

It's Time for a New High-Tech Manifesto:

Techdom's fate rides on the fight against viruses, spam, and ID theft

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Five years ago this month, I wrote a column calling for a Computer Users' Bill of Rights. The manifesto, based on the work of IBM researcher Clare-Marie Karat, argued that the No. 1 priority for tech companies should be making products easy to use. How well have they done? A look back finds major progress, but also plenty of new problems. Seven of the 10 points laid out by Karat, a usability expert at the Thomas J. Watson Research Center in Hawthorne, N.Y., dealt one way or another with the difficulty of installing and running hardware and software. While computers are still harder to use than they should be, tech companies have done much better in these areas.

Judging by what I hear – and don't hear – from readers, the basic job of getting computers, accessories, and programs up and running is no longer a big source of hassles. Nor are incomprehensible error messages a cause of much complaint. "We've made some real improvements," says Karat. "We're not there yet, but I'm proud of the work we have done." The biggest change, she says, is that usability issues are now considered central to the process of developing software or hardware, rather than as something to be fixed up just before a product ships.

IT SEEMS TO BE A RULE OF LIFE, however, that when we make progress against one evil, another rises to take its place. Five years ago, the most threatening thing you were likely to encounter on your computer was a Windows message informing you that someone or something had performed an "illegal operation." Today, our e-mail inboxes overflow with junk, much of it promoting illegal schemes of one sort or another and some of it truly vile pornography. We are warned almost daily of vulnerabilities in

software and of scary-sounding worms and viruses designed to exploit them. We're no longer sure whether a PC on the desktop is a useful tool or a dangerous intruder in our homes. It's no accident that Karat has shifted the focus of her research from traditional usability issues to protecting the privacy of computer users.

The successful attack on 1998's problems of hardware and software usability was important in making computers and the World Wide Web the true mass-market products they became during the Internet boom. It will take similar progress to assure the public that their computers are safe from hackers, their e-mail inboxes safe from junk, and their online information safe from thieves. Failure could prevent the liftoff of wireless services and e-commerce that I believe will be at the heart of a new spurt of high-tech growth.

Five years ago, a small number of companies – Microsoft, Apple Computer, Hewlett-Packard, and a few independent software publishers – took up the challenge. Today's problems are beyond the reach of even the biggest corporations. Still, they should provide far more leadership in the fight. Microsoft, after an embarrassing series of Windows security holes, needs to convince us that "trustworthy computing" is more than a public-relations slogan. The industry should leave behind a fruitless Washington argument over just what spam will be permitted and get to work – fast – on the technical fixes needed to stop it. And service providers and Web-site operators must, at long last, pay more than lip service to consumers' demands that their privacy be protected.

Customers should be due this as a matter of right. But it's also good business, because a failure to address these concerns could cripple the industry just as it's recovering. The gains in usability created by plug-and-play installations that actually work and operating systems that rarely crash were well worth the effort required. The next phase is more difficult, but every bit as necessary and potentially even more rewarding.