

# 'Crabapple' resists computer hard-sell

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**W**ELLESLEY, Mass. — Even though he started the Crabapple Anti-Computer Club, Steven M. Stroum's argument isn't with computers.

As a professional publicist, Stroum is pointing his slingshot at what he calls the "arrogant and manipulative" marketing tactics used by some computer companies.

Stroum became "David" in battle against the Goliath computer industry six months ago after watching television ads for home computers. He was particularly infuriated by advertisements that imply children would be failures if they were deprived of a computer.

Stroum, 35, is a prosperous

owner of a sales-consulting firm and father of a 5-year-old boy.

His organization has attracted the attention of some newspapers and radio stations, but scant public support. In fact, Crabapplers, who rally under a familiar striped apple logo embellished with a sick worm, number only 30.

His attacks, in part, are aimed "at drawing attention to the social consequences of increasing computerization." When asked what those consequences are, the bearded, amiable Stroum talks about "technostress," or the feeling of being overwhelmed by fast-changing technology.

He worries about the social isolation that could come about when a child is more engrossed in computers than playing with school pals.

Some computer companies try to con children and their parents into believing those who can't program a computer before junior high school will be left by the wayside, he said.

"When someone gets on TV and implies to me that I'm neglecting my kid and he is going to be a failure (without a computer)," Stroum said, "that's improper, unethical and irresponsible."

"Emotionally charged advertising is not appropriate for computers and technology because people have a difficult time as it is assimilating technology's impact on their lives."

**He points to Commodore International ads as a worst-case example.** One such ad depicts a young man at a job interview. When asked about computers, the applicant replies with answers that show he can play video games but doesn't know how to program a computer. He leaves the scene as he entered — jobless.

"Those ads are really gross," said Joerg Mayer, a professor of

computer science and math at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. Mayer, who has joined Crabapple, dislikes the tactic of making parents who know little about computers feel guilty.

"One third of the low-price computers are in closets," Mayer said. "It's not fair to make people believe that they ought to have something when they really don't need it, especially by using a guilt trip."

But can ads really exert influence on adults?

"If the advertisements weren't successful, we wouldn't have the ads," Mayer contends.

Commodore's Jim Dionne, vice president of sales and marketing, counters, "For every one person who complains about the ad being a guilt trip, I hear from 1,000 others who say the best thing they ever did was buy a computer for their kid."

The ad campaign "hasn't hurt sales," Dionne said.

Crabapple founder Stroum is a consultant for high-technology companies and has used computers

for seven years. He admits "only an idiot would ignore the benefits of computers." So it's not the speed at which the world is embracing technology that irks him.

**Instead, Stroum's gripe** is with the multimillion-dollar, high-powered tactics computer companies employ to introduce and sell their machines.

His anger rises over Apple Computer Inc.'s radio ad that urges kids to convince parents to buy a computer with the ploy, "It's tax-deductible."

In Apple's defense, spokeswoman Renee Olsen said the radio campaign to sell kids on its portable computer hasn't gotten any irate parental backlash.

"In a humorous sort of way, it was pointing out the irony that children know more about the technical aspects than parents do," she said. "We're trying to be persuasive; the point is sales."

Stroum also is unhappy about Atari Inc.'s mega-bucks campaign featuring the popular Sesame

Street character, Cookie Monster, to sell children video games.

Bruce Entin, Atari's spokesman, says the company uses symbols that appeal to children because "kids are the market for the games."

However, Atari "feels strongly that you don't advertise by making parents feel guilty," Entin said.

As for Stroum, Entin said, "He's full of hooey."

**But Bill Kahn,** president of Digital Laboratories of Watertown, Mass., lends support to Crabapple.

"People see cosmetic ads and know its hype, but large computer companies have more credibility, so people don't think of the ads as hype even when they are," said Kahn, a 20-year veteran of the computer business.

Crabapple's regular newsletter has the potential of being "a unique forum to ferret out misleading advertising," Kahn said.

Just what is Stroum's solution?

"To be effective, the advertising needs to be much more informative," he said.