

Action Fax-tion



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very office and home should have one. You definitely have to have one of these babies," exclaimed the bouncy hyperthyroid at Best Buy. He peered at me closely, probably wondering if I had been immured in a Tibetan monastery for the last 15 years. With fax machines as dead common as Mr. Coffee machines, it was only his curiosity that prevented him from sidling off into the washer/dryer department where less obtuse marks might be shopping.

He seemed to feel that, unless I was Amish, which was dubious because of my plaid pants and Hawaiian aloha shirt, my existence without a facsimile device so far into the 21st century was incontestable proof of my doltishness.

He was right, of course. I did feel left out of the electronic loop. Persons I hardly knew asked me for my fax number as casually as they would request the correct time. The sheepish reply revealing I had no fax number, relegated me immediately into the category of antique citizens who wore cellu-

loid collars and voted for Herbert Hoover.

Having already been lapped by precocious moppets who spoke computerese framed in gigabytes and were more at home with 512 MB RAM and Wi-Fi capabilities than they were with Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys, I determined to essay a timorous step toward compliance with modern mores.

"So, tell me about these models," I asked the salesman who, eyeing his watch, was edging toward the door.

"OK, they come in black, dark gray and putty to complement every office decor," he began.

"No, I mean what do they do?"

"You can send a letter or any other document with it," he explained.

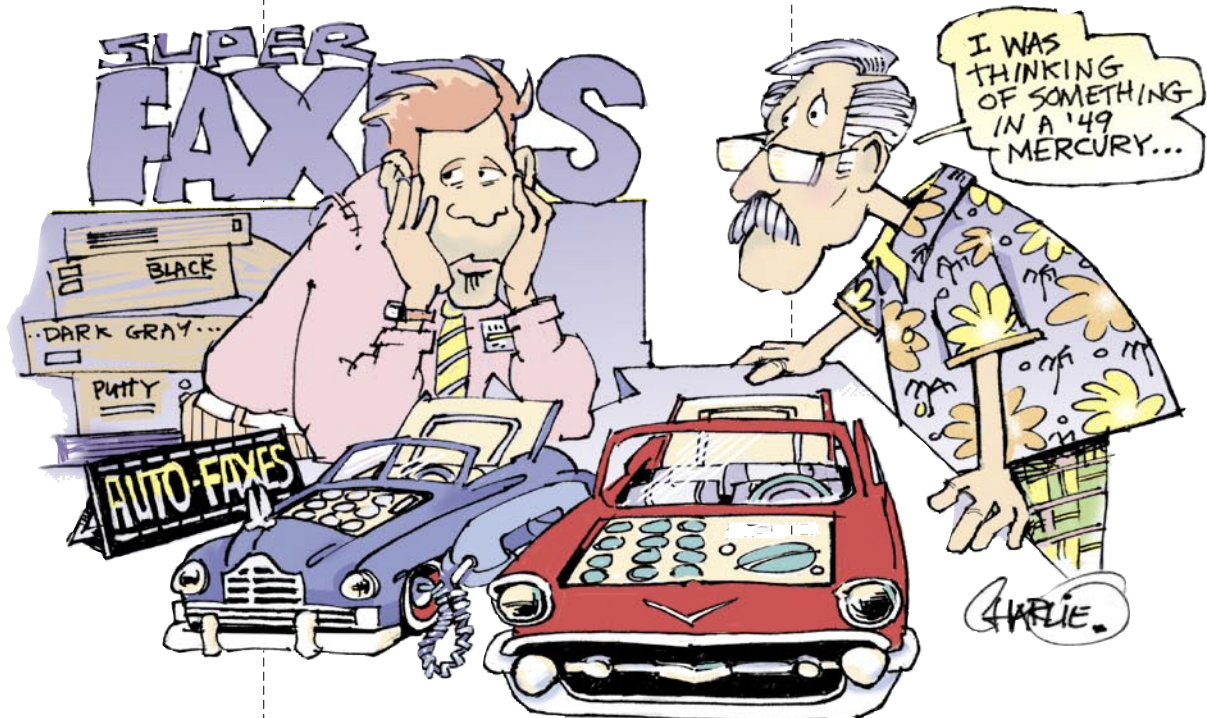
"I can do that now with a stamp."

"You can fax it immediately."

"I can phone it."

"Can you send a picture with it?" I pressed. He made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

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"Of course!"

"In color?"

"No," he sighed ruefully.

It turns out the compelling reason for having a fax machine is that it's the thing to do. Everybody has one. There's simply no point in pursuing the chimera of respectability without one. I must possess one, just to keep my head up in society.

Mine is dark gray. It has 43 buttons and a green light. After I plugged it in, I squatted in front of it for three days, transfixed, waiting for something to happen.

"I've got a fax machine," I confided to a friend.

"Really?" he said, stifling a yawn.

"So fax me something."

"What?"

"I don't care, anything! I want a fax!"

He faxed me last month's calendar. What a thrill! I mean the phone rang — bur-e-e-t! bur-e-e-t! — and this page just slid right out of the machine, all curled up like the Dead Sea Scrolls with last month's calendar on it, plain as day. I belong!

There are just a couple of the speed bumps on the information highway. If I really want to go top drawer in the fax world, I must have a dedicated line, i.e. a special telephone line hooked up exclusively to my fax machine. Otherwise, when the phone rings, it has only a moment to figure out whether the call is destined for the fax machine or it's Sears wanting me to extend the warranty on my dryer. My phone never quite got the hang of this, its electronic innards puzzling over the call until both the fax and the caller gave up.

The dedicated line is nice. I have

an insomniac friend who thinks the rates for faxing are lower at night, so around 3 a.m. a couple times a week, I am awakened by the fax machine that seems to yell INCOMING! in a particularly annoying way while I lie there wondering if I should get up and read the message, or try to get back to sleep and check it in the morning. See, your phone can't do that. It wants to talk to you right now or not at all. I think we can all agree that not at all is better, because a phone call at 3 a.m. can be an unsettling thing. On the other hand, the fax machine has an insatiable appetite for paper, whereas the phone has no yearning for anything other than higher rates. The fax can give you that plus the bill for paper.

Sales of fax machines seem to be lagging. Computers and e-mail are cited as the reason. The real reason is clear to me. Putty is not an acceptable name for anything but putty itself, an amorphous substance that is of no interest to anybody but plumbers. Dark gray and black are simply not inspiring colors, either and should be confined to the utilitarian drabness of destroyers and battleships.

As it stands, fax machines are never going to be as popular as digital picture-taking, text messaging, MP3-playing, miniaturized telephones. With the telephone's choice of classic, popular or rap ring tones and 256 color variations of covers, the fax purveyors have their work cut out for them. Panasonic, Sony, AT&T, Brother, etc. should take a leaf from the designers of these telephones that are tricked out to look like old steam locomotives, classic cars like Duesenbergs, Packards, '57 Chevys or

Harleys. That would lasso both ends — the kids under 12 and nostalgic geezers over 70.

Throw in some pastel fax paper and I guarantee iPods will never know what hit 'em.

CDA