Subject: My 10¢
Posted by Wayne Parham on Fri, 18 Feb 2005 07:22:56 GMT
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These are some of my opinions on this matter. I don't claim to have all the answers, but I do have some experience with issues like these. My experience has led me to believe that it is very important to disallow all commercial posts in non-sponsored forums and to forbid any ad hominem attacks. Either that or let every post stand. I remember when I first experienced audio messageboards. I was quick to recommend my own products because I was proud of them. It was innocent zeal. I did not know how it might affect others; I hadn't thought it through.My speakers became very popular on the messageboard I participated on. I'm sure there were those that were jealous, because I was getting so much attention. At the time, I just enjoyed the attention and didn't see it as a commercial enterprise. But I did gain exposure, and many people contacted me to have speakers built. Soon, I became a sponsor of the website and I did a lot to help it grow.There were a few that became angry, and I thought they were just jealous. At that time, I didn't see why there should be any problem with company representatives posting messages with information about their products. Sure, it amounted to free advertising, but it seemed like a great way to make contacts for everyone, companies and end users alike. I thought this kind of thing could co-exist with hobbyists discussions, and that it might help improve the quality of website content.Similarly, I thought that people should be able to say pretty much whatever they wanted. If their posts were over the top, it would be evident to everyone. If a person made really ugly comments, it would only hurt the person making the post, not the others they were attacking. That's true to a great degree, but I'm not sure we want to see really gross obscenities said about our wives and mothers from some wacked-out nut, and to have those posts remain online forever. But in general, my first thought was that audio messageboards should be completely unmoderated and uncensored.Over the course of the next few years, my thinking changed 180°.I began to think that some amount of personal decency should be enforced. I don't see any reason why an emotional outburst should remain permanently displayed on the website. Personal attacks have no place in a civilized discussion. They might be the kinds of things you'd hear in a locker room fight, but probably not to make an intelligent point. A vicious argument is essentially a private affair, not something meant to be seen by the whole world. Tabloid television, paparazzi and modern reporting have shifted public view somewhat, but still, I think the people involved are victims of exploitation of their human flaws and it isn't really all that interesting or necessary. So I can see good reason to pull the plug on a post that does nothing more than to call someone names.Same goes for calling a person's creation names. That's a thinly veiled personal attack. If there is really a case to be made that a design has flaws or could be improved, it can be demonstrated with reasonable explaination. If someone just says, "Bob's widget sound maker sucks bad" - That's a personal attack. I think that if Bob sees a statement like that and asks the webmaster or moderator to pull it, the moderator probably should.If on the other hand, someone says, "Bob's widget sound maker resonates at 80Hz and has a 15dB peak" - That's not an attack unless it isn't true. Even if what is said is negative and perhaps even confrontational, if it isn't a personal attack, it should be allowed to stand. This is the nature of debate, and not everyone agrees with everyone else, even experts regularly clash on views.But there is always the possibility that evidence is fabricated to make a point. If the 80Hz peak comment is bogus, falsified to discredit someone, then that's something else entirely. False evidence used to attack someone is no better than saying it sucks, in fact, it's probably worse because it has an air of authority. But if the arguments proposed are based on reasonably

objective information, then they aren't attacks even if highly unfavorable.I formed my opinions about personal attacks pretty quickly, but didn't change my mind about commercial posts for a couple of years. I always thought anyone should be able to plug their products. But then after a while, I began to see some favoritism and some manipulation of the forums over at the previous discussion website I sponsored. I started to wonder about the motives and ethics of the webmaster and moderators there. I gradually noticed some people's posts regularly deleted while others were allowed to remain as permanent advertisements. Some could write promotional messages complete with prices and contact information while others weren't even able to mention their names.At first, I thought it was because the ones getting deleted were troublemakers. I blamed the participants, thinking they were at fault. I thought there were probably infractions of some kind that I hadn't seen, and things I wasn't aware of. So I didn't pay much attention to complaints of this sort when they would surface. But then I saw some people post harmless references to their work - People that I knew personally and knew they had never done anything but be perfect gentlemen. When I started noticing their posts getting deleted, I knew there was some favoritism going on. So for the last year I sponsored the other website, I became pretty vocal behind the scenes about these