUY IN! That's where they make their MONEY!

Then, you have those MEETINGS! You know, the ones where you have to drag in all your friends and family, kicking and screaming, to hear the hype. To be SOLD! Usually down the river.

You'll only hear the good stuff at the meetings - either from those people who originated the program, or who got in at the top. The ones who ARE making all the money!

You won't hear from the ones who lost their shirts. THEY can't get out the front door to come to a meeting for all the product they bought that's now flowing over from the garage to fill the living room.

How many people do you know who have a garage filled to the rafters with enough soap to do the laundry of the entire world? Or, enough nutritional supplements that they shouldn't have to eat a meal in nine lifetimes?

With an online multi-tier affiliate program, a \$27 ebook isn't going to break you. And gee - you only have to buy ONE!

AND, you don't have to call Grandma again.

Here's Granny trying to live on Social Security and she has to buy a pit bull to fend off all the grandkids waving around their newest MLM product. After all, Granny is a perfect candidate for needing to make extra money. Right? Let's recruit Granny! Never mind that she can't get to the meetings in her walker and all her friends are either in nursing homes or the next life.

And please be advised that the MLM company does not CARE if your friends stop taking your phone calls. They do not CARE if your family moves away while you're sleeping. They do not CARE if you end up a lonely old person because everyone is afraid you'll shove a satellite dish up their nose if they meet you on the street.

In fact, they'll even tell you straight out that you don't NEED these people! You'll be rich enough to make NEW friends. What are you going to do - BUY them? What is wrong with THIS picture?

Now, online MLMs have to find different ways to pull all this off. Some of it can't be done online. That helps a little. But, watch that contract!

I can read and understand legal documents like a champ but it doesn't help with online MLM programs. Many seem to do as they please - interpret what they say any way they please - change anything they please - at any time they please - and they just give me a headache. I don't know HOW they get away with it!

Any reputable MLM company would be well-advised to stop referring to themselves as "MLM." They are going to have to find a new way to

take the smell out of MLM from the incredible bad reputations they have earned off-line!

Of course, some of them have. They call themselves "Network Marketing" programs. That's good IF they are also changing their approach, since most people are already on to this name change thing.

Unfortunately, although most of the stigma on MLM comes from old off-line reputations, too many of them are simply finding other ways to pull the same hype online. And many of them still require off-line efforts in the same old vein.

This is not to say that some multi-tier affiliate programs aren't also full of sickening hype. However in my experience, with few exceptions, they don't last long.

If you're involved with a truly ETHICAL online MLM company - that's terrific. Handled correctly, you DO have the opportunity to make some money from it. In this case, your only option is to do your work diligently and try to ignore the opinions of people like me who are still caught up in the residue from the old models.

The difference in an online MTAP and an MLM should be clear by now. For future reference, an online Multi-Tier Affiliate Program will NOT:

- Promise to make you rich
- Tell you it's a new career
- Give you a contract so complicated you could set up a new country with it
- Keep hidden costs from you until after you sign up
- Ask you to buy enough product to fill three warehouses
- Teach you to be "less than honest" with potential downline members
- Put Granny on your list of people to call because SHE needs the money
- Grab people by the nape of the neck in a coffee shop and drag them to a meeting
- Reward you by asking you to (IMHO) embarrass yourself by driving their signature pink Cadillac

What Goes Around, Comes Around

At the risk of being considered un-American, I have a couple of words to say about the level of online professionalism in the USA. It's SAD. Not only is it sad, but the prevalent attitude of Americans that the USA is at the top of the Internet pecking order - and therefore has special privileges - is downright misguided.

As citizens of the U.S. we had better get our heads out of the sand and wise up, or we'll find MORE than our heads in the sand. It is so typical of us Americans to believe that we are the be-all/end-all of everything. Such an attitude blinds us to the fact that the Internet has leveled the playing field.

I realize that I am making sweeping statements in what I'm about to say. I also realize that I am going to offend some Americans. Yet, these statements need to be thought about and acted upon - not REacted TO out of some sense of unjustified superiority.

These comments certainly do NOT apply to all Americans. It is unfortunate that those who abuse the opportunity to work online as true professionals give the rest of us such a poor image.

