

Computer Rage - How Not To Destroy Your New High-Tech Gifts

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At least 10 percent of high-tech gifts this holiday season may fall victim to "computer rage" - acts of uncontrolled frustration by their owners - estimates University of Maryland professor Kent Norman, a cognitive psychologist who directs the Laboratory for Automation Psychology and Decision Processes.

To help keep these new gifts intact, Norman recommends that users find unconventional ways to let off some steam on old computer equipment, such as barbecuing a computer mouse, cleaning a computer in a carwash or chopping a keyboard in half.

"When people sink three grand into a new plasma TV and something goes wrong, sometimes a killer instinct takes over," says Norman. "The anger may simply boil over when your spouse says, 'you spent all that

money and now you can't get it to work?' That's when you've got to make sure people or the expensive equipment don't get hurt."

Norman's research focuses on making technology user-friendly. He argues that overly complex computers, cell phones, gadgets and software have created a rising tide of frustration. "People who design technology are playing hide and seek with us," he says. "It took me months before I stumbled across the control to turn off the ringer on my cell phone. I have a real love-hate relationship with machines that aren't always smart enough to do exactly what you want."

For the past three years, Norman has conducted an informal online survey of technology frustration and rage (http://lap.umd.edu/surveys/computer_rage). Nearly 20 percent of respondents admitted dropping a computer to the floor in anger, almost 40 percent mutilating a CD-ROM, and more than 80 percent cursing out loud at a machine. Roughly speaking, he says, it all adds up to a 10 percent risk of serious damage to new high-tech equipment.

Norman recommends early interventions to keep frustration from getting out of hand. The trick, he says, is to do it safely, economically and with a sense of humor. "When you walk into my laboratory you'll see a severed video camera mounted on the wall and a computer mouse lying helpless in a mouse trap," he cautions.

But his main tools are videos designed to release computer rage vicariously. With tongue in cheek and power tools in hand, the videos feature destructive acts against obsolete computer equipment. In one scene, he marinates a computer mouse before barbecuing it. In others, he burns an old computer with a blowtorch and demonstrates the safe way to smash a monitor. A disclaimer advises: "All of the computers and computer equipment shown in various states of mutilation were either dead on arrival, obsolete, or really deserving punishment."

Norman says the videos also serve as a how-to guide for relieving technology frustration. The lessons are available free online (http://lap.umd.edu/computer_rage/). To master the techniques, he suggests practicing on old computers before disposing of them.

"If you expect to get a high-tech gift for the holidays, it's best to find a way to vent frustration early," Norman says. "But remember, safety first. Always wear your safety goggles and select your targets wisely."

Source: University of Maryland

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