Hobbies, People, & Purpose
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What responsibilities do we have with regards to our hobby, as people, and our purpose in being an informed HP calculator user?

Introduction
I find it easier to divide contrasting ideas into two groups such as cold and hot, male and female, black and white, etc. Of course there are many shades of gray between the black and the white, but to know both ends of the spectrum helps to contrast the elements and understand the ideas involved. Exploring the "middle" is a little easier when you understand the extremes. One such comparison and contrast "pairs" involves people. Let's call these two groups average and technical, or technical and non-technical. How would you characterize these two groups?

Another compare and contrast intellectual grouping is the classic nature vs. nurture influence on human development. Obviously a strawberry seed is determined genetically (nature) but will be greatly influenced by the soil and other conditions that allow it to grow (nurture). Do you believe that nature is dominant or that nurture is dominant? Perhaps it is useful to examine another idea group. Equal or not equal. If I divide any two "groups" into those that are equal or those that are not equal, which group is the largest? Obviously it is the latter group because the concept of "equal" is a very precise concept similar to that of being on time. You are either early or late, but you are on time for an 8 AM appointment for only less than a nanosecond. There is a vast amount of time before and after the 8 AM appointment. In reality you are either early or you are late. Once again you have two contrasting considerations.

What is a purpose? May you determine a person's purpose or goal by watching what he or she does? I remember watching a teenager doing office work one day. He had a part time job to vacuum the office carpet at the end of each day.   As I watched him do his task I wondered what it was that he considered his purpose or goal. I mentally came up with a list of three possible goals. (1) To move the vacuum hose all over the carpet. (2) To maximize the amount of dirt in the vacuum bag. (3) To minimize the dirt in the carpet. Of course the cynic would come up with a (highly probable) fourth goal. (4) To appear to be doing a task, but just passing the time.

Let's apply these some of these concepts to a technical group of people who have hand held scientific calculators as a hobby.

Hobbies
A hobby is an interest engaged in for relaxation. A few examples are collecting stamps, listening to music, reading books, photography, watching films, and playing chess. Just about any human activity may be considered a hobby. Once again we may gather most people into two contrasting groups, those who have and engage in one or more hobbies and those who do not.

A hobby is usually a spare time activity. If you work 60 to 80 hours each week you may not engage in a hobby because you just use your spare time to "rest." Having a hobby requires a certain amount of time and resources to be able to engage in a relaxation activity.

What makes a person adopt a particular hobby? Certainly being exposed to chess at an early age could be a stimulus to playing chess as a hobby. If you have never seen or heard of a buggy whip you will probably not take up buggy whip collecting as a hobby. My mother, who lives in a nursing home due to

age and Polio, has many angel figurines. She was given one angel as a gift and another friend saw it and gave her a second angel. Over time she has "collected" several shelves filled with all kinds of angels. She did not start out to collect angels, it just happened. Could we call this activity a hobby? Is my mother a technical person who studies angels? No, she just appreciates their attractiveness and having something to talk about.

Often a hobby will require the hobbyist to interact with other people. My mother doesn't have much space and she certainly can't do much, let alone handle and take care of an angel collection. Having the "collection" however, allows her to display and discuss them with her friends and staff.

What is the purpose of a hobby? There are many; relaxation, knowledge, satisfaction, pride, skill development, fun, and even profit are just a few.

Very often people get so involved with their hobby that they will form clubs or other organized groups to help them engage in their hobby. Through a group effort hobbyists may more easily expand their knowledge, physical items, tools, and reference materials involved with their hobby. When the object of their attention involves the applications of a particular piece of equipment the Organization they form is often called a User's Group.   One of my hobbies is electronic hand held calculators.

Calculator User's Groups
The average person uses a calculator as a tool, or as a requirement for work or school. Most people are not interested in how they work, why they work, or the nuances of how they are designed. I have been interested in scientific calculators since the first one was introduced by HP in 1972. I have been involved in calculator User's Groups since the inception of the first programmable scientific calculator. Since mid 1974 I have been involved in organizing hundreds of meetings in half a dozen countries for thousands of users. I have helped people start many "competing" user groups other than my own and people often asked me why I shared my experiences so freely. In the 33 years of working with people who have similar technical interests I have seen a very diverse group of people who come together to share a common interest. In my case all this hobby activity has primarily revolved around the scientific calculators made by Hewlett Packard. A total of 15,000 people have become members of these groups and we have organized meetings, conferences, contests, picnics, dinners, focus groups, advisory councils, demonstrations, surveys, and classes.

In all of these technical activities I have emphasized several basic operational principles that have proven to be effective in having a siginificant number of people engage in their hobby of buying, using, under-standing, supporting, adapting, and sharing their knowledge and experiences with their HP calculators. As mentioned above there are many advantages of working as a group in obtaining the maximum use of resources which includes money, time, expertise, and knowledge. In nearly every case these activities are non-profit activities.

