



Who's responsible when a kit doesn't work?

Magazines like EA have been publishing designs for build-it-yourself electronics projects for many decades now, and for almost all of that time various firms have marketed kits of parts to help readers build these projects. But if you buy such a kit and it doesn't work properly, just who should be responsible? It's a thorny question . . .

The other day, a bloke who sounded a little like a solicitor (although he didn't claim to be) rang me up to complain at some length about a problem experienced by his brother. According to my caller, his brother was a reasonably experienced electronics technician, and a regular reader of the magazine. He apparently decided some time ago to build the Playmaster Stereo AM/FM Tuner of January-March 1986, and had accordingly bought a kit from one of our advertisers.

But when it was ultimately completed and turned on, quite recently, there were all sorts of problems which he couldn't solve. So he rang the kit supplier seeking help.

"Oh — sorry about that," said the kit supplier, "but we just sell the kit of parts. If you have any problems making it all go, ring EA. It's their design!"

So consequently he rang our office, and apparently spoke in the first instance to our secretary Naomi Lenthén. She in turn duly explained that the project development engineers weren't really able to talk at length on the 'phone to individual readers concerning problems with projects. Nor were they able to repair individual projects, because they're almost always flat out designing next month's projects.

In any case, she explained, the designer of the project concerned had departed from the magazine about six months ago, and was currently working for one of our competitors. So we had no-one who was particularly knowledgeable about the project concerned, and therefore not in a position to offer

much help. We didn't even have the prototype of the project concerned to use as reference, as this had apparently also disappeared.

But what about the reader's problem? Well, said Naomi, we do provide a Reader Information Service to assist readers with problems, providing they write in with clear and concise details. The project engineers then tackle each letter at a convenient time, perhaps when they're held up for some reason with the current project.

They then offer suggestions and advice, which are either sent directly back to the reader concerned, or published in the next available issue of the magazine itself in the Information Centre section. This depends on whether the reader chooses to enclose the appropriate small fee, to cover a direct mail reply.

What if the problem was due to a clear design fault, or some other error in publishing the design? Well, said Naomi, as soon as we discover any problems of this nature, we publish full details of the solutions in the next available issue, in the Notes and Errata column.

Naomi said we'd be happy to send out a photocopy of all of the published Notes and Errata for the project concerned, if that would help. And this was duly done, but the reader concerned apparently still had problems with his AM/FM Tuner.

Surely someone ought to be responsible, he decided, because he had spent hundreds of hard-earned dollars on this #@!@*% kit and it still didn't work properly. I gather it was at this stage

that he apparently asked his brother to ring me up, and try persuading me to get one of our engineers to fix the project.

Now while I could sympathise with his brother's predicament, I really can't afford to have any of the project engineers spending hours fixing individual reader's projects. I explained this to him, and suggested that his brother could either try writing us a letter in the usual way, or seeking help from a service technician with experience in sorting out tuner kit problems.

His reaction was to state that neither of these alternatives seemed to him satisfactory. Accordingly he intended to contact the Consumer Affairs people, to seek their help in getting either the kit supplier or ourselves to accept more responsibility.

That's his right, of course, but it remains to be seen whether he'll achieve the kind of result he wants. The fact is that he'll be opening something of a Pandora's box, because the whole situation is rather more complex than it seems.

First of all, let's forget the thorny question of responsibility itself for a moment, and look at the practical question of economics. Who can *afford* to accept responsibility for fixing reader projects?

Consider the magazine first. If we were to try fixing reader projects with our current complement of engineers, the odds are we'd have to have blank pages in future issues, where the project articles would have been. I can guess what would happen to EA's circulation sales (and the jobs of all of us who work here) if that were to happen!

On the other hand, if we were to try fixing reader's projects as *well* as producing the necessary number of new projects for the magazine each month, I estimate that I'd need to put on at least two extra service engineer/technicians.

And they'd need to be rather more experienced and knowledgeable than your average TV service technician, so they wouldn't come cheaply.

To be honest, we simply couldn't afford them. I don't know whether many of our readers realise it, but electronics magazines like EA really don't make all that much money nowadays. Compared with many other magazines, we have to carry quite heavy overheads. I suspect our competitors both here and overseas are in a very similar position.

