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Supporting Those Who Support Us

> *Companies, organizations and individuals offer the Amateur Radio community a wide range of products and information for our use. As customers we expect they will treat us fairly. We have an obligation to do the same.*

A major reason why Amateur Radio is such a rewarding activity is that it is full of creative, talented people who do amazing things. It enriches life to be a part of such a productive global community.

We are indebted to generations of selfless individuals who have shared their knowledge with the rest of us without any desire for compensation, other than the good feeling it gives them and perhaps a bit of well-deserved recognition. They, and those who carry on this tradition of "giving back" to Amateur Radio, exemplify the spirit of the internationally agreed upon definition of our radio service, which says that radio amateurs are "…duly authorized persons interested in radio technique solely with a personal aim and without pecuniary interest."

In the early days of radio it was all circuits and antennas: in other words, hardware. Someone who publishes a hardware design expects, even hopes, that others will duplicate it. He or she might even facilitate the process by offering printed circuit boards, hard-to-find components, or complete kits for sale.

Today, software occupies an increasing amount of space in the Amateur Radio universe. We use software to facilitate design, generate and process signals, control our stations and keep track of our contacts. Much of it is made available free of charge for non-commercial use. As my friend and neighbor Tom Wagner, N1MM, puts it, "It didn't really seem like I could make a lot of money selling [my logging program], so why irritate people by asking them for money? If I did that, then there would be a lot of expectations as to how fast I fix problems, and what features I add. I still get that, but I can always say: 'Hey, it's open source — write it yourself!' I don't do that often, but it's nice to know that I can." Other developers of freeware subscribe to a similar philosophy. Not only do they make their programs freely available for the rest of us to use, they often devote countless hours to technical support. Their only reward is the satisfaction of knowing they are making Amateur Radio more enjoyable for others and contributing to the advancement of the art and science of radio.

Our community is also well served by companies, most of them small businesses, which offer us a wide array of products and services. We can't expect them to do this for nothing. They have bills to pay, payrolls to meet, and investors who are entitled to a reasonable return. They can't bring new and improved products to market unless it makes financial sense to do so.

Expectations are pretty clear when it comes to commercially produced hardware. Customers expect equipment to perform as advertised and to come with instructions that are complete and not difficult to understand. They expect courtesy, a reasonable level of technical support and warranties that will be honored. For their part, vendors are entitled to be treated with respect and — obviously — to be paid for their wares.

By extension the same expectations should apply to commercial software. The principal difference between hardware and software is the ease with which the latter can be copied and redistributed. Recent developments in 3D printing are very exciting, but it will be a while before you can buy a transceiver and run it through a 3D copier — either to supply copies to all of your friends or to sell them in competition with the originator. Commercial software developers, though, must rely on the ethical standards of the community they serve. If they can't then they will devote their talents to other pursuits and our community will be the poorer for it.

Intellectual property law is mind-numbingly complex and continues to evolve, but the basic principles are pretty clear. For purposes of copyright, software is treated as a literary work. This means that all software — even freeware — is copyrighted unless it is specifically in the public domain. Providers of freeware generally grant the right to use it with conditions that needn't concern typical users. On the other hand, "buying" software usually means that you are buying a license to use it within certain conditions established by law and by the license agreement. Most people don't read the fine print and if you're just going to use the software yourself you probably don't need to, but if you're going to make copies you should know that the license agreement probably prohibits the distribution of copies to anyone else. You should abide by the terms of the agreement, not only because it's legally required but because it's the right thing to do.

Of course, we must acknowledge that the ARRL has a stake in the protection of intellectual property. Producing publications of the quality you have the right to expect from your national association is an expensive process. The charter of the ARRL includes publishing information relating to electronic communication as one of our purposes as a not-for-profit corporation, but net income from the sale of publications makes it possible to update and expand the ARRL bookshelf and contributes to the pursuit of our overall mission: the promotion and advancement of the art, science and enjoyment of Amateur Radio.

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