

The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer for Publication in CNY-PCA Redline Report Copyright 2008 <http://www.holzerent.com>

SNAFU

As I write this I have just completed my Porsche Parade registration online and am awaiting the email notification of such. Today is Wednesday, the day after the Registration opened on 3/11/08. Knowing the Parade fanatics as I do, as we have been attending since 1984 almost religiously, and like those with the MOST attendance having been shut-out of the 2005 Parade, the 50th at Hershey, I had waited until 10 AM yesterday to start my registration. I was doing the registration for my wife and myself, as well as for my daughter and her friend from Houston with whom she has been attending those same Parades since they were toddlers. I was using two computers the entire time, with hi-speed internet via my own LAN, and pressing the SEND button every 30 seconds or so. Until 3:30 PM, when I figured we were not going to get through at all.

So I called National to inquire about options, since I simply could not waste any more time that day. I was told by the same Vu Nguyen who joined us for our 50th at Alex Bay last year that my only choice was to mail our applications. So I printed out the forms and filled them out and took them to the USPS and waited in line. Thankfully, I had the foresight to get them earlier, since they were unavailable to download either – see my email to Joyce over last weekend, which led to her posting all of you with the copy I had received separately. At the post office I paid \$7+ to mail the two applications, each in their own envelope, after watching the clerk stamp the March 11 2008 postmark on each, and attaching the Certified tracking code to each. At 4:30 PM. So as of that time, I had spent six and a half hours trying to get the right to spend \$1230 plus hotel so I could see the friends I get to see only once per year from all over the country (and Germany, since I consider both Peter and Wolfgang Porsche personal friends as well), with no confidence whatsoever based on the fiasco which occurred with Parade 2005, wherein my ONLY way to attend despite having signed up on that first day was as Affiliate to the same Aubrey Sutton who I was trying to pair with my daughter now. For those who don't remember, that was the year I won my first Overall in Tech Quiz, and when they announced it they said I was from Maverick Region, because that was Aubrey's.

The fact that the 2005 assignment of who was accepted for attendance seemed to be inversely related to distance from, and years attending, Parade was clear in my mind. Even Mike Rollins, the last guy standing each year when they do the “stand ‘till we count off the number of Parades you have attended”, was shut out and had to piggy-back on someone else like me. And we were FAR from alone. Similarly clear was the fact that it was the first Parade where the ONLY way to enter was online. And the assignment had been done completely by the software in that online process.

So here we were again. Entirely dependent on whatever automated process PCA had on their server, and it was clearly not up to the task. They had been updating notices about every two hours that the load on the server was huge, so if we were unable to get in, we should “try back later”. But we were all fully aware of 2005, and the rule that preference is only given to those who register on that first day, and implicitly first during that day, since the same system assigns the car number via an email to confirm your registration which is sent to you. So if those are sent within a half hour of registering, what happens when they have too many cars register on the first day, exactly what happened with Parade 2005 ?

Upon my return, I had a mailbox full with emails of horror stories of the same ilk from many of my PCA friends from Texas and the Left Coast. Then I received a call from Jerry Sutton, Aubrey's Dad. At about 6:30 PM he had finally been able to get through and register online, and had received a car number 156A. Which means that ONLY 155 others had gotten through before him. Hmmm...

Then I got a message in response to my direct email to Vu suggesting that, while I knew nothing could be done for this year, they should in future allow people to pre-fill all the data which would take an average one hour to enter and then come back on the “Register Day” to merely enter the payment info. Run the numbers and you can imagine that 900 cars through a single portal with an hour each cannot possibly be done in a single day. Anyway, the message was that “despite their extensive testing” there was a problem, so they would treat any registration online or postmarked until midnight March 13 EDT as a “first day equivalent”. The same message was then sent globally to all PCA members who had an email address listed with PCA.

Today a smattering of messages from the “faithful” who also tried again began to suggest that the online process was possible. So I re-did all the entry I did on paper yesterday, and it seems to have gone through. Though I have no email confirmations as yet.

By now you are wondering why I am telling you any of this, and whether there is anything to be gleaned other than that volunteer organizations are subject to more variability than professionals. That may be true, and at a local level it is absolutely so. But PCA has long since ceased to be a purely volunteer group. And those who are paid, and who insisted this was to be the process, have every right to be embarrassed by this episode. But that is NOT the message here.

Aahnold played a robot in the *Terminator* series of movies. One, called *The Rise of the Machines* essentially played on a theme like those of *Colossus*, *the Forbin Project* and *War Games* wherein the machines took over from the humans, and went awry. The latest episode of *Top Gear*, the irreverent BBC car show, demonstrated the problem succinctly on a Lexus. For those who haven't paid attention, Lexus has a sedan which "parks itself". It has caused such a sensation that Audi has made a commercial with an S4 sliding into a parking spot along a curb in a perfect 4-wheel drift with the statement "Audi, for people who can park themselves".

THAT is the message I want to impart to those who have not yet used this to wrap fish in the freezer. The host of "conveniences" and Porsche Anagrams which really are deutsche for "We're smarter than you are" have two serious deficiencies. The Lexus in *Top Gear* backed straight into a wall. The computer in *War Games* was simply trying to learn to play games better when it seemed to launch a thermo-nuclear strike on, causing a similar response from, the then-existing Soviet Union. The last few words of that sentence are the message in the madness here. Things change, and not always in predicted fashion. Yet all the problems above were the result of trying to remove from humans the need to take an action which could, arguably, be better performed by a machine. But each was also dependent on the Achilles Heel shared by all; they are dependent on assumptions made by the humans who designed them. And when those assumptions are wrong, things become FUBAR.

Think about that the next time you believe ABS, ESP, PSM, Accident Avoidance Radar, and the host of other electronics you have come to depend upon through your driving experiences, will protect you from stupidity. Consider it well when you think you can forget rudimentary skills because "they are no longer needed – the machine will take care of that". As an instructor I see it all the time; the Porsches today ARE smarter than the people who can afford to buy them. But what happens when they fail? I am sure you will recognize the wisdom of this article when you experience your first encounter with the new "ideas" for protecting you from the "boogeyman"; transmitting key fobs which allow a car to be unlocked only by your physical presence, and use an electrical latch to prevent thieves from using a "Slim Jim" to yank a draw rod between the handle and the latch. The objective was to protect your precious Porsche from being stolen, an all too frequent occurrence with high-end cars like ours.

But what happens when the battery in the car has died (they do) and it is cold and blustery (they do more often in those conditions) and/or the battery in your key fob has died (likewise)? You are FUBAR. You were FUBAR when you agreed to pay for all that complexity to "protect you". Oh, and the thief? Do you think (s)he gives a damn about that crap? Because you would never buy a Porsche you couldn't see out of, nor one whose windows weighed so much the car handled like a Hummer, the windows MUST (ask the laws of physics, which YOU certainly ain't about to change) be thin enough to be broken. And because Porsche couldn't sell you a car unless you could afford it, even at Porsche prices, the cost for that window must be extremely small as a percentage of the total price for the car. And it must be able to be maintained locally by SOMEBODY, even if it is the dealer (and again, think how tolerant would be the buying public if the ONLY source for repairs was a dealer). So the determined thief will simply break the window, sit on glass shards for awhile, and still steal your car, and replace the window later. The ONLY reduction in theft will be from joyriders and opportunists, and many of them will simply wait for YOU to be in the car instead, thereby converting your loss of a replaceable car into something potentially a LOT worse.

It is called the law of unintended consequences. And, by definition, it cannot be overcome. SNAFU.

