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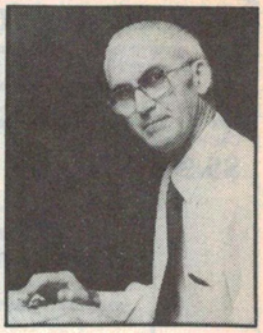
Conducted by Jim Rowe



More thoughts on projects that don't work

My column in January's Digest issue discussing the question of responsibility for project kits that don't work certainly seems to have stirred up the proverbial hornets' nest. Almost as soon as the issue was published the 'phone started ringing, and within a few days letters began arriving!

Among the first callers were a couple of our main advertisers, who market kitsets. Not surprisingly, they were a little peeved at my little crack about electronics entrepreneurs, the money they make and the way they spend on expensive toys.

That's fair enough, too. I have to admit that it *was* rather a cheap crack — and more importantly, of rather dubious relevance. The mere fact that an electronics retailer may make a lot of money (assuming they do) is not in itself any reason for criticising them, of course, and I really wasn't seeking to suggest that it was.

In fact I'm happy to acknowledge that if a kit supplier or any other business person is making good money, it might well be because they're providing the right products and services, and at the right price — so the world would be understandably beating the proverbial path to their door, and plying them with money. And if that's the case, in my book they're entitled to all due praise as well as the inevitable riches.

I certainly don't subscribe to the old Aussie tradition of knocking our tall poppies or anyone who's made a lot of money, regardless of how they've done it.

Actually all I was trying to do in the original column was contrast the kind of money being made by parts retailers (at least a few years back) with that made by magazine editors and publishers, in order to show which of the two might be able to *afford* to help readers with kit problems. It looks as if I mightn't have made that point too well.

Of course I did express the suspicion that things nowadays mightn't be as rosy for kit suppliers as they were in the past, and judging by the response of the two entrepreneurs concerned, I gather that's pretty true. Apparently there's a lot more competition now than there was a few years back, and Australia's falling dollar has driven up the cost of components (virtually all of them imported).

Incidentally one of the two entrepreneurs who jumped on me (nicely!) was Jack O'Donnell of Altronics in Perth. And as it happens, Jack had another legitimate gripe about the column concerned: in talking about kit suppliers and whether or not they're prepared to help constructors who strike trouble, I stated that to my knowledge, Dick Smith Electronics was the only one of the major kit suppliers to offer this service.

Jack's firm provides the same kind of service, apparently, and he was pretty peeved that I hadn't rung him when writing the story, to find this out. Fair enough, point taken. I should have rung up to check, I agree.

The only comment I'd like to offer about this particular aspect is that perhaps if Altronics had promoted its own service a bit better, I mightn't have *needed* to ring up in order to find out that they have one. Like most of our readers, I've been well aware of DSE's "Sorry Dick, It Doesn't Work" service, because they've given it so much promotion.

So there's a constructive suggestion, Jack. Since you've got this great service too, why not make more of a song and dance about it? I'm sure it would increase the appeal of your kits quite a lot. Flat-chat technical journo's like Jim Rowe wouldn't have to ring up to find out what you're doing before they write a story, either . . .

OK then, enough about the response by the kit people themselves. Now for some of the points raised by others.

The first letter to arrive was from P.A., a service technician based in Sydney, who generally seemed to agree with most of my comments. However he took issue with my reference to "highly-paid service people", pointing out that neither he nor his immediate colleagues regarded themselves as highly paid. They didn't have any "fancy toys", either.

Fair enough, although I wasn't really suggesting they did. The point I was making was that in order for *EA* or any other electronics magazine to provide a service to fix reader's problem kits, we'd need to put on suitably qualified extra staff — and in my view, this would add significant cost.

Actually P.A. makes the point that in his view, it *would* be a good idea if magazines did put on the extra staff and provide this kind of service. He suggests that readers would be happy to pay for the service at the usual commercial rates, in order to get correct operation from an expensive kit. Moveover, he suggests, it would also provide the magazines with important feedback on project design problems, and allow them to correct things faster.

He has a point about the feedback angle, although I can assure you that readers certainly aren't shy when it comes to letting us know about problems they encounter with projects. Our

Some kit suppliers weren't happy . . .

sometimes-bulging letter basket is testament to that! So generally, it doesn't take us long to find out if one of our projects has a design problem.

Often the main delay is not in finding out there's a problem and coming up with a solution, but in letting readers know about it. Like most magazines we have a fairly long lead time, and by the time one issue goes on sale generally the next has just gone away to the printers, and we're working on the one after. So even if we find out straight away, it's almost impossible for us to let readers know sooner than two months later.

