



BY RICK NELSON, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Consumer electronics: too daunting for our addled brains?

It's no secret that consumer spending has been driving the economy, and high-tech company Credence Systems has retooled its businesses to focus on consumer electronics (Reference 1). But it's now questionable whether consumers will continue their spending, despite income-tax rebates that some of you may have received by now. At bloomberg.com (Reference 2), economist Ken Goldstein said, "Consumers have gone into the bunkers. [They] fear that their budgets are getting squeezed tighter and tighter. ... A \$600 check isn't enough to turn things around."

But it may be more than a weak economy that drives consumers away from electronic products. They seem not to want much of what they can afford. That's the conclusion I reached after reading an article in *The Wall Street Journal* that cites a study by Accenture noting that the US electronics industry last year spent about \$13.8 billion handling returned products (Reference 3). The article states, "Especially galling to manufacturers is that many returns are preventable: Only about 5% of returns were because a product was truly defective." Many devices were returned simply because they were too confusing to use.

My conclusion: If you make a product with a user interface so poor that the average consumer can't figure it out, then your product is defective, even if all the transistors, buttons, displays, and other components work.

And if it does turn out that consumers—at least young consumers—aren't smart enough to understand and appreciate the latest high-tech gadgets, the consumer-electronics industry may have only itself to blame. You might infer this conclusion from Mark Bauerlein's new book, *The Dumbest*

If the average consumer can't figure it out, then your product is defective.

Generation: How the Digital Age Stupifies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future.

The book, slated for a May 15 release, was not available at press time, but in commentary on boston.com, Bauerlein notes that young people don't read books; they spend their time and money on *Grand Theft Auto* instead (Reference 4). The predominance of video use, Bauerlein adds, makes schoolwork suffer. Boston.com reinforces this point by citing a *Boston Globe* article noting that "thousands of Massachusetts public school graduates are ending up in remedial reading and writing classes in college."

Bauerlein also says that spelling is a lost art, thanks to instant messaging. And so is composition. He adds, "On MySpace, if you write clearly and compose coherent paragraphs with informed observations on history and

current events, 'buddies' will make fun of you." In short, concludes Bauerlein, "Kids are drowning in teen stuff delivered 24/7 by the tools, and adult realities can't penetrate."

It all has a nice symmetry: The consumer-electronics industry fries our brains, so we are too stupid to be able to set up and operate consumer electronics.

And this situation can have a deleterious effect on the engineering profession. As I've noted before, entry-level engineers are often more adept at playing video games than at working in a real-world laboratory (Reference 5).EDN

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