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Corporate Greed Comes To Cyberland

By Ernest Steadman

At the age of 61, I'm certainly not as old as many readers of these editorials. But, I think I have more unique life experiences than most of our senior readers because at the age of 16 I was left the sole support of my mother and six brothers and sisters. Thankfully, it happened in the rural Deep South where a man was accepted as a man by his deeds and the responsibilities he had. When the family car gave out, at the age of 17, I bought my first car from a Ford Dealership on credit. I remember the owner telling me about having to pay a 97% Federal income tax. Yes, 97%. Some years later, President Kennedy, in order to boost the economy, lowered the highest tax rate to 72%. Remember?

I remember the recession of the 60's. South Florida was particularly hit hard when Cape Canaveral was almost shut down and thousands lost their livelihoods. One fellow offered one of those old southern mansions that was just off the Melbourne Causeway, not half a block from main street, for the princely sum of \$25,000, sitting on a whole acre of commercial property complete with a two bedroom caretaker cottage on the grounds. The house itself was probably four stories high with ceilings of at least 12 feet in height, loaded with ornate wall and ceiling sculptures. Good, decent homes that once sold in the \$30's now sat vacant with signs lowering the price, in some instances, to less than \$10,000.

It was a time when the United States left the Gold and Silver Standard and overnight, while people were loosing their homes left and right, gold shot up from \$35 an ounce to more than \$1,000. Silver rose from \$6.00 an ounce to somewhere around \$35.00. If you had a dollar bill that had a Silver Certificate on the back of it, you could easily get \$5.00 for it from just about anyone.

It hit everyone and every industry. Two industries in particular reinvented themselves; tires and batteries. When you went to buy a tire, it clearly stated whether it was a 2 ply or 4 ply tire. One could reason that a 4 ply tire was better because it had twice the rubber that a 2 ply tire had. Then, suddenly, a 2 ply tire became something else, it became a 2 ply tire with a 4 ply rating. Truthfully, there was a time in America when it was safer to ride on tires that had been recapped (tread added to an older tire) than it was to ride on 4 ply rated tires. The battery industry did the same

thing. You no longer could determine the Amps of a battery. What they did was go to a "Cold Cranking Amps" rating. In that way they could reduce the amperage by about a third and still claim the product to be as good as before. It wasn't.

Remember the recession of the late 70's? Anyone remember what industries were most affected? The automotive industry for one. Look around. How many late 70's and early 80's automobiles do you see still traveling the roads or, for that matter, in someone's collection of antique autos? Just about NONE is the correct answer. The standards were lowered so much that things like transmissions and motors had a usable life of maybe 10 years, if that.

Now, America once again is facing yet another recession. Yes, a recession. When a common worker can no longer afford to take his family 60 miles up the road to have a picnic in the park or in the forest, when groceries (I'm referring to the kinds of foods that working people eat) go up more than THIRTY PER CENT in one year, we are facing a recession. When independent truckers, not too long ago, would haul goods for \$1 a mile now must pay nearly that much in fuel costs to travel that same mile, we are headed into a recession.

But, have no fear. Some corporations who cater to the home print industry have come up with a unique way to not only insure the purchase of their after-market wares, they have found a way to compete and take business away from the very retail outlets who sell their wares to the general public. I am specifically referring to Lexmark and Epson. What they have done is embed a chip into every inkjet printing cartridge for their printers that tells the printer when to change the cartridge. Before that, when the cartridge ran out of ink, you knew it was time to change it with another or to refill it. No more! The program they have come up with remembers the unique chip and refuses to reuse it, even if it is refilled.

I can't speak for Epson, but with Lexmark you get only three choices when a cartridge gets low of ink (determined by the printer program, not by you); replace it with a new one, order a new one from the Lexmark website or cancel your print job. Lexmark even has the program to the point it reports back to them on the way you use their printer, what kind of printing you do and how often.

Under the guise of "saving the planet", Lexmark has a cartridge exchange program where if you buy all your cartridges from them, for every four that you return to them in their postage-paid envelope, they will give you the fifth one free, undercutting their retailers by 20%.

As to refilling any ink cartridge, to make it affordable, they replied to me, "Inkjet cartridges and printer failures caused by refilling or a third party ink are not covered by your Lexmark Printer Warranty, Extended Warranty or Service Agreement." In other words, if you don't buy their

cartridges, you don't have a warranty. They fail to say that their printers simply will not work except with a brand new cartridge supplied by Lexmark. I've used their printers for the past 10 years, 4 of them, and never had a problem with a refilled cartridge. I did wear two of the printers out but also gave two of them to young relatives who had just acquired their first computer. Now all of a sudden, with this new printer, there are new rules and I don't think it has anything to do with warranties or equipment failure but everything to do with raising their "bottom line" at the expense of their customers and retailers.

Hewlett-Packard said that although they do not like for their customers to refill their cartridges, "HP has not programmed printers to be unable to use refilled cartridges." I'm still waiting to hear from Pitney-Bowes and Brother, but I think they will have about the same reply as did Hewlett-Packard. It's an industry "thing". If I buy a new car, I'm going to be told what kind of motor oil to use and if I don't it will void my warranty. But, they don't tell me what brand it has to be or from whom I can buy it. When I buy a suit of clothes, I'm not told when, where and under what conditions I can wear them. No one is going to invade my privacy and follow me around to insure that I do what they tell me, except in the case of Lexmark.

I don't know about the rest of you, but if this fails to go industry wide in this recession and I had stock in either Epson or Lexmark, I don't think I would be keeping company with them for too much longer.

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