Plenty of us are struggling to bring the rest up to some level of competence and professionalism. However, the pitiful fact is that we are fighting this battle against our own countrymen. (Sorry Ladies, I don't know if they've come up with a non-sexist way to use that term.)

I work online with people from all over the world every day. More and more I'm finding that I prefer to work with those outside the USA. Why? Because that's where I find the MOST true professionalism. What a sad commentary on my own country!

It is here in the U.S. where online business owners refuse to give complete contact information. It's here in the U.S. where a legitimate business letter will be ignored. It's here in the U.S. where people won't bother to return a phone call. It's here in the U.S. where we find such pathetic customer service and the attitude of, "The proprietor is always right."

90% of Internet users are no longer in the USA. That percentage is plummeting down every day. In my opinion, this is a good thing - we

have a lot to learn from International users. And learn it, we will - or be left in the dust.

The greatest blessing of the Internet is our ability to easily establish relationships with others around the world. We have an opportunity never before available to learn first-hand about - and FROM - those of cultures foreign to us. Why do we waste that by complaining about how they use the English language - all the while we butcher it ourselves?

Our languages are different - our sense of humor is different - the way we experience the world is different. And, certainly the way we do business is different. Why do we not celebrate this opportunity by learning all we can? Have we become too arrogant to do that?

I have begun to fear that arrogance is the exact reason why so many Americans are unprofessional. I rarely encounter this when I work with businesses outside the USA.

What I find instead are people who care about their business - who care how they present themselves - and who cooperate on a grand scale to get things done in the most courteous manner possible. What I do NOT find is email ignored - unreasonable demands - broken commitments - lousy attitude - and blatant dishonesty born of greed.

Outside the USA, I find people who take great pride in what they do - without all the self-aggrandizement. They show that pride by the actual work they do - not by blowing their own horns.

I don't hesitate to make these statements because the few exceptions I've found are negligible compared to U.S. standards. Or, lack thereof.

The greatest thing the Internet has to offer us isn't money. It's knowledge. It's the opportunity to learn and to finally become a true global village on this planet.

Can we do that? Not if we don't get off our high horses and admit that we may have something to learn.

Meanwhile, continuing to treat those outside the U.S. as the second-class citizens of this global online village is bound to come back and bite us in the ol' wazoo! Tolerance and acceptance of other cultures is part of being a professional in the first place.

You can trust me on this. The U.S. Internet glory days will most assuredly come to a close. So, just remember! What goes around - comes around. Every time.

How are Your "Customer Manners?"

There's a lot of talk lately regarding how the amount of "Internet Rage" is increasing. Attacks seem to come from two places.

First, from people who don't do what they committed to do. This includes merchants who don't provide what they promised. It's a defense mechanism. You know - it's the ol' "The best defense is offense," routine. It's a little sad.

Secondly, rage - and the "flames" - come from some customers. These are the same customers who forget all their manners because they never have to see you face to face. Let's talk about that ...

iCop members are required to exhibit professionalism in their online businesses in every way. But - how do WE do as customers?

Every online business owner is also an online consumer. We can't run our businesses without using other online products and services. When we are dealing with other merchants, we're just another one of the crowd.

However - that does NOT mean that we get to act like some of the other online rage-aholics. No matter what you are doing online, you're doing it as a member of iCop.

Ideally, that's mentioned in your signature file. If so, you are identifiable as a member to anyone who receives an email from you.

When something goes wrong while we're acting as the customer - we need to deal with that in a professional manner. This goes for everyone - iCop member or not. YOU know who acted in an unacceptable manner toward you, don't you? And, you'll remember that person!

Well, other merchants will remember you too - if you lower yourself to the level of the rage-aholic. NOTHING warrants anything other than professional behavior at ALL times. It is perfectly possible to write a SCATHING letter without all the histrionics. Off-line professionals do it every day.

Just food for thought ...

When "Freebies" Aren't Free

It seems that "benefits" are not enough to sell your product or service. "They" tell us that you must give away "freebies." Instant gratification and all that.

Now rather than get on a roll about what I think about instant gratification - and the babies who demand it - let's just assume that freebies are a necessary evil. Let's think about how to use them ethically.

I've written about jacking up the supposed worth of freebies before so I won't be redundant here. Now, let's talk about whether your freebies are really even free.

