

Before starting a “Brains Trust” Question and Answer session Mike J highlighted two points of caution on the internet.

The first was to advise everyone to follow our emailed warning a couple of weeks ago to disable Java in web browsers following advice from Homeland Security in America. Java is a programme that helps with web browsing, but has been found to contain security weaknesses that can be exploited by hackers. Not all computers will be vulnerable and not all versions of Java are affected, but unless you are expert, it is better to be safe. There is plenty of advice on-line.

Google ‘How to disable Java’ and choose advice you can follow for the operating system you are using.

The second warning was that the normal credit card guarantee does not apply to purchases made through the Amazon Market Place because you are not buying from Amazon, but from the person using it to publicise the goods. The legal difference negates the banks guarantee.

Mike advised members to be aware how their store cards are allowing the store to build a picture of spending and shopping habits. The power of computers enables the store to ‘mine’ the mass of information it (legitimately) obtains in order to target specific advertisements. It makes their advertising budget and their stock control system more efficient and helps keep prices down.

Howard pointed out that there is growing concern that this information is being used to offer higher prices to on-line customers with higher purchasing power as shown by their spending history.

This invoked a discussion about “Cookies”. The on-line information is gathered by cookies. A cookie is a small piece of data sent by the website to be stored on your machine. It notes what you looked at and remembers it (on your machine). Next time you visit the site, the site checks to see if there is a cookie and if there is one, it uses it to help load the web page you want. Cookies are harmless in that they cannot carry viruses or install nasty little programmes on your machine. They can be time-saving by recognising who you are and saving logging-in time and effort. A tracking cookie can hold a lot of information about your history on that site.

Sometimes a site will use a cookie from a third party specifically to compile users’ browsing histories. It is this sort of cookie that makes many people concerned about their privacy.

Anyone who objects to this sort of privacy intrusion can arrange for all cookies to be deleted after every browsing session. This can be done manually or automatically (and they can be backed up before being deleted in case you want some back later). Google “Delete Cookies” to read all about it.