The comment I'd like to make on P.A.'s suggestion that we should provide a project repair service, is that I'm not so sure that readers would be happy to pay normal commercial rates for the service. Somehow I suspect that they'd expect us to fix them for nothing, on the basis that it was our "moral obligation", having described the project in the first place and supposedly encouraged them to tackle it.

I remember fairly clearly some of the projects that were sent in to the DSE service when I was working there. Some of them were pretty horrendous, and looked as if they'd been wired up using a 2-pound plumber's iron heated up with a blowlamp. Sometimes any resemblance between them and the original design published in the magazine — or with good wiring practice — seemed to be almost accidental.

Surprisingly some of these kits had supposedly been wired up by "highly experienced technicians" who'd been working for umpteen years in the industry, too. We often found ourselves wondering *which industry* it was, that they'd been working in!

In fact over the years, I've gained the strong impression that the *last place* many people look, when a project they've put together doesn't work or gives trouble, is their own workmanship. They're generally much more eager to blame the designer, the magazine, the kit supplier, the component manufacturer — almost anybody who can be roped in.

Of course problems have been generated by all of these other causes from time to time, including ourselves. But I have to say that in my experience, probably the most common single cause of problems is the constructor themselves. Perhaps they've over estimated their own capabilities, or not bothered to read the article, made unwise component substitutions, or adapted and modified the original design to the point where problems have crept in.

With these thoughts in mind, I'm a bit skeptical about P.A.'s suggestion that readers would be happy to pay for a repair service — particularly one run by the magazine itself. I suspect we'd end up having to make it a free service, and the costs would drive the magazine down the gurgler.

On a different note, P.A. also has a dig at some of the kit retailers, who in

. . . and made this clear to me!

his experience will sell kits to virtually anyone with the "readys".

He says he's personally witnessed instances of sales people glibly selling quite complex kits to customers who fairly obviously don't have any prior experience of electronics construction. In some cases they've also sold them a soldering iron and a booklet on soldering, when asked by a customer how such a kit is put together. And he's apparently heard sales staff, in reply to questions of how much skill is involved in assembling quite complex kits, offer the advice that "If you can read and follow simple instructions, you can't go wrong!"

As P.A. comments, this kind of sales approach seems very likely to lead inexperienced people into tackling projects beyond their capabilities. In cases where this happens, I think most reasonable people would agree that the kit supplier should be expected to accept most of the responsibility for the kit not working — and I agree with P.A. that there'd be a high probability of that happening.

When I mentioned this to one of the kit retailers, his answer was that all of *his company's* kits were provided with a sheet, which prominently warned the inexperienced constructor of the risk in tackling a project beyond their capabilities. I gather that the sheet advises them to return the kit for a full refund, if they have any doubts, before proceeding any further. And his sales people are apparently instructed to give a refund without question, provided that the kit is still unassembled and in as-new condition.

This does seem to get around at least some of P.A.'s criticism, at least for the firm concerned. Although I'm still inclined to think that the direct face-to-face impact of a sales person, oozing reassurance, might well outweigh a few sobering words on a sheet inside the kits. If you were a newcomer sitting down late on Saturday afternoon with your first electronics kit, all excited and keen after being psyched up by the salesman, would YOU take much notice of the sheet and pack it all up to take it back on Monday? I'm doubtful.

Not content with having a go at the kit suppliers, P.A.'s last brickbat is directed firmly back at the electronics magazines. I'll let him express this last one in his own words:

It has been my experience that the magazines are generally reluctant to print errata concerning projects, especially where there is a design mistake. They tend to dismiss criticisms from readers, even when a simple solution is offered. Some "designers" consider it a personal defamation to admit any error in print, or otherwise. I have tried unsuccessfully for several YEARS to get one magazine to publish errata of a serious nature for two of its designs, both of which are still widely sold as kits. In the trade these particular designs are a standing joke.

He goes on to suggest reasons for this behaviour, including immaturity of the project designers and magazines not wanting to lose credibility with the readers or kit suppliers by admitting they've made mistakes.

Whew — I would open up the subject, wouldn't I? I have the distinct feeling that I led with the magazine's chin on that one, especially when P.A. goes on to offer at least two examples concerning past *EA* projects. (He also offers a number of examples involving other magazines, I hasten to add!)

Now I can't comment on the actions of other magazine editors; nor would it be diplomatic to say anything about what may have happened at *EA* during the years I wasn't here. But to comment on a general level, we all make mistakes from time to time. Of course design errors creep in now and again, in every magazine's published designs — we wouldn't be human if they didn't.

