



Pamela Collins, Editor in Chief

Y2K: Major Disaster or Minor Distraction?

With increasing intensity over the past several months, news coverage about the Y2K computer glitch has generated much speculation as to what problems we may face at year's end. One thing is certain. In the time remaining before 2000, there will be even more news and speculation. At least one disaster movie about the Y2K scenario is already in the works.

Palm Beach County has taken many measures to eliminate and minimize the Y2K problem. Before we address what's been done, let's address the problem.

Simply stated, the Y2K problem lies in the inability of the computer's programming to recognize the year 2000. Older programs and programmable microchips may read the year as 1900 or may fail to recognize the date and shut down its operations. In today's society, computers control many aspects of modern life, making our lives simpler, safer and more enjoyable.

The County has planned ahead to tackle the Y2K problem. More than 3 million lines of computer code involving 13 different types of computer languages

Continued on page 2

"It's always helpful to learn from your mistakes because then your mistakes seem worthwhile."

-Garry Marshall-

John Lofquist, (Centrack success story)

John Lofquist's world is inhabited by the heavy equipment used in the construction, mining, forestry and highway industries. When people have equipment to sell, John hooks them up with people who want to buy, and vice versa. It sounds like a business run by big men in overalls, but John does it out of a 10,000 square foot office in Boca Raton in a completely high-tech environment.

Three years ago, John created Centrack, an internet-based advertising and information service, to marshal a 16,000 piece equipment inventory worth an incredible \$1.4 billion. His company isn't an overnight success story, but almost. In the beginning, Centrack was John, a small office, 14 years of experience in the heavy equipment industry, and a vision. Today the company has just gone public, trading on the OTC-BB exchange. It is also on the verge of pioneering a concept never before applied to the heavy equipment field - regular online auctions. To make the idea work, John used an existing software base, but his company also invented several proprietary modules to enhance the product. "We're very much in the forefront with this auction," said John when the auction software was being tested in preparation for the real thing in October. "We're fairly certain we're the first to have this sort of auction online."

Centrack is an entrepreneurial success story, complete with the initial period of "dues-paying." Some of the story's features are familiar. "I started with a single small office, on the phone eight hours a day to drum up business," remembers John. "My family sacrificed a great deal in the beginning. We had 12 employees in August, today we have 20, and by the end of the year we'll have 35. But it started out with just one - me, the chief cook and bottle washer."

John found support along the way from the Palm Beach County Enterprise Development Corporation, one of several County/State supported organizations available to people with an entrepreneurial dream who need assistance. "We have an ongoing relationship," says John. "They provide us with leads, potential investors and clients. It's a very good relationship." Centrack is a registered vendor with Palm Beach County, and a client of the Office of Small Business Assistance. "These agencies are very important," says John. "If they're used to their fullest, they can and will provide you with potential alliances. They also bring you together with people who can help mentor you and expand your business."

John plans to expand Centrack into other markets, including aircraft, oil and pipeline and marine equipment. John's personal horizons are also expanding: at age 59 he's about to become a grandfather. "I'm still in shock," he admits. But with the energy of a young man, experience and the support of local small business development resources, John is certain the future of Centrack is just as bright as his soon-to-be grandchild.

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Continued from page 1

have been brought into compliance. More than a dozen mission critical systems have either been replaced or modified. The remaining tasks should be completed well before year end to make all County computer systems in full compliance.

The County has done its part, and we have received assurances from other utilities and services, namely BellSouth, Florida Power & Light, South Florida Water Management, banking, health care and retail grocery industries, that they too will be prepared. Indeed, to assure citizens of the continued availability of these necessary services, Palm Beach County hosted its Y2K Forum in June 1999 to demonstrate what progress had been made and what was planned.

In addition to the efforts taken by the County and private enterprise to ensure computer availability and reliability, the County's emergency response personnel, such as Fire Rescue, the Sheriff's Office and the Emergency Operations Center, will be at a higher level of preparedness.

Despite the broad-based preparations and precautions, a possibility may still exist for isolated, short-term disruptions. While these disruptions may amount to no more than a temporary inconvenience, there are measures that citizens can take to minimize any unforeseen Y2K impact.

One suggestion is simply to maintain your stock of hurricane supplies through year end. Since hurricane season does not officially conclude until the end of November, it would only be a matter of keeping your bottled water, canned food, batteries and any other emergency provisions for a few more weeks through the start of the new year. While these supplies may never be needed during a Y2K disruption, their availability can give your family a greater feeling of personal reassurance.

Additional precautions and considerations may include:

- prescription medicines - have at least a two-week supply available
- cash - if your local ATM doesn't work, have enough for a one-week supply
- keep track of credit card charges and retain receipts
- closely scrutinize invoices and statements with interest payments; calculations based on dates may be affected by Y2K problems
- keep a paper file on financial transactions, especially if e-commerce transactions are handled via computer
- gas up the family car before December 31st

As the new millennium approaches, news coverage on anticipated concerns will increase. The County has exercised diligent planning. Nevertheless, planning on your part can preclude panic. Make prudent plans now and whatever happens, if anything, it will most likely be no more than a minor disruption.

Y2K *Checklist*

by **Phil Scruton**

Experts downplay problems associated with Y2K on the homefront, but suggest families stock up on essentials as if they were preparing for a hurricane.

Get:

- ✓ a one-month supply of medicines and storable food
- ✓ a wired phone - cordless phones won't work if power is out
- ✓ a first-aid kit, flashlight, radio, radio batteries, bottled water, camp stove or grill, auto fuel in vehicles (top up frequently as year-end approaches).