First we have something called "shareware." I don't know where this name originated. It seems to mean something you get to use a portion of until you pay for the full version. Or, they share it with you for a limited amount of time - unless you pay for it. This is NOT free!

Then we have those freebies that I call, "hooks." You are offered something for nothing. But when you start to download or access it - you suddenly find the condition. For instance, you must subscribe to an ezine before you can actually have the freebie. You are paying a price, whether it's money or not. THIS is not free!

In fact, it isn't even honest.

Many ezines give away ebooks for new subscriptions. Subscribe to the ezine and receive the ebook. Straightforward and honest. The condition for receiving the ebook is right up front.

But when someone offers the "freebie" first, without mention of any condition - THEN demands the subscription before delivering - that's manipulative and dishonest. It's also insulting the intelligence of the visitor.

Please examine your "freebies" - and how they are "given" away. The very basis of professionalism is honesty, ethics and integrity. Don't play cute and think you're fooling your visitors. The word on underhanded methods will spread like wildfire.

Are YOU in Compliance with the FTC?

Nearly everyone has probably heard about the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the USA cracking down on Internet businesses. This is probably NOT a country specific problem. I believe most countries have some kind of comparable agency. If it can happen here, it's only a matter of time until it happens everywhere. Assuming it hasn't already happened in some other countries.

Unfortunately, I'm not qualified to help those outside the USA on country specific business practices. But, I would imagine they all at least require ethical behavior.

I used to believe we could regulate ourselves on the Internet. As time passed, I changed my mind. After several years of investigating and reporting all kinds of scams, it seemed an impossible feat.

Now, the government HAS stepped in with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) going on the warpath over a number of things, including truth in advertising. Their influence is even spread outside the USA. This is SERIOUS and they aren't fooling around!

Self-regulation would have required all online business owners to conduct their businesses in the MOST professional manner. We've done things online in such a slipshod fashion as to leave ourselves vulnerable to all kinds of dangerous (to our businesses) situations - including any frivolous lawsuit some bozo wants to file.

I've always said - we MUST conduct business online the same way we would if we owned a brick and mortar company. Some of that includes certain contractual legalities. Yet, most online micro-business owners can't afford the attorney's fees it would require to have these contracts written.

Now, Here's the Question!

Do YOU need to be afraid of the FTC? A terrific product came out last week and their sales letter says you do. It raised a lot of dust. In fact, I watched people going off half-cocked, and saw some absolutely idiotic things written about it.

The answer is ... Yes, you damn well DO need to be afraid IF you are operating in the USA, and IF you are NOT in compliance with FTC rules! Why the hell is this so hard to understand? We have LAWS here and ALL business owners are expected to follow them – whether operating online, or off.

I've NEVER been able to understand why some people think that having an online business grants them immunity from the LAW. Yet, I see it constantly. Now, I see people getting hysterical because they say they "can't afford" to comply!

Well, excuse me, I don't mean to be cold-hearted, BUT if people can't afford to BE in business for themselves, they need to go out and get a job! It's only a matter of time before that happens anyway.

Yes! The Internet IS a wonderful place for people to get into business for themselves at lower costs than they would face with a brick and mortar business. BUT – that does NOT mean they won't have ANY expenses! And, one of the FIRST expenses should be to set things up LEGALLY. It's a matter of priorities, and our FIRST priority should be to STAY in business!

If you went to your bank and got a loan to set up an off-line business, the first thing the bank would do is REQUIRE you to operate legally – with all the proper legal documentation. Why? To protect their investment! So, WHY won't people protect their own investments of both time and money?

Nobody ever said, "Here's the Internet, go out and do whatever you please with no regard for the law or ethical business practices!"

This is basically what iCop has always been about. People have complained to me because I required a full and formal privacy statement to be on the web site of every iCop member. And that's just ONE legal document, one I even give out a link to a template to use!

I hate to admit it, but I had loosened up on that requirement since we've launched the "new" iCop. That was a mistake! After reading what I'm about to show you, we went back to that requirement for FULL and FORMAL Privacy Statements.

In fact, effective immediately, NO U.S. company will be allowed to use the iCop seal who is not in FULL compliance with the FTC.

Anybody too lazy to do it isn't serious enough about his/her business to BE an iCop member! We are here to train. We are here to help people stay OUT of trouble not help them get into it.

