

In this month's *Finding It on the Net*, let's look at the problem of getting help with your sophisticated test gear. With the splits, rapid mergers and shut downs of many electronic test gear makers, it is common to find yourself with a high-end piece of valuable equipment that no longer has any direct support and has become an orphan.

Just figuring out what happened to the manufacturer can be a chore, and getting manuals, parts and calibration or repair assistance can be mind-boggling in complexity.

First, some quick history in an attempt to explain what on earth happened to all these companies:

- In 1999, Hewlett Packard split into Hewlett Packard (www.hp.com) for computers and peripherals, and Agilent Technologies (www.agilent.com) for test equipment and analytical equipment. Then, in 2005, Agilent divested its RF semiconductor portion to Avago Technologies (www.avagotech.com).

- In 2007, Danaher Corp. (www.danaher.com) bought the test equipment manufacturer Tektronix (www.tek.com). Previously, Danaher had bought Fluke Electronics (www.fluke.com), a test equipment manufacturer that previously had acquired Wavetek, a test equipment manufacturer that had merged with Datron, another test equipment manufacturer.

- For added confusion, the RF portion of Wavetek became Willtek Communications, which you can find at www.willtek.com/english. Prior to this, Wavetek had acquired PMI/Pacific Measurements, which offered microwave test equipment; however, those assets eventually wound up as part of Gigatronics, a microwave test equipment company, which mercifully is still around (www.gigatronics.com).

- IFR, long-time avionics test equipment icon, and Marconi, the RF test equipment maker, both became part of Aeroflex, an electronic systems and test equipment company (www.aeroflex.com).

Dizzy yet? Well, just be glad we are not talking about semiconductor manufacturers.

Now, the question becomes: How do you get help with items considered "out of support" from all these companies or when the company is simply gone?

Here is where the Internet really steps in to provide volunteer support on a level that would have been impossible a few years ago. List groups, composed of former employees, users, repair stations, hobbyists and interested observers, now exist for many of these product lines. They offer an amazing depth of information, documents, parts, support and troubleshooting skills on many items now abandoned by the original makers.

As an interesting aside, ongoing discussions from these list groups about how Agilent and Tektronix had abandoned customer support, even to the extent of manuals on many early instruments, soon was noted by Agilent, and led the company to build up a growing library of PDF manuals, which can be downloaded from the Agilent website for no charge.

Tektronix also released public permission for free duplication of older, out-of-support copyrighted Tektronix manuals to aid users with their older equipment.

The power of e-Press can be quite significant, as this demonstrates — but full credit should go to both makers for reacting well to their public.

Still, when parts are gone, it's no easy task to support something.

Here are some of the most popular groups:

- Tektronix: <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/TekScopes>
- HP/Agilent: http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/hp_agilent_equipment
- Agilent: <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/agilent>
- ALLtech/Eaton/AIL: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AILtech>
- Manual Exchange: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Manual_Exchange

Another interesting group that could prove useful to *Avionics News* readers is the Mode S group at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Mode_S.

If your quest for repair parts fails, you can try eBay to look for a junker model like yours to strip for parts. Sometimes, it's the only way to breathe life back into that critical instrument.

In addition, you can find an index of these referenced links, as well as an index of other useful technical tidbits, at Sphere Research's engineering links at www.sphere.bc.ca/test/data.html, or visit the *Avionics News* archives at www.aea.net/avionicsnews for "Finding It on the Net" links.

If you have comments or questions about this article, send e-mails to avionicsnews@aea.net.