I will not discuss all of the possible activities or principles involved in an HP handheld User's Group because these have been well documented in previously published articles. One particular aspect of a User's Group activity, however, has been recently brought up in the community and I would like to comment on it.

The question is an old one, and very fundamental to all equipment oriented User's Group's ranging from car clubs to computer clubs.

The Club-Manufacturer Relationship

In the early days of programmable calculators the machines were very powerful compared to what was then available to the consumer buying public. The home computer or personal computer didn't exist and many technical users were starving for applications and operational information related to these powerful handheld marvels. HP was struggling to keep up with the general customer needs and couldn't expend resources for these highly technical users. The thirst for technical information was great and very soon a liaison formed between the user's group and the manufacturer. What principles should govern such a relationship?

The basis for the operational guidelines for the group is usually based on the idea of group independence. Should the group "get in bed with the manufacturer?" Should the group be completely independent of the manufacturer to the extent of never having contact or even caring?

Of course the group wants to be independent. Why, and what exactly does this mean? To answer this question you have to examine the purpose of the group and the purpose of the manufacturer. If they are at cross purposes there is little discussion. There should be no relationship. Another element is time. After 33 years in a world of rapidly changing technology this is a significant amount of time. In this time perspective I have announced the formation of many similar user activities and for every one of them I have also announced their demise, yet we continue on despite several assaults of individuals who have "other ideas" and "other principles."

At the heart of the "relationship" question is the potential purpose and goal conflict mentioned above. The User Group wants to publicize the schematics of a machine and the manufacturer would rather that they not be published. After three decades of dealing with "the manufactuer" I can say that the passage of time has instilled a maturity on both sides of the issue. HP has come to better respect the rights and needs of the User Group and the user community has become more understanding of the difficulties that HP has. This has been especially accomplished through annual conferences on both sides of the "pond."

I believe that this tremendous progress has been possible because both groups realize that their goal is very much similar. Simply stated, this goal is to produce and encourage the production of the best possible computational tool at the lowest reasonable price. In other words each member of the community realizes that each is dependent on the other. It is not a competition of a user trying to know about the internals of the machine and a manufacturer thinking that their customers are stupid and irresponsible.

Mutual Respect Is Essential

The User's Group must respect the business interests of the manufacturer and the manufacturer must respect the information interests of the User's Group. The heart of this relationship is a sense of responsibility and mutual trust. The User's Group has to recognize their actions have consequences, and the manufacturer must recognize that their informed users are not just mindless customers.

Some of these areas of mutual respect involve such situations as:

A. The informed user community does not need sales pitches. They want honest specifications regarding new machines and accessories. If the two get together at a meeting they do so as equals in the pursuit of excellence.

B. The manufacturer does not design their machines to meet the requirements of the hobbyist, but recognizes that these informed users are a tremendous resource for a better understanding of their products and for ideas for future models.

C. The informed user community must understand the constraints of the manufacturer. The informed user must understand the limitations of design and manufacturing in the context of the current business environment. He should not waste everyone's time demanding impossible technology advances such as 3D screens and "forever" memory. History is water under the observation bridge, but it is OK to be reminded of the good accomplishments of the past.

D. The manufacturer wants to keep their future plans secret until product release, but they may want to increase the "connection" between them and the responsible informed user community. This may require the signing of non disclosure agreements which is customary between all vendors, consultants, distributors, and all those they discuss the future with.

E. The HP calculator user community is constant; it is the manufacturer that is continually changing its perception of the user. The needs of the HP calculator user community have always remained the same. We want well thought out machines that are fast, accurate, easy to use, rugged, and dependable.

A Bad Idea
I remember having a meeting with HP at Corvallis many years ago. One of the managers made the comment that he considered that it was my job to discover company secrets and it was his job to see to it that I didn't. This really caused me to wonder about the people and purposes of it all. Suppose that I "discovered" all the details of the next machine a full six months before its introduction and I published all this "secret" information. What would be the consequences? Suppose that a competitor read my exposé and rushed to market a competing product that caused the HP product to fail? What if a series of such actions caused HP to go out of business? Is this in the best interests of a group of enthusiasts and their future needs? Is this being responsible?

Conclusion
Any information brings with it a responsibility. The child only thinks of today. The informed user must think of tomorrow. We do not have a competition between the user group and the manufacturer if the goals are the same. In the 33 years I have been involved in the HP Calculator User Community I have seen many managers come and go. I have seen HP essentially "leave the calculator business" twice. I have also seen the informed HP user community champion their cause when many considered it hopeless that HP will regain its reputation.

There have been many technological innovations in the hand held product arena, but I have never been more optimistic for HP than I am today, and I have seen it all, up close and personal during the last 33 years. The future has never been so clearly positive; in spite of some of the "negative progress" of this century. We saw the glimmerings of this at HHC 2006. We will see the new calculator group further evolving more clearly during the conference in San Diego in September at HHC 2007 and in London in October at HPCC's 2007 meeting.

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