Okay – below is a link that will get you in compliance with the FTC. Yes, it's for the USA. But, I suspect that following it in any country would cover you fairly well. OR, you can find your own country's regulatory agency and read their requirements. I'm fairly sure they are all online by now.

[Click here](#) for compliance site.

PLEASE – read it and USE it! If you don't, you'd better be afraid - VERY afraid. Because, YOU are breaking the LAW! Want to take a chance on getting caught and shut down?

Greed is a Terrible Thing

I know that some people wonder why I go after the "Big Guys" so often when I'm writing about unacceptable online behavior. It's very simple. The "Big Guys" teach the "Little Guys" what to do.

We often hear that we should pick someone who is successful and do the same things they do. I don't happen to agree with that. At least, not on the Internet. Online business gets too "out of control." We have no regulated standards other than those set ourselves.

People start online businesses - look at the "Big Guys" and assume that if "they" do it - it's okay. After all, they are promoted by thousands of people - and they're making money. Funny how money so often commands respect where no respect is due.

Yes - greed IS a terrible thing. Often, the bigger they get, the more ruthless they become. And let's not forget that they're telling people what they want to hear!

Then, of course, most people are afraid to criticize them. WHY? These people are not gods!

Please, please, PLEASE take a good look at your web sites and your advertising! Is there ANYTHING there that could be called "unethical?" I promise you - you CAN be successful without being pond scum.

And when you are, YOU will be the person other people emulate. Maybe that's what it's going to take to clean up the Internet.

Web Sites that Don't Work!

Not making the money you'd like to with your web site? This might be a good time of year to look it over carefully. We're looking at 6 good months for sales - but will you get them?

Not only are the following god-awful irritating - these situations will NEVER get MY money. And probably won't get much of it from other people either.

For Instance ...

Don't ask me to "sign in" in order to take a look. You want a user name and password before I even buy or join anything? WHY? I'm not going to do it. I'm GONE.

A friend told me not long ago that he couldn't seem to access a site properly. He sent an email asking for a solution. The reply? He was to open his browser options and make changes! WHAT? He had to set his options in a certain way just for this site? I don't think so! I'd pass. I'm GONE.

Then, we have the sites with code that won't allow certain browsers to pick up anything other than the top graphic. How smart is that?

One site owner even told me, "Oh, well you must have an older version of ..." NOT. And even if I did - WHY would that site owner not make sure the site works in ALL versions? Guess they don't want the business. I'm GONE.

Flash presentations. Forget them. Unless, of course, you're more interested in showing off your artistic abilities than in selling product. I NEVER wait for a flash presentation to load. Same thing for a page taking 10 minutes to load over-blown graphics. I'm GONE.

And of course, the mis-spelled or mis-used words will turn me off immediately. People who don't have sense enough to have their sites proof-read aren't the people I want to do business with. An editor is called for on ALL web sites! You'd NEVER get a book or article published off-line without an editor proof-reading, and maybe editing,

it. Apparently, a lot of people don't even KNOW they are mis-using words. I'm GONE!

Bottom line ... Don't tell me what I have to do to have the privilege of viewing your web site. Don't tell me I have to set a browser a particular way - use a particular browser - sign in - wait for your S-L-O-W flash show - or HUGE graphics to load - or, overlook your mistakes. I WON'T.

You make your web site fit whatever browser **I** want to use - set however **I** want it set - and don't waste my time. **I AM** the visitor. Do it **my** way - or **you** lose! Why? 'Cause, I might have been your customer, but now, I'm GONE!

Use HTML Email at Your Own Risk

I realize that hoards of new people are coming online every week. And, I can only HOPE that's the excuse for this, because I don't have time for idiot management, BUT ...

PLEASE learn to use text format email! You probably get a bazillion legitimate ezines already and 99% of them are done in TEXT. There's a REASON for that! Take the clue!

This html email is a PITA. How am I supposed to read what you wrote over your jungle background? How am I supposed to read the part that you laid over your dark blue border because you haven't learned how to handle a table yet?

Can YOU read it? No? Then, why are you sending it to ME? Think I have powers you don't have?

Even without those silly backgrounds, I STILL don't want your html email! How am I supposed to read your pale yellow text on white? Do you send your off-line business correspondence looking that ridiculous? It's black type on white. Period!

