(Approx. 1281 words)

My Smartphone, My Friend

Greg Skalka, President, Under the Computer Hood User Group

<https://uchug.org/>

President (at) uchug.org

I got my first smartphone, a low-cost ($150) Samsung Galaxy J3, in 2017. It was not that powerful and I was a bit apprehensive about this new device, so I used it mostly for phone calls, texts and select apps. I saved web browsing and email for my computers and laptops as the phone screen seemed too small. As I warmed up to the smartphone I found it essential for navigation (with Google Maps). Having a camera handy, as poor as it was compared to my Panasonic Lumix digital camera, became another feature I used constantly. As time passed, I added more apps but was selective about what I chose to install. I had no time for games and no use for social media, but I used several smart home apps to control the various devices I bought. I refused to do banking or conduct any financial transactions on the phone, preferring the relative security of a computer for any online banking or shopping.

Every business seemed to have a smartphone app to promote, but I only installed a few that I thought were safe and offered compelling benefits worth the risks. One of the riskiest apps I use is Google Maps, as I have found over the years that it has been tracking me, even when the app is not running.

However, its benefits are so compelling that I’ve made that bargain with the Google devil and accept being tracked in exchange for its navigation capabilities. Having every store and sandwich shop app seems like a foolish risk that is usually not worth it. I don’t want Google to also know what I’m going to do in the future and whom I associate with, so I refuse to use a calendar app on my phone or computer.

One app I do accept is the Southwest Airlines app, as it is so much handier than checking in for flights online with a computer. The Southwest app finally drove me in 2022 to buy a new smartphone, as their app developer stopped supporting my old phone. I bought a Samsung Galaxy S22 and am hopefully spending real money ($700) to buy more performance and tech longevity.

As with my first Samsung, I bought myself a very rugged case for my S22 to allay my fears of damaging the phone. With the belt clip front, the phone is fully enclosed when I carry it. I use magnetic USB adapters and charging cables to protect the phone’s USB type C connector from excessive wear. I mostly charge my phone from a battery pack in a fast-charge mode and now use settings in the phone to limit charging to 85% of capacity most of the time, to extend battery life.

Over time I’ve found my use of the phone has only increased. With a higher resolution camera in my S22, I find I’m using it much more and my dedicated digital cameras much less often. Last fall the number of prescription drugs I needed to take increased and some came with restrictions I had to follow; I found the smart phone to be very useful in medication management. One medication required it be taken at least two hours after eating and at least one hour before eating; I found the best time to take it was immediately upon waking (I don’t believe I do any sleep-eating). The problem is that I normally get up early and leave the house for work in less than an hour; this meant I often had to wait around a bit before eating breakfast and going to work.

I found my smartphone could be very useful in helping me manage this. The first thing I do when I get up is take this particular medication. I then immediately note the time on my phone and write that time into a document on the phone (for reference, should I get confused). I then set an alarm on the phone to melodically go off in an hour, indicating when I may eat breakfast. I often have to wait a little, but even though the time I get up can vary, this system keeps me from eating too soon after the meds. I have another medication I must take with food at dinner; another alarm set for a nominal dinner time each day helps remind me. I also take another medication once a week on a specific day, so another alarm on my phone reminds me of that.

The breakfast alarm could also be done using Alexa, but my talking to set it could be more disturbing to my sleeping wife. The other alarms on my phone can remind me even if I have gone out for dinner.

I used to wake up to a plug-in, battery-backed-up alarm clock at my bedside. It is more a wake-up alarm of last resort, as I typically wake up before it goes off. I always kept my phone in another room at night as I didn’t want to be awakened by late-night spam calls. When we remodeled our bathroom last fall, we had to temporarily move into our guest bedroom. I didn’t want to change my alarm clock, so I just used my smartphone alarm (which I do when I travel). I got used to it, and since there were no overnight spam calls, I’ve kept using my phone as my alarm clock since moving back into our bedroom.

My phone is also a convenient memory aid; I keep many lists on it in the Samsung Notes app. In addition to shopping lists, it has many pieces of information that I don’t want to have to keep looking up. Printer cartridge part numbers, oil filters, and oil types for cars are easy to look up on my phone when I’m in the store.

Sometimes, when I get an idea for a newsletter column, I write down a few notes on my phone. I can keep an inventory of my mom’s supplies on my phone, which can be easily updated when I visit her assisted living facility, and then needed items can be ordered when I get home.

Text messages are also a convenient way to keep track of information and events that can be referenced later.

My siblings have a text chain that we have used over the last few years to disseminate information about our elderly parents. It is easy to look in that text chain to see the events significant to my dad’s passing, when my mom had medical issues, and how things have changed over time. Now that I’m overseeing my mom’s care, my text reports to my siblings are a good record to keep.

Communication is a primary function of the smartphone, though how well it works often depends on the capabilities at the other end of the link. My mom has a “senior-oriented” smartphone but only uses it for phone calls. She can’t send or receive text messages or photos connected to them. My other siblings live out of the area, limiting.

My wife found a great gift for my mom this last Christmas. It is a photo frame with an added capability. Its display cycles through the photos in its memory, but its Wi-Fi connection can add pictures to the frame. My siblings and other relatives can send photos to the frame from anywhere using a smartphone app. My brother even wrote a short note, took a picture of it, and sent it as a kind of text message.

I’m constantly finding new ways to use my smartphone. With new ways to use it being developed all the time, it continues to become a closer friend.