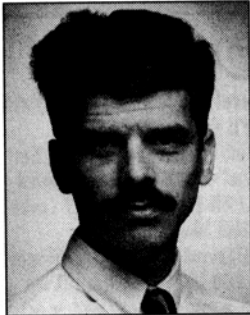


# CROSSCURRENTS

## TURN UP THE STATIC

People are always trying to sell you something. That's how capitalism works. The problem is when they try to sell you something that 1)



2) isn't particularly healthy for you, or 3) is especially unhealthy for the environment.

Alas, Kensington, famed mouse maker, is currently bucking for triple-threat status with its new Kensington Cleaning System line. The family of sprays, wipes, and air dusters is aimed at reducing static and dust on, around, or in your computer, which, if you believe Kensington's claims, are bigger threats to your PC than the last Internet Explorer beta.

For example, Kensington claims, "Dust, grime ... and other contaminants often get inside and contribute to equipment failure. A simple program of preventative maintenance is a proven way to reduce equipment downtime and expensive service calls." Elsewhere the company states that "dust inside your computer ... can cause critical components to overheat ... drives and delicate parts can malfunction," and that its Cleaning System "helps prolong equipment life."

I have a problem with Kensington's claims and the chemicals it's pushing. One of the antistatic sprays (which you're directed to use dutifully two to three times per week) contains 2-Butoxyethanol, not the most benign chemical to be blowing around your office. Others contain mostly isopropyl alcohol, which you can buy by the jugful for far less than what Kensington is charging.

But the most questionable product of the bunch is the Dust Blaster, which blows dust and grime out of hard-to-reach crevices in your computer. This little blue can contains Tetrafluoroethane, otherwise known as HFC-134a. It's perfectly safe around

humans and, as Kensington proudly notes, ozone friendly. What it fails to mention is that HFC-134a is a major greenhouse gas. According to Wiley Barbour, who regularly tracks greenhouse gas emissions for the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation, HFC-134a has a global warming potential of 1,300—which means one ton of HFC-134a traps as much heat in the atmosphere over 100 years as 1,300 tons of carbon dioxide. (Ironically, Kensington lists the Dust Blaster on its Other Hot Products Web page. No kidding!)

Is a cleaner computer worth a few melted polar ice caps? You be the judge.

Of course, if Kensington was only pushing this stuff to IS types (who once used cans of compressed CFCs to clean off circuit boards), I wouldn't be so irked. But Kensington is

Consider what Steve Gibson has to say. Gibson, an electrical engineer, former longtime columnist for *Infoworld*, and the developer of Spinrite, the premiere hard disk utility, was blunt in his assessment.

"I can assert with 1,000 percent confidence that Kensington is more than laying it on rather thick," says Gibson. "I'd call it nearly pure bullshit! The static sensitivity of computer components has fallen *radically* over the years as IC processing technologies have matured. What was once a problem is hardly one anymore. If you scuff your feet in a deep pile carpet in the Arizona desert during the summer with zero percent relative humidity till your hair is standing on end and then bring your finger near one pin of a Pentium processor until a half-inch spark leaps across the gap, then that Pentium will have trouble with more

cautions, such as using antistatic wrist straps and keeping devices in their antistatic packaging."

Aspinwall, coauthor of *IRQ, DMA & I/O* and other light reading, chimes in. "Fortunately the IC world is much farther ahead than Kensington's marketing department," he says. "Most chips have a lot of built-in antistatic and excessive discharge protection. If you're upgrading your PC, even that wrist-strap thing is a bit of overkill. Simply opening the PC's chassis puts you at a no-charge risk. Then set the SIMM or card or drive in its antistatic bag on the system chassis, remove it, and pop it in the system. The days of killing a PC by walking across the room and zapping it are pretty much myth now."

## JUST SAY NO!

For the record, I don't have an ax to grind with Kensington. It makes a lot of superior products. I realize that other companies put out similar cleaning products and other industries pollute the atmosphere with a lot more HFC-134a. And yes, there's probably stuff under my kitchen sink that's more toxic. But that doesn't let Kensington off the hook. It's a major accessory supplier to office and computer stores, and it should know better. Do we really need millions of consumers pumping HFC-134a into the atmosphere? Do consumers need to fritter away their dollars on antistatic products that offer minimal benefits? I think not.

The Kensington Cleaning System is an ill-conceived product line that should be pulled from the market. And if you feel that the polar ice caps are more important than a dust-free PC, write the company and tell it so. Address your gripes to Peter DuPont, president, Kensington Technology Group, 2855 Campus Drive, San Mateo, CA 94403. ★

Your comments, as always, are welcome. You can e-mail me at [rluhn@aol.com](mailto:rluhn@aol.com) and [rluhn@compuserve.com](mailto:rluhn@compuserve.com) or write to me care of Computer Currents.

*Polar ice caps or a cleaner PC? Kensington's Dust Blaster uses HFC-134a, a major greenhouse gas.*

aiming the Dust Blaster and the rest of its line directly at end users, noting enthusiastically that once "consumers increasingly understand the benefits of preventative maintenance, the market for specialty cleaning products ... will explode."

## THE EXPERTS ZAP KENSINGTON

The question is, do consumers really need these cleaning products? Is static that big of a threat to end user PCs? The experts I talked to were unanimous: No.

than just division math. It really takes that much to hurt modern electronics."

Hardware mavens and *Computer Currents* columnists Stephen Bigelow and Jim Aspinwall concur. Bigelow, author of *Troubleshooting & Repairing PC Drives & Memory Systems* and a dozen other tech tomes, adds, "Static is not the great evil these companies make it out to be. In the fabrication process, of course, it is. But for most end users, static is not an issue as long as you take reasonable antistatic pre-