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Who Ya Gonna Call?

Unpleasant Experiences – Senior Computer Students

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I teach computer classes at a local library and hear a myriad of students' horror stories about their unpleasant computer experiences. Here are some...

Last year, this happened to two senior citizen students, in separate classes. Each student mentioned taking her computer to a local store to have it 'repaired.' One said which store she brought it to (a big-box store with a diagnostic department) and paid $200. The other took it to a local office-supply store but was too embarrassed to admit the cost she paid. In both cases, the ladies could not remember what problem(s) the PCs were having -- they just "weren't working right." Each student got her computer back, and each computer worked great. The problem? Their personal data (docs, music, photos, etc.) was gone. When questioned about whether they were offered the service of backing up these files, I was met with blank stares. They weren't pleased with losing the files, but still -- blank stares. Neither student could recall being offered a backup of the data files (at additional cost, of course). Perhaps that solicitation was not made, or perhaps they simply did not understand it.

Last month another student reported a pop-up on his Win10 PC. It was one of those typical pop-ups suggesting that the computer had so-and-so many things wrong and a simple phone call could set everything straight. The phone number in the pop-up was 1-855-623-5333. A simple web-search of this phone number reveals it as a popular component of a "pop-up virus." This pop-up loaded immediately with each Win10 login and kept the user from seeing any of his desktop or running any programs. It acted as I would expect a ransomware attack would act, although no ransom demand was noted. Perhaps needless to say, I had to enter Windows' ‘Safe Mode’ to be able to evict it from the PC, since in ‘Normal Mode’ I could not access any programs (including security tools). But how did the user get this infection? Simple: He opened an email message from the US Postal Service regarding his request for an upcoming vacation hold of his mail delivery. The problem is that the email was fake. It LOOKED like the other email message he'd previously received, but when hovering over the links in the message, they did not point to the USPS, but rather to some other web location. Not knowing how to determine that the links were fake, he trusted the message and clicked away. BOOM! -- The PC got hacked. An important lesson learned.

Another student was trying to demystify Microsoft's OneDrive on her Windows 10 PC. She had a subscription to Office 365 and had a genuine purpose to be using that cloud storage service. But it just wasn't cooperating -- she was challenged with getting the sync feature to work. So, she searched the web for assistance, and came upon a Microsoft site with a phone number. (Turns out that the site was NOT a Microsoft site, but read on.) The site looked professional, and she called the number, and met “Alex and Steve.” Alex chatted with her about her dilemma for the longest time (20+ minutes), drawing fancy images on her screen, suggesting what they could do for her and how much their service would cost (initially, $699, but when they learned that she was a senior citizen, the senior discount kicked in at $499). Fortunately, Alex and Steve were greedy enough to price themselves out of her business, but had they suggested more like $100, she might have jumped at the offer. But during the long chat with Alex, we surmise that Steve (probably not their real names, of course, since they certainly didn't hide their far-eastern accent) was diligently trying to break into her PC and access whatever files he could. Later, in diagnosing some oddities with her system, we found remnant files in a few places that looked as though Steve had accessed the PC but wasn't experienced enough to cause permanent damage. Sloppy novice hackers.

And a student brought her laptop to a class and asked whether I could help her with a problem. She could not log in to her Windows 10 PC since the previous weekend, although she was insistent that she knew the password. After several tries (using variants of the password contents), we sat there, discussing the problem and alternative solutions (there were few). But during that chat, we were surprised to hear a voice come over the speakers of the not-yet-logged-into PC, telling us that a call to such-and-such phone number could fix so-and-so many hundreds of problems on the PC (similar to the screen popups that we all have witnessed). I figured that the user had caught an infection that also changed her login password. (I have broken into login credentials on Win7 & 8.1 PCs, but Win10 presents advanced security features that stymied my similar attempts.) I do not know what the user eventually did with her PC issue.

These are situations which none of us want to experience. But what if we do have problems or questions about our PCs or our Internet experiences? Each of these users COULD have avoided their dilemmas with a little knowledge…..or with a computer club membership. As a club member, you have access to knowledgeable folks who are willing and able to assist you, without shelling out extra bucks unnecessarily. The club newsletter lists contacts to club volunteers who are ready to help. And each member has the email addresses of the other members. Do not feel intimidated to ask for help when you're stumped with a problem. We all started out with no knowledge, and through reading, research and asking questions (and bits of trial and error), we all have acquired a certain level of digital smarts. If you ask one person, and the response is not quite satisfactory (maybe it didn't work, or it was way over your head), ask again, or ask someone else. Everyone has different ideas and potential solutions, and different ways to convey them. There are NO dumb questions -- we've all asked them. Besides, it's FUN to learn how to control your digital toys! So, never be afraid to ask for help.