Other home and personal considerations:

- ✓ for home computers, check manufacturers' websites or call for information to see if their products are Y2K compliant; although newer computers are almost all Y2K compliant, older computers may need an upgrade to the Basic Input Output System (BIOS)
- ✓ call manufacturers of appliances that are date-sensitive, such as VCRs and alarm systems
- ✓ if traveling during the first month of the year, get a paper ticket rather than an electronic ticket
- ✓ try to avoid traveling by air on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day

Personal finance planning:

- ✓ try to have cash at the beginning of the new year sufficient for two weeks' purchases and bills; begin collecting cash in small withdrawals beginning in November; if you depend on Social Security, stockpile enough cash to cover that income in January; do not keep more cash at home than you expect to need
- ✓ prepare a list of all important account numbers (checking, savings, credit cards, loans and mortgage accounts) and amount, in case year-end computer records are lost
- ✓ some experts suggest reviewing investments in foreign companies in case those companies are not Y2K compliant and could suffer losses
- ✓ confirm how much federal income tax you have paid in 1999 and keep a record of the amount

Y2K and Small Business

This is the infamous problem: computers and software programmed to recognize only the last two digits of the year will see the "00" on January 1 and think the year is "1900." Problems that potentially can arise from this error range from the mildly irritating to the catastrophic. Fortunately, most large corporations and civic agencies report having found fixes for the Y2K bug, but it's important to understand the problem and, particularly for small businesses, what can be done to deal with it.

The vast majority of banking institutions have spent time and money making sure, for instance, that ATMs will work on New Year's Day. Utility companies and federal agencies also say they have solved the problem. Earlier predictions of anarchy as the result of Y2K-related breakdowns have been discredited. Small businesses must be alert not only for those computers and software that need correcting or replacing on their own premises, they must also be concerned about vendors and others that they do business with. Failure to correct a Y2K problem can mean disruptions of accounts payable and receivable records, interest calculations and other aspects of day-to-day business. Embedded computer chips represent the most difficult area to troubleshoot, requiring careful evaluation. These embedded chips can affect environmental control systems, manufacturing processes, and other date-coded equipment.

For other equipment, refer to the users' manual or contact the manufacturer to see if there is a Y2K problem. For small business owners there are many other sources of advice. Hundreds of organizations offer year 2000 compliance testing. Just search for "year 2000 compliance testing" or "year 2000 independent verification and validation" on the web, using one of the web search engines. Other useful resources

A bend in the road is not the end of the road....unless you fail to make the turn.

-Unknown

include workshops offered by local small business support agencies. The Small Business Administration helpline can be reached at 800-U-ASK-SBA. The National Institute of Standards and Technology also has a help line at 800-Y2K-7557. Contact NIST via e-mail at y2khelp@nist.gov.

Support for local small businesses is also available at the Small Business Development Center on the campus of Florida Atlantic University. The SBDC has an extensive selection of Y2K resource materials and business analysts on hand to offer advice. Call them for information at 561-362-5620.

On the homefront, anything that uses a date and time should be checked to see that it will convert to the year 2000. Because days fell on different dates in 1900 than they will in 2000, VCRs, for instance, may not record the program that you've told it to record. In general, fears that food supplies, utilities and banking will shut down have been allayed. Those wishing to stockpile cash in case something goes wrong with their ATMs should do so in small increments well before December 31st.

Interestingly, despite warnings by extremists, a recent Gallup pole showed that nearly 79 percent of Americans expect the Y2K problem to have "little or no impact" on their personal lives. With careful preparation, and use of the many resources available to help individuals and small businesses, that expectation can indeed prove true.

Are you in need of a product or service that may not be cost-effective to produce in-house? Or, are you a small business based in Palm Beach County that is looking to take on additional work? If you answer yes to either of these questions, call the Office of Small Business Assistance at 233-1550 for details on how your company might participate in the "Outstanding Program."



Business Resource Guide ***Business resources that can assist with the growth and development of your business:***

Business Development Board of Palm Beach County -
(561) 684-2401

Hispanic Human Resources - (561) 641-7400

Palm Beach County Resource Center - (561) 863-0895

Palm Beach County Business Incubators:

**Business & Economic Development & Revitalization
Corp. (BEDR) - (561) 686-0064**

**Delray Beach Center for Technology, Enterprise and
Development (TED) - (561) 265-3790**

**Enterprise Development for Glades Entrepreneurs
(EDGE) - (561) 993-3343**

Palm Beach County:

Office of Small Business Assistance (OSBA) - (561) 233-1550

International Airport - (561) 471-7447

Engineering Department - (561) 684-4000

Purchasing Department - (561) 233-1500

Facilities Development & Operations - (561) 233-0200

Business Loan Fund - (561) 838-9027

Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) - (561) 833-1672

Small Business Development Center - (561) 362-5620

U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) - (305) 536-5521

Business Resource Checklist

- *Accounting*
- *Business Plans*
- *Credit Counseling*
- *Incubators*
- *International Trade*
- *License/Certification*
- *Marketing Plans*
- *Relocation Assistance*
- *Business Counseling*
- *Business Roundtables*
- *Employee Training Programs*
- *Legal*
- *Loans/Financing*
- *PBC Marketing Assistance*



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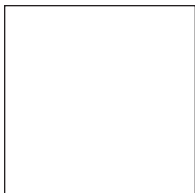
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