More specifically than that, all I can say is that my own policy here at *EA* all along, both before and nowdays, is that we always listen very carefully to anyone claiming that we've made a mistake. We make a point of checking out these claims as fast as we can, and if they're right we act quickly to remedy

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matters. This means finding the best solution to the problem, and then advising both kit suppliers and readers as fast as possible.

As evidence of this, I'd ask P.A. or any other interested reader to look back at our "Notes & Errata" section for the last six months or so. Far from being unwilling to admit we've made any mistakes, I'd say we've being going out of our way to hang our dirty linen in public!

I'd certainly like to think that P.A. doesn't have too much to complain about *EA* designers being unwilling to accept valid criticism nowadays, at least.

Now to the comments of other people who responded. A gentleman called H.J. of Horseshoe Bay in Queensland wrote in to describe two unhappy experiences he's had, with kits from well-known suppliers.

One was apparently an amplifier kit which arrived lacking six essential parts — but with four "ring-in" components which seemed to have no possible connection with that kit. The same kit had photocopied instructions which were so blurred that at least 30% of the parts couldn't be identified.

With a second kit, many of the parts in the original project's parts list had been replaced by substitutes, but there was no information on which substitute replaced which original. H.J. relates that when he complained to the supplier, they "didn't want to know about it", and disclaimed all responsibility.

He adds that a friend who is an experienced technician told him that he personally would never buy another kit, because those he had constructed would not perform according to the claims made for them.

Finally, H.J. concludes by saying that he himself would rather pay a little extra, and buy a ready-built unit. At least then, he can ask for a demonstration before buying, and save both money and possible disappointment.

Fair enough. It's undoubtedly better to buy a piece of ready-built equipment if you don't have enough experience to be able to get a project going. Even if you do, it's certainly faster.

The only point I'd like to make here is that putting together a project or kit can be interesting, challenging and satisfying. It can also be a great way to learn more about how electronic equipment and gadgets work. There's really nothing quite like direct "hands-on" experience, with the smell of resin-cored solder up your nostrils and the thrill when you first turn whatever you've built on, and it (hopefully) springs into life.

Mind you, it's certainly true that nowadays, building something yourself isn't always a way of saving money. In fact with some kinds of equipment, it can even be dearer than buying a commercially built one over the counter. That's why in some cases, like VCRs and CD players, electronics magazines like *EA* haven't even bothered to describe them at all.

Of course there are still plenty of other things where you *can* save money by building one yourself, as well as having the satisfaction of doing so. Even in cases where it's possible to buy a ready-made one cheaper, you can often build one which performs a lot better, and is really comparable with a much more expensive model — so you're still actually saving.

With regard to H.J.'s experience with incomplete kits, or kits with unexplained component substitutions, I don't think anyone would deny that this is unfortunate. Accidents will happen, of course, and substitutions often have to be made. But just as magazines should be willing to admit their mistakes, so too should kit suppliers.

I fully agree that when a supplier replies to a complaint with what amounts to "get lost", that's a very poor way to encourage a kit buyer to come back for more. In fact it seems a very good way of ensuring they never come back at all — certainly to the company concerned, and possibly to the electronics hobby as a whole.

Mr H.J. himself is a good case in point. It seems pretty clear from his letter that his project building ambitions have been well and truly killed, and that's sad.

But let's end up on a happier note. Among the other letters that came in was one from a Mr S.Calder of Hycal Instruments, who has apparently been providing an independent and low cost kit and project repairing service for the last year or so, and with some success.

He writes that his service is called "Fix-A-Kit", and he charges only $15 an hour for labour. That's very reasonable indeed, by modern standards. He also doesn't charge for kits that can't be repaired for some reason, except a small fee to cover package and return postage.

The only kit/project he apparently won't tackle is our own Playmaster AM/FM Stereo Tuner of December 1985 — February 1986. This design has given a great deal of trouble, it would appear.

Mr Calder tends to reinforce my own comments earlier, about constructors themselves being responsible for many of their problems:

I don't like putting people down, but if they took their time, followed the instructions to the letter and checked everything before powering up, then I would have much less business in this area!.

For those who would like to take advantage of Mr Calder's Fix-A-Kit service, his address is 4/62 Great Western Highway, Parramatta NSW 2150. His 'phone number is (02) 633 5897.

Well, that's about all I have space for this month. There *was* another quite interesting letter, and one that I planned to discuss because its writer took me to task quite assertively. But somehow we managed to lose it, before I could do so. So if the reader concerned wonders why I haven't commented on his letter, that's why — not because he had a go at me!

If he cares to send me another copy of the letter, I'll be happy to discuss the points he raises in a future Forum.