

August 6, 2002

LOOSE WIRE

By JEREMY WAGSTAFF



How to Squeeze More Juice From Pricy Printer Cartridges

If you've never had to buy a printer cartridge, feel free to skip this week's column. If you have, you might have noticed a bizarre trend: Printer prices are falling like CEOs, while the cost of inkjet cartridges seem to be rising at the same rate. I'll let you into a secret: It's not a coincidence.

BAGS OF BLUETOOTH

Since last week's column I've found out about more gadgets that will use Bluetooth, the wireless standard that allows two devices to communicate across a room or small office.

Samsonite (www.samsonite.com¹) will introduce a suitcase next year that has a Bluetooth chip installed that should make tracking your luggage a lot easier. Samsonite says you will be able to store details of your trip, connections and contact information in the chip.

They won't say how it will work, but I'm guessing the data could be accessed by airlines, hotels and lost-luggage offices to hook-up passengers with their cases. Samsonite says the chip will also work as a security alarm. If the case is moved out of range of the passenger's own Bluetooth controller – his personal digital assistant, for example – an alarm will sound. All this shows great potential, and as the price of Bluetooth chips falls I'd love to see the same thing applied to things we mislay easily, such as car keys, sunglasses, infants, etc.

Another option for Bluetooth use is in cars: **Johnson Controls** Inc., a U.S.-based supplier to car makers, is planning to use Bluetooth to hook up the car's electronics with the driver's cell phone – which could then transmit data about the car's parts to, say, vehicle-recovery services.

Printer manufacturers have noticed that people don't like paying a lot of money for a boring piece of beige plastic that doesn't play games, videos, music or dance the samba. But they've also observed that people don't really notice how much they're shelling out on refill cartridges for those boring bits of beige plastic. The result: A series of moves that I would call -- and I'm going to have to lapse into technical jargon here -- "sleazy scams to ensure you keep coughing up dough for your printing needs." For example: Not all inkjet printer cartridges are made equal: **Hewlett-Packard Co.** sells two versions of some of its cartridges -- one furtively labeled "economy" and one not. It turns out the "economy" one contains half the ink of a standard one but sells for about \$28 against \$50 for the standard. I for one am not quite sure what "economy" means in that context. (Probably "sustaining the inkjet cartridge economy.")

I'm not the only one baffled. The issue has spawned a class-action lawsuit by three women in the U.S. who found that when they bought new printers the color cartridge was of the "economy" variety, without, they argued, H-P disclosing that it was only half full of ink. The case is still going on, revived by a ruling by Minnesota's appeal court in May. That ruling reveals something of the surreal ways printer manufacturers are misleading the public ([see link](#))². The court at one point decides that "referring to an ink cartridge may fairly imply to a consumer that the cartridge

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Send your comments about Loose Wire to Jeremy Wagstaff at jeremy.wagstaff@feer.com⁷. Or, blog them at: loosewire.weblogger.com⁸.

COMPANIES

Dow Jones, Reuters

Hewlett-Packard Co. (HPQ)

PRICE	13.25
CHANGE	-0.16
U.S. dollars	12:45 p.m.

Lexmark International Inc. (LXK)

PRICE	46.37
CHANGE	0.08
U.S. dollars	12:45 p.m.

* At Market Close

contains a certain amount of ink." Indeed.

Chances are that your printer will come with proprietary software that helps you choose the layout and style of printing. This includes ink-saving options such as printing in draft mode and compressing two or more pages onto one piece of paper.

CHEAT SHEET

If you're looking for ways to beat the computer-printing industry, check out the following sites:

- The most entertaining is www.alotofthings.com³, run by Joseph Nigro in California, who backed into the business of refilling cartridges when he found himself saving \$11,000 a year after fiddling successfully with his H-P printer cartridges. His Web site is full of informative articles on how to save money on ink and cartridges.
- There are also dozens of associations dedicated to promoting recycled cartridges: start with Australia's www.acra.asn.au/site/⁴.

Great idea, except in nearly all cases you can't save those settings, leaving you to print in normal ink-guzzle mode unless you fiddle around each time you print something. (On an H-P DeskJet 840C, for example, this entailed an extra six mouse clicks.)

All this makes it expensive to print -- around 20 U.S. cents a page, according to some calculations. That means that once you've printed 500 pages you've already shelled out \$100, or the cost of the printer. And while I suppose I should be applauding the fast-dropping prices of printers, I'm not the first to point out that it's a classic case of razors and blades -- sell the razors cheap because you can always gouge the punter on blades.

So what can you do? Not a lot. Most printer manufacturers have a monopoly on their respective cartridges, and have been waging a silent battle with anyone providing cheap alternatives, such as refill packages, or reconditioned cartridges. They do this by building the cartridge cases like Fort Knox, leaving only the brave to fiddle with them, and scaring the normal user that the warranty will be invalid should the cartridge be tampered with.

Another trick is to render the cartridge useless. This means installing an expiration date on it, so that even if there's ink inside it can't be used after a few months; another favorite is to install a chip in the cartridge which registers itself in the printer's memory, supposedly to measure the level of ink in the cartridge. In fact the user will often have to throw out a cartridge still containing good ink as soon as one color runs out (color cartridges usually contain separate tanks for the three colors necessary to print in color). One chip also tries to block attempts by users to refill the cartridge and reuse it in the same printer. The result is a guerrilla war by frustrated power users trying to hack past these restrictions.

All this, of course, is very profitable for printer manufacturers. H-P, which dominates the inkjet market, didn't respond to my e-mailed questions while **Lexmark** Inc. declined to be specific, saying they do not comment on "the proprietary technology in our products."

Here's what I suggest: If you do a lot of inkjet printing, look into refilling cartridges or using reconditioned ones. In both cases, buy from a reputable dealer and run tests before investing in industrial quantities. Secondly, for normal use, make sure you print in draft mode. I would also recommend two excellent programs: Use FinePrint (\$40 for a single license from www.fineprint.com⁵) to alter your settings so you can print several pages on one sheet, and inkSaver (\$35 from www.inksaver.com⁶) to cut back on the amount of ink being thrown onto the page, preserving resolution while making serious economies in ink consumption. Both pay for themselves within weeks.

Lastly, I suggest you all complain loudly to your relevant monopoly-monitoring body about this state of affairs. The European Union is reported to be considering action against the major manufacturers, and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission may follow suit if enough people make a fuss.

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<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB1028653707988964240.djm,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

- (1) <http://www.samsonite.com>
- (2) www.lawlibrary.state.mn.us/archive/ctapun/0205/1641.htm
- (3) <http://www.alotofthings.com>
- (4) <http://www.acra.asn.au/site/>
- (5) <http://www.fineprint.com>
- (6) <http://www.inksaver.com>
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