If you want to be an artiste - do it on your personal (not business) web site! DON'T do it in my email. DON'T make ME change formats just so your fancy junk will copy into the reply.

And, do you READ the lists where you send that html email? Haven't you SEEN the mess it makes on the lists? Or, do you only write to the lists and not read them?

Haven't you noticed that YOUR html message looks like hieroglyphics? Haven't you noticed that all messages don't look that way? Don't you think there might be an answer for that? Do you want people to read it or not?

If I could figure out how to do it, I'd make a filter that would bounce all html email. It would attach an autoresponder message to the sender of the obnoxious stuff. Here's what it would say ...

"Your email has just been dumped into my D-U-M folder, never to be seen by me.

I don't want to see your adorable puppy dogs and kitty cats blocking the words. I don't care about your gorgeous parrot background. I don't want blinking banners and cutesie graphics in my email files. If you want to send me a display of orchids, call the florist.

I refuse to go blind trying to read your pink, lavender, yellow - or ANY color print. Black will do very nicely, thank you. So try again - try in TEXT format - and your email will reach my in-box. Send me a proper business letter and - lo and behold! - I'll even respond. Just like magic!"

Why Use a Third Party Merchant Account?

After seven years online, I still use a third party merchant account. I know people wonder why a "professional organization" would do that, since it is considered by some to be UNprofessional. So, I'll tell you!

When I opened my first web site, I researched regular online merchant accounts. Talk about a headache! It was gruesome. There was SO much difference in what they offered – there was SO much hype – and, it was expensive for someone just starting out.

I decided I would wait until my new business was two years old (that was the requirement), and just get a merchant account with my own bank. When the time came, I checked it out, and found that I would STILL be paying over twice the amount I was paying a third party merchant account to process payments.

That didn't make good business sense to me! And, by that time, I had heard the horror stories of having your own merchant account for an online business. Major problems develop.

The main problems are fraud issues. Affiliate programs are especially susceptible to fraud. Any expensive products that can be resold are also at risk.

If you have your own merchant account, YOU will be expected to check every order for fraud. By this, I mean some thief using stolen credit card numbers. IF fraud gets by you, YOU will be liable to return the money to your merchant account provider, since they paid you. And, you may not HAVE it by the time the fraud is discovered.

Then, what happens?

Your merchant account provider places a "freeze" on your checking account! I've heard of providers leaving this freeze on bank accounts for up to NINE (9) months. You will also lose your merchant account – as if YOU committed the fraud!

Now, mind you, you may have funds in that account over and above the amounts of the fraudulent transactions. Doesn't matter. They freeze the ENTIRE bank account at LEAST until they have every cent of their money back – PLUS the time it takes them to release your

account. I've heard of the freeze staying in place for six months, EVEN if they got all their money back in the first 30 days!

Do not believe for a minute that they give a damn about any other funds they have tied up. They don't! How are you going to operate your business without money? In fact, how are you going to LIVE without the money they tie up?

I know people who have been completely wiped out because they spent money paid into their bank by the merchant account provider. Then, MONTHS down the line, it becomes apparent that fraudulent transactions accounted for some huge amount of the sales, and they had to cough up thousands of dollars – already spent.

Thieves Checking for Good Credit Card Numbers

Then, you have the credit card scammers using your order page to check for good credit card numbers! They use some routine to input random numbers – just like the telemarketers dial random telephone numbers.

They may only put through sales of one dollar, or less. All they are doing is noting which numbers go through. THOSE they know are valid credit card numbers to be used in one scam, or another.

How does that hurt you? YOU are paying your merchant account provider a FEE for every transaction! When the thieves are running through hundreds, or even thousands, of numbers, that can add up FAST.

Do you think your merchant account provider will refund those fees to you when it becomes apparent what's going on? If you guessed yes – guess again! They don't CARE! The transaction happened – you PAY!

Not So With a Third Party Merchant Account!

Now, I can't actually vouch all third party merchant accounts. And, I'll be honest and tell you that, in two years, I went through four of them that didn't work out. But, for nearly four years, I've had one that works beautifully.

THEY check for fraud! They have people on staff who do nothing else.

If someone started running numbers through, they'd catch it in a flash. We do NOT pay for bad transactions!