With many other kinds of magazine, on the editorial side you often need little more than an enthusiastic and hard-working editor, plus a journo or two. Sit them down at desks with a typewriter/word processor each, a telephone and a supply of paper, and away they go.

But with an electronics magazine like EA, this just isn't enough. To produce an attractive, credible and viable magazine, you really need to set up and maintain an electronics lab with a suitable complement of well-trained engineer/writers, to develop and describe projects. You also need to provide them with the right equipment and tools, to work efficiently. And you need to provide both them and the editors with the necessary reference books and journals, so they can keep up to date.

It all costs money, of course. So much money that the company accountants seem to be forever "shocked and horrified" at what seems to them to be our abnormally high level of overheads. I can just imagine how they'd react, if I wanted to put on a couple of extra highly-paid service people.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not crying poormouth, or suggesting that EA is in danger of sliding down the gurgler. Far from it; in fact we're doing fairly well, and probably in a somewhat better position than our competitors.

No, the point I'm making is that electronics magazines in general simply *can't afford* to offer much more than written advice to readers with problems. I imagine our competitors would find it even more difficult to do so than we would.

If we were all forced to do so, I'd say it was very likely that we'd all either have to close down altogether, or at least stop describing construction projects. I can't believe that either my unhappy caller, or any of our other readers for that matter, would want either of these rather draconian scenarios to eventuate. It really would be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

How about the kit suppliers? Now as some readers will be aware, I spent a few years working at one of our largest advertisers, and one of the major kit suppliers. OK, let's not be coy — it was Dick Smith Electronics. Anyway, during those years I was able to see things from the "other side of the publishing coin", as you might say. And I saw just how much money could be made (at least at that time), by at least one of the firms selling project kits. It was a good deal more than magazines like EA were making out of describing the projects concerned, I can tell you.

Yet it was the magazines who had to maintain the electronics labs, and pay the engineers to design and develop the projects. So at that time, I know from my own experience that while the magazines did much of the work and carried a lot of the overheads, it was the kit suppliers who made most of the money.

Having said this, I can almost hear my old boss and sparring partner Dick Smith picking up the blower to remind me (probably with some emphasis!) of the kit suppliers' contribution.

It's true, of course, that there's often quite a lot of work involved in sourcing all of the parts needed for a project — particularly here in Australia. Most of the components are imported, and they're often hard to get. Overseas sources dry up, orders get lost or delayed, manufacturers change their models or specs, and all sorts of other problems can occur. I do remember it all, Dick, so please don't ring me!

The fact remains that a few years ago

at least, kit suppliers were making an awful lot of hay — and rather more than magazines like EA. Whether or not they're still doing so I don't know, although many of the guys at the helm of these firms still seem to have some pretty fancy toys, like \$80,000 sports cars, cruisers and private planes. I can assure you I don't have any of these toys, and I've never met any other electronics magazine editors who did, either.

Mind you, I suspect things aren't quite so rosy for kit suppliers nowadays, as there seems to be a lot more competition in the kit market. Some of the larger kit suppliers have also set up their own R&D/kit development departments too, so at least these firms now have rather higher overheads as well. One way or another, I suspect that the kit suppliers would claim inability to help readers with problems — at least if it had to be done for nothing.

Not the least reason for believing this is the fact that so many of them seem to refer readers with problems straight back to ourselves. It's called passing the buck . . .

Of course one notable exception to this is DSE, with its well-known "Sorry Dick, it doesn't work!" service. But this is only available for the more complex and costly project kits, and even so it's neither free nor without qualification. There's basically a fixed service fee (appropriate to each kit), to cover labour and any replacement parts required.

In addition, DSE reserves the right to refuse to service an assembled kit, if it's too much of a mess. And this is quite understandable; I've seen what some assembled kits look like — including some from supposedly "experienced technicians".

OK, so much for the economic side of things. Let's now turn back to consider the question of responsibility. Just who should be held responsible for a project/kit that doesn't work properly?

Perhaps I shouldn't be admitting this, but it seems to me we probably *do* have to rule out the kit supplier. After all, as they're quick to point out, they only provide a service by collecting together the parts for a published project design and making them available in a convenient parcel. At an appropriate price, of course.

