



Buy American Simson L. Garfinkel

Every time the furnace in the basement starts up, the speaker on my answering machine goes "snap." If I turn the volume up all the way, I can hear a radio station—just another errant signal picked up by the machine's poorly shielded electronics.

Indeed, the only saving grace of my answering machine is the name in its upper right-hand corner: AT&T. It was the only answering machine in the entire store that was stamped with the name of an American company. That's why I bought it.

I always try to buy American. My Jeep was made in the United States, just like my toaster oven. In fact, the only major appliance in my house that wasn't made in the USA is the computer on which I'm typing this article. It's a Toshiba 3100e, "a product of Japan, assembled in America." It's a 12-pound portable wonder, with an easy-to-read orange screen and a built-in 40 megabyte hard disk. There's nothing like it made by an American company.

There have always been a lot of good reasons for buying American products, most of them having to do with keeping American dollars and jobs from fleeing overseas. When it comes to computers, however, buying American has additional implications. In the fast-paced world of high technology, the machines that sell become the *de facto* industry standards. From personal computers and workstations to supercomputers, nearly everything having to do with computers was invented in the United States. For that reason, and that reason alone, things like the IBM PC, the Macintosh and the Sun Microsystems Unix workstation have become standards the world over.

Buying American computers means keeping the computer industry and innovation in the United States. If the leading edge of innovation ever leaves this country, we'll never regain it.

Because of distances, time changes, and language barriers, Americans find it difficult to work with foreign companies—especially technical ones. I speak from experience. As a computer consultant who specializes in research and development, I've had the occasion to work with unreleased equipment from both Japan and California. Other things being equal, progress usually comes faster when I can call up the engineer who designed the piece of equipment that I'm working with and ask questions in English. U.S. companies share a big competitive advantage, compared to those overseas, because we all

speak the same language and work in nearly the same time zones. And, for the most part, we share language and time zones with our customers.

That's all changing now. Not a day goes by that I don't read an advertisement for some low-cost, high-performance computer (like the one that I'm using) in the newspaper. Increasingly, it's the engineering for these machines, in addition to their final assembly, that's being done offshore.

One reason that American firms are falling behind is that they don't take a long-term view of markets and business opportunities. Concentrating on

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the bottom line and short-term profits, they are losing sight of final goals.

Just look at what happened—and is happening—with dynamic random-access memory chips, or DRAMs.

DRAMs are those little boxes inside your computer that store programs and data, and they are vital to most computers. Without them, a \$15,000 33MHz 80386 computer system can't stack up against even a \$5.95 calculator.

Just two years ago, American computer companies were stifled because they couldn't get enough DRAMs to stuff into their machines. Programs had to be kept simpler, because the machines didn't have enough memory. The price of memory-hungry high-resolution graphics boards went through the roof. Companies lost sales. Scientists put off solving some problems.

What caused the shortage? Short-sightedness. In the mid-1980s, DRAMs were cheap and plentiful. But there were Japanese DRAMs and American DRAMs, and the Japanese ones cost less. American computer-makers bought the lower-priced chips, and soon all but two American chip-makers had shut down their commercial DRAM production lines, complaining that they couldn't make a profit. (The U.S. Department of Commerce eventually ruled that the Japanese companies were selling their chips at a loss to force out their American competitors.) A few years later, with fewer players in the market, the prices of the chips went through the roof.

Get it? It's a scenario that never would have happened in Tokyo, because Japanese companies enter into long-term business relationships with their suppliers. They pride themselves on being faithful custo-

mers, even if it means buying a 45-cent DRAM chip for 55 cents two months out of the year.

But not here: Americans have their own way of solving problems.

In 1988, U.S. Memories Inc. was born. U.S. Memories was supposed to be the United States' answer to the Japanese, an industry-wide consortium that would be funded by American computer companies and that would build DRAM chips specifically for them. U.S. Memories' charter was to provide our computer manufacturers with a steady supply of the precious chips.

But then a funny thing happened: The price of DRAMs started falling. With new plants coming online in Japan, Europe, and South Korea, the chips became plentiful once more. The American backers of U.S. Memories backed out. Without the promise of tremendous short-term profits, U.S. Memories went out of business this past January.

Waning patriotism is at the root of many problems in this country. By putting short-term gains before long-term development, we are shortchanging ourselves, our future, and our country.

Many people think that this form of patriotism is outmoded. Perhaps so, but then why is it that businesses in countries that have a greater sense of national identity are now pulling ahead of their American counterparts, after years of investing in themselves and in their country?

Instead of investing in their future, and ours along with it, our business leaders are hunting for tomorrow's dollar. They are reminiscent of investment bankers who shut down productive factories and invest the gains in government Treasury bills to get an extra percentage point of interest.

We have to live with the consequences.

And so I bought an answering machine with AT&T's name on it. I knew that it wasn't as good as the Panasonic model, but I don't want to see American companies drop out of another high-tech market. And I knew that, with my business and the business of other consumers, AT&T would eventually start making better equipment. I think that I am making a difference, if only a small one.

At least, that's what I thought until this morning, when I turned the AT&T box upside down and saw these words:

"Custom manufactured in Singapore for AT&T." □

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Departments