

Newest electronics short on simplicity

Friday, January 30, 2004 Posted: 11:16 AM EST (1616 GMT)

(AP) -- Barry Jaruzelski would have never imagined he'd need to consult a 146-page owner's manual just to learn how to turn on his new cell phone.

The New York tech industry consultant had asked for the simplest handset available to replace a lost phone. But where was the power button? Turned out Jaruzelski had to push the red "end" button twice to power up the handset. Honestly.

Not only are the latest gadgets packed with more features than ever, they're also harder than ever to figure out.

Culprits span the gizmo gamut from DVD players to digital cameras and wireless devices. Even televisions are increasingly acting more like computers, those notoriously confounding beasts.

Jaruzelski's shiny new communicator, incidentally, turned out to be loaded with features he said he'd never use: games, text messaging, Web-surfing, and customized ring tones.

Larry Sherby, 50, of Palo Alto, California, also eschews frilly gadgets.

Sherby got a digital camera from his wife a year ago but only uses its most basic features to point and shoot.

Forcing the flash? Timer? Long exposure? No way.

"It's a computer, that's what it is. It's got menus and menus. I have to consult a manual anytime I try other features and then I forget how to do it," Sherby said. "If it takes that much effort to learn what to do, forget it."

Even tech-savvy users manage to get frustrated by gadgets with automatic features or one-button steps.

"The more a product could do, the more that could go wrong," observes usability expert Jakob Nielsen, a principal of the Nielsen Norman Group consulting firm.

Nielsen has a postdoctorate degree in computer science yet struggles with the 35 buttons on his DVD player's remote control. "The button I use the most -- pause -- is the smallest and in the middle of five other buttons," he gripes.

No laughing matter

The fact that some people still have blinking displays on their VCRs because they



Larry Sherby, of Palo Alto, California, uses only the most basic features of his Olympus digital camera because he says the rest are too complicated.

Story Tools

 [SAVE THIS](#)

 [EMAIL THIS](#)

 [PRINT THIS](#)

 [MOST POPULAR](#)

YOUR E-MAIL ALERTS

Electronics

Consumer Electronics Show

Wireless Phones

Activate

or [CREATE YOUR OWN](#)

[Manage alerts](#) | [What is this?](#)

couldn't figure out how to program the machines is a long-standing joke. But techno-hurdles really aren't a laughing matter.

Time is wasted on poorly written, Bible-sized manuals. Patience is lost on customer service calls. Extra trips are made to the store. Consumers pay for bells and whistles they never use.

Neil Carty, an independent filmmaker and admitted gearhead in New York, hates the snags in getting his gadgets to run properly.

"You want to play with it as soon as you get it, and you don't want to find out that you have to go and get something else like an adapter," he said.

“ It's a computer, that's what it is. [The camera's] got menus and menus. I have to consult a manual anytime I try other features and then I forget how to do it. ”

-- Larry Sherby, digital camera owner

Often, consumers make do. Some rely on geeky relatives or friends to install or troubleshoot.

Sherby, a laser equipment salesman, has three computers, a wireless router and high-speed Internet access at home, but all are working fine thanks due only to the help of his son's friend.

Others, like Nina Burns of Redwood City, California, pay extra for installation or service warranties.

Burns, the founder of a parenting advice company, recently made use of her computer's \$200 service warranty when she couldn't get the external DVD-writer to do file backups.

Burns also lets her husband handle the VCR and DVD player hookups. She just keeps a one-page cheat sheet they drew up by the TV so she knows which remote control buttons to press.

Electronic Tower of Babel

Some consumer electronics companies are trying to make it easier on customers.

One example: Epson introduced a television this month that has a built-in photo printer, CD-ROM drive and memory card reader. The company tested prototypes first and found the original designs sent users scrolling through too many screen menus to print a photo.

The result: a simple print button on the TV remote control.

Still, companies in the past few years have focused more on adding performance and features than on making products that are easy to use and play well with other machines.

A typical home's entertainment center has become an electronic Tower of Babel, given all the competing and sometimes incompatible formats and standards.

With digital music, songs encoded in the Advanced Audio Coding format are not playable on devices that support only Windows Media Audio format.

Recordable DVDs have four existing formats -- and more coming -- frustrating people who purchase blank discs only to find out that their DVD burners won't accept them.

Harold Garland, 55, of San Jose, California, nearly plunked down \$500 for a state-of-the-art digital recorder at an electronics store -- until he saw the fine print warning that the gadget's software would not be compatible with his Macintosh computer.

Garland walked out with an old-fashioned \$50 cassette recorder instead.

"I probably would have wasted hours and hours trying to figure out the digital

recorder and how to master it anyway," Garland said with a bittersweet sigh.

There are some signs of a changing mindset among manufacturers. At this month's Consumer Electronics Show, the industry's largest trade show, the need for simplicity was a repeated theme during speeches.

One of the strongest statements -- a do-or-die sort of rallying call -- came from Gerard Kleisterlee, chief executive of Royal Philips Electronics. He cited a Yankee Group study indicating that 50 percent of consumers postpone purchases thinking the products would be too difficult to use.

The data also showed that 25 percent of consumers thought they already owned a high-definition television -- the true number is less than half that.

"We as an industry have managed to confound the consumer even in the most basic consumer electronic device -- their TV," Kleisterlee said. "Our future is in the balance. Complexity is intrinsic in technology but simplicity is how we should bring it to the consumer."

This is a challenge that can't be solved with lip service, analysts warn.

"The simpler it looks," Nielsen said, "the harder it is to build."