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Matt Smith: Answering the call for computer trouble

Never since baby talk have so many people been so gaga for googles — or Google, for that matter.

Officials all around the area are giddy over Internet giant Google Inc.'s plan to set up an advertising headquarters that will bring about 1,000 jobs to Ann Arbor.



At the same time, I'm hoping this Google investment in some way gets one of my long-held dreams to come to fruition: a national 24-hour computer help hot line.

Sure, scoff if you want. At the same time, you can't deny something like this has happened to you or somebody you know:

- The printer is shooting out reams of pages that sort of look like the Rosetta Stone, but look nothing like your 15-page term paper.
- A child initializes your home computer's hard drive, mistakenly thinking that he or she is merely making more room to download episodes of "SpongeBob SquarePants."
- Instead of sending grumpy in-laws digital pictures of your kid playing soccer under the header "Look at Johnny play soccer!" you wind up sending them a video clip of French soccer star Zinedine Zidane head-butting an opponent in the World Cup finals.

- Non-computer-savvy loved ones use floppy discs as shims to stabilize unsteady chair legs around the home.
- Instead of sending prospective employers a professional photograph of yourself along with your resume via e-mail, you inadvertently send them snapshots of you in your homemade Captain Kirk outfit and attach them to your spec "Star Trek: The Next Generation" script.

If it hasn't happened yet, it could happen anyday now — and when it does, you won't be scoffing then. You're bound to want some help.

Enter the 24-hour computer help hot line.

I'll admit we're fortunate to have good information technology people at the Daily Press & Argus. When I go home, though, I can't count on their help. They don't know my home computer.

For example: When I go home and have to perform important, hard-hitting newspaper columnist research to, say, allude to a very special episode of "Blossom," but the Internet connection just isn't happening, I'm out of luck. Our tech guys won't have the answers, and I doubt very much that they would recall the very special episode in question because they don't seem like the "Blossom"-watching type.

So, to reiterate: There are quite a few potholes on the information superhighway, and I think a national 24-hour computer help hotline would make life easier for us all.

How would you get a hold of the hold of the hot line? Well, a lot of communities have 911 set aside for emergencies and 411 for directory assistance. In some places, you can also call 311 for government information and 211 for community services information.

You get the idea. Anything-11 will get you somewhere. That's the pattern the 24-hour computer help hot line should follow, in my opinion.

Since binary code — a kind of computer language — is made up of zeroes and ones, I'm thinking the computer hotline could be 011. Then 110101010010101010001001010010. Plus 1010101010101010101010100111110.

Then you'd want to hit 0101101010101-0010101.



This process might shake up the whole notion of international dialing, which also uses 011 as a prefix, but nobody said this hot line thing would be easy. Just worthwhile.

Now, I'm not a bleeding heart who expects the government to pay for a 24-hour computer help hot line. No universal help desk, with customer support from cradle to grave — no way, at least not in my book.



I think the money for the project could be collected by means of attaching some fees to some computer practices a lot of people are already doing at no or lower cost right now:

- Set up a \$500 cost for Googling yourself. That's just shameless, people.
- Add a penny to the song download fees on Apple Inc.'s iTunes music service. Hey, you're already spending 99 cents on a song. You wouldn't miss another penny, now, would you? Besides, users have downloaded more than 1 billion songs since April 2003. An extra penny per song would have generated more than \$10 million additional dollars by now.
- Chip in a buck each time you check out a celebrity's homemade sex movie that was leaked to the Internet. Paris Hilton's screen time alone would be an invaluable source of revenue for the hot line. As Paris herself would say, "That's hot."

If we could get the 24-hour computer help hot line up and running, I would love to use that experience as a springboard to launch another long-running dream of mine: A 24-hour math help hot line.



You'd probably have to dial pi to make that happen, though.

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