They even send us a warning if the machine check flags a transaction., i.e., name doesn't match address, comes from a country known for fraud, etc. They warn us not to deliver until they have checked it out, always within 24 hours – usually MUCH faster.

Now, it's true – they deposit money into my bank account once a week, rather than every day. But, so what? Do I NEED it every day? Nope. AND, for all this protection, I pay less than HALF what I would pay for a merchant account that gives me NO protection whatsoever!

So, while I watch many of my good friends online pulling their hair out, paying for fraudulent transactions, paying for the scumbags to check credit card numbers, so they can look "professional" - I rest well at night. I'm also protecting my business, my reputation, and my MONEY!

Sometimes, it just pays to outsource certain services! And, your merchant account is one of them!

Yes, I WILL tell you which third party merchant account I use. And, I'll tell you the link is an affiliate link. I've used this company for a long time, and recommended them constantly. I've just decided to finally take a commission.

[Look Here](#)

Slow Down!

We are constantly told how FAST everything is on the Internet - and "they" tell us that we need to keep up or be lost. So I suppose that slowing down is easier said than done. Especially, if we believe that.

Yes - computers are fast. Most of time. Our ability to correspond now moves like lightening compared to the old "snail mail." We can do something creative - like make a web page - and see a finished result in record time.

I don't think that's what "they" mean, though. "Keeping up" seems to mean that we need to absorb vast amounts of material. It means that we need to know EVERY latest trick - sales technique - programming format - and design technique. And if we don't - we've goners on the Web.

In other words, it's the same old story of "keeping up with the Joneses." Unless we WERE the Joneses, few of us could ever keep up off-line. Do we think that something magical is going to give us wings online?

Now - it's good to be constantly learning and moving forward. I'm not against that. It's part of the way we achieve our goals. What's bothering me are the things that are being allowed to slide when people won't slow down.

Little things. Simple things. And these ARE the things that will take you out of the running.

For Instance ...

We make silly mistakes. Now I admit to being a champion at that. But it only seems to happen when I'm feeling rushed to get something done RIGHT THIS MINUTE. Sheez! Like that email couldn't go out an hour later!

But here's the one that can really make us look D-U-M ...

Some people apparently never read an email all the way through. IF they read it at all. How do you think it looks to a business associate

when you won't even take the time to read what's sent to you? I can't tell you how often I have to spend my time answering questions on information that someone couldn't bother to read when I sent it in the first place!

And here's the REAL killer! Sometimes, that information is RIGHT THERE in the quoted part of the first message that they are using to write back to me! This is crazy! Which takes less time? Reading it the first time? Or skipping over it and having to write and ask for it again? Now, how professional is that?

Oh, and one more thing. If you'll just get away from that computer for a few hours a day, you'll be amazed at the great ideas that jump into your head - while your mind is doing "nothing."

I'm betting that soon a new study will be done. And, I'm betting they will find that people who work online have a higher incidence of stroke and heart attack than those who work off-line. Why? The STRESS levels! The stress of trying to go faster and faster and faster so as not to be left in the dust.

AND, I betting that, if we DON'T slow down, we'll - BE dust!

Remembering Summer

I had a really neat childhood. My brothers and I went to school in the city, but nearly every weekend, plus holidays and summers, were spent on our beloved grandparents' farm. In the city, I learned to be quite the little lady. But, on the farm, I could just BE. So, I had the best of both worlds.

It's those summers I've been flashing back to lately. I have NO idea why! Maybe, I'm worn out. Maybe, it's one of those, "Stop the world, I wanna get off," things. Maybe we just work too damn hard, and forget to relax and enjoy. Or, maybe we're not ALLOWED to relax and enjoy anymore.

Now, I know everyone didn't get to spend childhood summers in the country. But, I wonder how many people remember things like this ...

Waking up, just past dawn, to the cool, morning breeze gently lifting the white, "summer curtains" in the bedroom, listening to the quail give their "Bob White!" call, then heading to the kitchen to gobble the cold oats (not oatmeal – slow-cooked OATS) left for us by Pappy Lee (our grandfather) when he went to the barn to feed the animals.

Or, on days when we woke up early, having Pappy make us buckwheat pancakes, topped with pure butter and homemade sorghum syrup, made as only he could make it.

