



BY PAUL RAKO, TECHNICAL EDITOR



Fear of feature-itis

I recently bought an Olympus DS-30 digital-voice recorder that comes with an 86-page manual, a typical example of “feature-itis”—a bewildering array of too many useless features. Consumer-electronics manufacturers believe that feature-itis makes their products more desirable, and some of the features of the DS-30 are in fact desirable. For example, it operates from two AA batteries. The last thing I want is some product that I would have to plug into a USB port for an hour to use.

Looking at all the switches and buttons on the recorder only intensified my regret at seeing the manual fall out of the box. The recorder has three positions for microphone sensitivity. It has a power switch and a hold switch. It has play, stop, and record switches. It has an erase button. It has three software-defined buttons under the LCD. It has five more buttons in a circular-navigation array. OK, here is what I wanted: one toggle switch. When the switch is up, the recorder is on. When the switch is down, the recorder is off.

These days, modern consumer-electronics devices must be little computers. They have to boot up. And the tiny LCD must show all the folders in which I could file my recordings. The designers and marketers at Olympus apparently think that I want to spend my time arranging files into folders with five little buttons and a 1-in. LCD screen. On the contrary, I am not going to store my precious recordings on a little gizmo the size of a couple of matchbooks. The Olympus designers apparently forgot that I could lose this recorder, or someone could steal it.

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The real-use scenario is that, 20 minutes after I make a recording, I put it on my workstation, and a few minutes later, I back up those files on a second machine and a USB drive. Later in the week, I swap that USB drive with one in my safe-deposit box. I do any file arranging on my dual Dell 24-in. monitors using a 104-key keyboard and a three-button mouse with a scroll wheel.

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I needed the recorder for an interview with frequent EDN contributor Jim Williams, staff scientist at Linear Technology, and I bought the device on my way to see him. I had no time to research the purchase. Once I had


the time, I looked at comments about the recorder on the Internet, and I saw that, with all these features, the D-30 still lacked the one thing that might be useful: the ability to rewind for a few seconds and then rerecord, meaning that you can't use it to dictate letters or articles, as you could with any Dictaphone that debuted since 1959.

Giant manuals and tons of useless features bring to mind the old Logitech-mouse days. All we wanted back then was a pointing device. Logitech came with a big manual and all kinds of software, some of which was evil TSR (terminate-and-stay-resident) programs that ate up memory and caused a host of incompatibilities and problems. You see, Logitech had a big department for designing mice, and that team was going to keep adding features that nobody wanted.

Here's another example of feature-itis: I recently needed a stud sensor to help me mount a whiteboard on a wall. I borrowed a simple Zircon model from a friend. It had one LED that turned on when you slid it past a stud. I was so impressed that I went out and bought a Zircon of my own. The store didn't have the basic \$8 model, so I bought the full-featured \$29 model. It was supposed to do “deep sensing” and find wires in walls. It came with a CD instruction manual. But it didn't work. It had 10 flashing LEDs, but it could not reliably find the stud like the sister product that cost approximately \$20 less. It looked to me like a clear case of feature-itis, so I took it back and found the \$8 one at another store. EDN

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