problems.Most people don't even notice that sort of thing. Most people could care less. That's why they can get away with it. But it has an insidious repercussion that I've since realized is even more objectionable than the mere allowance or disallowance of a free advertisement here or there. Once this kind of thing is allowed, the tone of the website is artificially manipulated. Products that might not be popular in their own rights are made more popular because posts about them are allowed to stand, while other products that might be better seem less popular because they are deleted.Over at the other site, this went to an extreme and became really bad. There were a few rabid regulars that could be used to attack people by proxy. They were easy to manipulate, just plant a few seeds in their minds. Stir the pot, make a few attacks and blame someone in a telephone call or private E-Mail. The next thing you know, the messageboard would be filled with attacks and you would think that the whole world was down on a particular company, product or organization. All because one person had manipulated events to give this impression.There were also the favorites that were given constant praise, much more than they would have been given on their own merits. This is because the tone of the website had been artificially sweetened by regular "atta-boy" posts from a vocal minority. Between those plugs and the self-promotion they got away with, these favorites were basically editor's choice vendors. They were given artificially inflated reputations, and positive reinforcement from the group tends to balloon it even more. Some of these impressions spread beyond the group and affect public perception.The moderators of a discussion board website are like editors of a magazine. All the participants are independent authors. If the editors single out something and consistently remove references to it, it will appear to be somewhat unpopular. But the truth may be that it is very well liked, and the website moderators are trying to generate a false impression hoping to reduce its popularity. The opposite is also true. If promotional plugs are allowed to stand, then a zealous person or small group of people can make something appear to be very popular when it really is not. Look for a product that is over-represented on a particular messageboard and what you've found is more than likely an example of this kind of thing.I spoke with a friend on the telephone yesterday about a situation just like this. He has had problems with a group over at the other website. There is some selective censorship going on there. Big surprise. One group can post all they want about their products, but he is limited in what he can say. This kind of protectionism makes one party look a lot more popular than the other, when in fact, there probably is no reason for it other than the whims of the messageboard website owner.We could easily run into the same kinds of problems here if we relaxed our rules on commercial posts. There are a few of us here that are regular participants and that also have

small companies going. Since we've become friends with one another, we would be tempted to look the other way when one of us posts a plug here or there. And at first, it would be innocent enough. It would probably be helpful in most cases, pointing out an option to someone and giving them a good solution.But then later, we'd suffer the same fate as the other site. If some of us make plugs, then everyone needs to be able to get away with it. But some people would annoy us, and the moderators would delete their plugs and point to the rule about self promotion. Right then and there, we would have set favoritism into motion, with some people being ART insiders and others left outside. The outsiders would complain that they were censored, and they would be right. Of course, the moderators would delete their complaints too, after all, they were irritating to begin with. Soon, we would be smug in our arrogance, and we'd be no better than the tabloid website we all just left.I've had a few small company representatives write to me asking how to make posts on AudioRoundTable.com. I get the feeling that the prohibition of commercial posts kind of cramps their style. I usually suggest that they simply stick to the issues, and avoid discusion of specific products. I mean, I am in the same boat as everyone else. I can talk about corner loading of woofers. I can talk about horns. I can talk about crossover slopes. I can talk about DI matching. Basically, I can discuss all of the ideas that I think are important, and I can talk about why I think they're important. If people agree with those ideas, then they probably will like my products. I don't have to mention them by name. This kind of discussion is just as constructive, in fact, more so.The only thing that is forbidden for me is to suggest my specific products in the non-sponsored forums. I can reply to direct questions, but I can't turn it into a sales pitch. I can't launch into an open-ended discussion about one of my speakers. I can't reply to a general question with a suggestion to buy or use one of my products. But I can suggest a type of system, and it probably will be something that I employ in one of my loudspeakers.Basically, the way for a company representative to participate is to suggest ideas, and not specific products. That will do as much to spread the word as anything else, and it has the added benefit of being useful to anyone who reads it. If a guy can't do this, then chances are he doesn't have any good ideas anyway.Just my 10¢