Racing to the barn behind him, dogs at our heels, to help "feed," and check on any new arrivals, and see if the (harmless) bull snake, kept for controlling the mouse population, had shed its skin. Then back to the hen house to gather eggs.

And, maybe watch Pappy kill and dress a hen, carefully removing any unlaidd eggs, to be boiled up with the chicken and homemade noodles for supper (called "dinner" in the city) that evening.

Helping Nonny (our grandmother) bake pies "from scratch," – using LARD - while the morning was still cool enough to turn the oven on - where the left-over dough was shaped with a chicken shaped cookie cutter, sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, with a "red-hot" for an eye, and baked to make the very BEST cookies in the entire world.

Lying in the grass, watching cumulous clouds lazily making perfect shapes of animals and other objects as they floated by. Or, hiding out under the young Weeping Willow tree, staring up at the leaves, and fantasizing what life would be like when we "grew up."

Running through the orchard, picking fruit off the trees, wiping it off on our clothes, and eating it on the spot, without concern for washing off any pesticides. Or, snatching strawberries from the patch, or grapes from the vines as we passed by, and it was okay to do that.

Picking flowers from the flower beds, taking them to the house, and washing the ants off them in the sink before sticking them into a Ball fruit jar, where they presided over the kitchen table with the oil cloth cover, and the mean cat that would reach out from another chair, and swat our bare, brown legs with her claws extended, if we dared to sit down without looking.

Swinging on the tire swing, hung from the huge, old Cottonwood tree in the barn yard, that lightning struck at least once every year.

Riding the Indian Paint ponies, whooping like little savages – bareback – racing the trains on the tracks out behind the farm along the full length of the property, with the engineers waving to us all the way across.

Telling my brothers they'd better not chew that gum without asking, and laughing so hard when they did it anyway, and found out later it was Ex-Lax.

"Going to town" on Sunday mornings to the Sunday School that taught us to sing "Jesus Loves Me" and "God is Love." And, to the church service afterward, and on Wednesday evenings, where the pastor preached hellfire and damnation.

And, showing up for Vacation Bible School every day for two weeks in the summer. And, the "Ice Cream Social" at the end, with homemade ice cream being cranked in a churn, and sugar cookies with colored sugar sprinkles, to celebrate our latest "graduation."

Hot afternoons reading books like, "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn." Or, learning new words by doing, "It Pays to Increase Your Word Power" in Reader's Digest.

Working in the garden, helping pick vegetables that would be carried to the house and used for supper, or be cleaned for "putting up" - to be used when wintertime came.

Shelling peas, or removing the ends of snap beans, while sitting on the old glider out on the screened-in porch, with Nonny telling us stories about life back in the "olden days."

Drying dishes that Nonny washed in a big metal pan in the sink, while Pappy Lee sat in the kitchen, next to his radio, listening to a baseball game – or, listening to us, because he cared about what we had to say.

Heading to the pond with Pappy after supper to fish, watch the dragonflies, listen to the cicada, and maybe even catch a turtle on the line, big enough to make turtle soup.

Catching lightning bugs and putting them in a jar, with holes punched in the lid, to see if we could get enough to read by.

Watching Nonny and Pappy play Bridge on Friday evenings with Mr. and Miz Roberts, and all four of them smoking cigarettes, and drinking iced tea, loaded with sugar and fresh mint (which they shared with us), and nobody worrying about second-hand smoke or making the kids hyper-active.

And, being fascinated by how Mr. Roberts could keep his cigarette in his mouth while he played Bridge, and talk around it, and grow a two-inch ash, and still get it to the club-, or diamond-, or heart-, or spade-shaped ashtray before it fell.

Going to sleep at night, after a bath with Ivory soap, kneeling beside the bed, reciting, "Now, I lay me down to sleep ... ," listening to the lonely, quiet, wonderful sound of a train as it whistled its warning way up at the crossroads, and waiting for it to pass.

And, listening to the bull frogs over at the pond. And, smelling the foot-wide white flowers, that bloomed at night, on the Moon Vine outside the window. And, lying there facing that window, with just a thin cotton cover, watching a bazillion stars twinkle, as if inviting us to reach out and touch them, and holding us in awe of the universe. And, feeling so very safe ... And, we were.

Remember?