There's probably a parallel here with the pharmacist, making up a prescription from your doctor. If the resulting medication doesn't fix the trouble, you can hardly hold the pharmacist responsible — providing he made it up with the ingredients as specified.



Even DSE reserves the right to refuse servicing a kit if it's too much of a mess . . .

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On the other hand, you may not be able to hold the doctor responsible, either. It could be that there was something else wrong with you, something very unusual, that the doctor could not reasonably be expected even to consider. After all, the doctor is only human, and not infallible. Providing he/she acted in good faith and took all reasonable care in making the diagnosis and writing the prescription, most people would think it unreasonable to hold them responsible, even if the patient should die.

The same kind of thing applies, I would argue, in the case of published designs for electronics projects. Here at EA (I can't speak for the other mags) we spend a lot of time and effort designing the projects, and trying to make them as easy to build and get going as we possibly can. In other words, we take all reasonable care, and present the designs in good faith.

But we don't claim to be infallible, or that the designs are guaranteed to work. This would be quite unrealistic. What we're providing is not a normal product like a TV set or a CD player, but information for the benefit of those inter-



Sorry mate, we just sell the bits. Try ringing EA!

ested in it and able to put it to good use.

For a start, sheer economics and time constraints prevent us from building up and testing more than a couple of prototypes at most, for any of our designs; often we can do only one. We don't have the luxury of building a "pre-production" run, as commercial designers do, to iron out the almost inevitable bugs due to component parameter spreads, etc. All we can do is check things out as thoroughly as we can, and try substituting a number of parts in the most critical areas.

Sometimes I think it's nothing short of a miracle, in the circumstances, that most of our designs turn out as trouble-free as they do.

Even more importantly, the designs we publish are only part of what's needed to produce the final product. The other ingredients are the necessary components, and the labour/skill necessary to put them together according to the design. We don't supply these other ingredients, nor do we have any control over them. Yet in reality they're just as important as the original design, when it comes to the final result.

When magazines like EA first started to publish designs for electronics projects, over 60 years ago, they were quite often little more than a circuit diagram and a few suggestions regarding overall layout. It was assumed that the reader would be able to provide the rest for themselves, from their own experience and knowledge. And by and large, this seemed to work out quite well. No one expected the designs published to carry any kind of guarantee of success, but accepted them for what they were: worthwhile and useful information.

But over the years, things have changed. Magazines like ourselves, trying to be of even greater value, have gradually published more and more information for each project. Parts lists, wiring diagrams, PCB and front panel artwork, you name it — all aimed at

helping the constructor to achieve a more professional result, and with minimum hassle.

One result of this is that our projects can now be tackled by readers with somewhat less experience than before, with a greater chance of success. That's great, of course. The more people able to experience the satisfaction and enjoyment of putting electronics to work, the better.

But at the same time, the original idea of publishing these designs seems to have been forgotten — at least in some people's minds. To say it again, all we do is publish *worthwhile and useful information*, for the benefit of those interested in it, and *able to make use of it*.

So if it's not the kit supplier who's responsible for the success of a project built from a kit, and not the magazine either, who is? There's only one party left, of course: the constructor themselves.

I know this sounds like passing the buck *par excellence*, but I'm afraid it's true. When we publish a design for a project, we simply can't take responsibility for what you do with that design. You really have to accept that responsibility yourself, because it's you that buys the kit, and you that supplies the labour and necessary construction skills. You're really the project manager, for your particular implementation of our design, and therefore you're ultimately responsible.

Don't forget that all we charge for the information we provide you is a few measly bucks each month. For that kind of money, no one should be expected to provide a full Rolls-and-chauffeur service, surely.

We can certainly sympathise if you've paid hundreds of dollars for a kit, and can't get it to work properly. But our role in the enterprise has only been to publish the basic information, and for this you've paid us only \$3.50.

Does this mean we don't care if you get into strife? No, not a bit of it. We spend a lot of effort trying to make sure you won't get into strife, in the first place. And if we discover we've made a mistake that might cause you strife, we drop everything to advise you as soon as possible. We also offer advice and suggestions via the Information Service, if you still get into trouble.

But when you boil it all down, it really has to be a case of *caveat constructor*. Any other way, and you mightn't have any electronics magazines around, to provide you with a steady diet of interesting designs.

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