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Editor's View

Being Seduced by Technology

Sometimes the simple solution is the right solution. Plus the MVP mess shows the Microsoft can listen.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

In this month's ADVISOR Answers columns, I address a question from Barbara Peisch about disabling option groups. Barbara is a friend and client and the question came up in the course of some work I'm doing for her.

Once I'd verified that setting Enabled to .F. for an option group didn't dim the buttons in the group, I immediately thought of using the GetSysColor API function I'd discussed in the July ADVISOR Answers. I spent a delightful couple of hours messing around, figuring out which of the retrievable system colors best corresponded to the disabled color of a textbox and should therefore be applied to option buttons, then creating a couple of classes to do what I thought VFP didn't. The solution I put together used good OOP practices, was carefully designed to work even if Microsoft changed the API, and gave the developer using it lots of flexibility. I was rightly proud of it.

It wasn't until I sat down to write the thing up for the column that it occurred to me to ask the simple question "But what about individual option buttons?" At which point I hit myself on the head and threw all my work out the window. It turned out there were still some interesting questions, but I'd wasted a lot of time and energy chasing a problem that wasn't there.

Why am I telling you this story? Because I know I'm not the only one who's done something like this. We all work with technology that's changing constantly. More importantly, we do it because we like it. The temptation to try something new and different is there all the time. Like Rube Goldberg and his machines, we love to explore new approaches to problems, to hook things together in ways we haven't connected them before and to learn something new as we do it.

Trying new things is fine. Without doing so, both our minds and our work would become stale. But we have to resist the temptation to try new things without checking whether the existing ones can do the job first. That's where I got in trouble. I was so pleased at the prospect of using this great API function I'd uncovered that I didn't do my homework and make sure I *needed* to use it.

New technology is like that. It's seductive. It calls out to us. It's why auto leasing is so popular today. Why buy a car and own it after 24 or 36 or 48 months when you can pay a little bit less each month and then turn it in for a brand new one at the end? But just as there's a price to pay for leasing rather than buying a car (always making car payments rather than having periods of time where you simply own the car without payments), always using the newest thing in your application without considering other possibilities sometimes means that doing things the hard way.

Telling Barbara I'd invested those hours badly was embarrassing. (She was a little stunned when I said I was thinking of confessing publicly.) On the other hand, I'll probably find a use for the wrapper class I created for GetSysColor. More importantly, I won't forget the lesson I learned about trying all the straightforward ways before doing it the hard way.

Speaking of 'fessing up

I'm not the only one who's made a public retraction lately. Microsoft stepped into a real Public Relations morass in late October when they sent an email to all their MVPs (Most Valuable Professionals) announcing the termination of that program. MVPs are volunteers who provide support in the various online forums and newsgroups for Microsoft products. Altogether, there are several hundred MVP's worldwide for hardware, software and operating systems. They're chosen because of the quality and quantity of the help they give. (I'm an MVP for FoxPro, along with most of FoxPro Advisor's Contributing Editors and columnists.)

The furor was immediate. The message indicated that Microsoft intended to begin offering direct support in their newsgroups. While people were pleased about that, many MVP's felt as if they'd been slapped in the face. The implication was that we'd been simply filling in because Microsoft was too busy to handle online support; now the company would pick up the slack, so we could get back to our own business. It ignored the fact that many of us had been supporting users side-by-side with Microsoft's people before Microsoft got out of the online support business; more importantly, it missed the point that peer-to-peer support is often better than what a well-trained technician can offer.

The trade press picked up the story. The spin varied dramatically, depending on the writer. MVPs were painted as everything from angels to Microsoft apologists and response to online articles ran the same gamut.

Microsoft was bombarded with emails. Three days later, the MVPs received a kinder, gentler message stating that due to customer feedback, the program was being reinstated.

What's the lesson? For me, the biggest point here is that Microsoft can change its mind. If enough people get together to deliver the same message, and focus it at the right level (in this case, Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer), the people in Redmond will listen. They won't always change their decisions – it depends who made the initial decision and why, but someone out there is listening.

A Well-Deserved Break

This issue of FoxPro Advisor is the first ever with no Functional FoxPro column. After more than 11 years of writing at least one column a month for Advisor Media, Mac Rubel is taking a break for the next few months.