Scanner Tales 134: Little things that make our scanner lives easier

In many of my Scanner Tales I mention some tool, device or gadget that makes my life easier. Here are a few of my favorites. I am sure that many of you have used these in your shacks or have some other neato-cool thing you can share with us.

Some of these things are pretty common but I found I cannot live without them. Others are more obscure. Here are a Baker's Dozen of things that I like and make my life easier:

1) Little flashlights

20 years ago, our police chief got a deal on these little Streamlight "ProTac 1L" LED flashlights and handed them out to all of the guys at the annual meeting. Like most police gear they come in one color; "Police Tactical Black". It really doesn't matter what you are trying to sell to cops, just paint it black, call it "Police Tactical Black" and cops will buy it.

I retired a few years later and was allowed to keep my baby Streamlight. I found out that it was extremely handy to have around. When I am poking around in the depths of my radio cabinet trying to fix an issue, trying to see some tiny print on a circuit diagram or adjust something on a radio that little light just about perfectly fits my needs.

When I am working in the attic, I flip the clip around and attach the little light to a ball cap. It makes for a great and comfortable headlight. Out in the car if I am trying to plug something into one of the scanners it allows me to see what I am doing. If I am in "dark mode" in the office at night I can just point it at the radios to find the proper L/O key etc.

20 years later I am still using that little light. I buy a 12-pack of batteries every few years and tend to go thru 3 or 4 batteries annually.

2) Furniture Lifter

When we bought a batch of those nylon floor sliders a few years ago off of Amazon one of the things that popped up was a furniture lifter. I thought at the time it would be a great thing to have and promptly forgot about it. A while later we bought a new dining room set and the delivery/set-up man had one of these, using it to pop in his own sliders. I then went back to Amazon and bought one. While it works great for furniture, I found that I tend to use it more often on my radio cabinets.

My cabinets get heavy, with 10 radios and several accessories in them. I like to run cables under neath them for other stuff on the desktop and used to use a rubber door-stop. I still had to lift the darn thing

up to pop in the doorstop, that wasn't easy.

With this little (13 inch long) lifter thing I can easily lift the cabinet enough to slide the cables under the feet. It has paid for itself over and over again. It was only about $10 but is worth every penny.

3) Label Maker

Back in the mid 1990's I bought one of those P-Touch label makers. Remember that Seinfeld episode where the labels fall off the boxes and caused mayhem and confusion? Yep, one of those. As it turned out we started our rebuilding of the police station soon after I bought mine. I brought in my label maker, and we used it extensively throughout the building. The department paid for the label stock of course and we soon bought another label maker identical to mine. 30 years later I still have mine and the last time I visited my old department they still had theirs. I use it all the time, I label coax runs (both ends of course!) USB cables and more.

I also have my own home inventory database of electronic items. Each one gets what we call an "Owner Applied Number" with a label with my callsign and that unique number. I have a database in FileMaker Pro that I keep track of these things and have fields for the real serial number, my OAN, the name and description, as well as other info like IP addresses, update codes (for Uniden scanners), date or acquisition and value. I make the labels with my trusty P-Touch and apply it to the device.

I use it to post info like the programmable button uses on my two-ways, what scanners have what upgrades and more. They are just too darn handy!

4) Weak Electric Driver

Why would I want a cheap WEAK electric driver? Well, to protect myself from myself. I have a couple decent electric drill/drivers and they are awesome but when I am working on a scanner, my radio cabinet or something less sturdy I don't want to tempt fate with a big, strong driver. I opt instead for my cheap Sam's Club "Fanttik" driver. It works great for these projects yet is not strong enough to strip the heads or overtighten most screws. It even has a little LED light to help my old eyes see what I am screwing and keeps me from screwing it up.

5) Multi-bit screwdriver

Next time you are at HomeDepot, Lowes or Harbor Freight keep an eye on the racks near the cash register for these red-handled screwdrivers. They typically have a reversable shaft with 2 dual-sized screwdriver inserts, one flat and the other Phillips. One thing you might not have known is that the shaft itself is also a nut driver. They market these as "6-in-1" screwdrivers. I found that the nut driver fits the SEMS screws that I use perfectly.

These things are cheap, under $5 each when on sale. My local HomeDepot had them on sale for $2.99 a

few years back, I bought a half dozen. I keep one in the car, one in the office, one in the kitchen and the others in each of workbench's drawers. They work fine for 95% of the tasks one would need a driver for and if you lose it or the bit gets worn, they are cheap enough to buy a couple for the price of that latte you got on the way home last night.

6) Phone Camera

Sure, we all have these. You have to really search around these days to find a phone that doesn't have a camera on it. Most of use gave up on "real" cameras, the latest iPhones and Androids are as good or better these days than the $3000 digital camera (and equal amount spent on lenses) I have sitting in a closet.

These can be really handy to have around the shack or out and about. Find a new freq on CloseCall while out driving around? Take a picture of the scanner screen to note the find. When you get home you can go back thru the pictures and log them as needed.

Relocating some device and need to remember what was plugged in where? Take a picture and refer to that when restoring it. I think we all have used the flashlight on our phones in a pinch as well.

7) Parts Grabber

A decade ago, I had dropped a socket into my car engine compartment and could not reach it. The next day I happened to go to a local Harbor Freight store and came across a Parts Grabber. This is a 24" flexible metal rod with a plunger knob on one end and a 4-prong grabber at the other. Press in the plunger and the prongs separate a bit to allow you to grab a dropped socket, screw, or whatever. Let go of the plunger and the prongs close in to hold the item.

This is great for grabbing a small piece of hardware that you dropped into the cabinet someplace. I also found it a great way to fish wires in, thru or under something. Before I discovered that furniture lifter, I would use this to pull a cable under the cabinet. Poke it thru, clamp on the cable and pull it back.

Recently I could not find my grabber so went on Amazon and bought a new one. This one has a little LED light on it which is just bright enough to help.

8) Microfiber cloths

Next time you are in Costco or Sam's Club pick up a package of those blue or yellow microfiber cloths. They are great for wiping down dusty radios and monitors, desktops etc. They are cheap enough to throw away after getting too dirty, but you can launder them if you are really cheap. If you live in a dusty area like I do (Phoenix is as well known for its dust as it is for its heat) they are invaluable. I keep one in the office always and wipe down the desks, monitor tops and other stuff a couple times a day. My wife thinks I am crazy but between crumbs and ambient dust I have to keep things clean in here.

In the car they are even more necessary. Cars these days have large touchscreen displays and between the dust and fingerprints they get pretty gross after a week or so. I wipe the display weekly and then wipe down the dashboard and other surfaces. The scanner displays also seem to collect dust and fingerprints somehow.

9) Alcohol wipes

Once every few years we pick up a box of 500 of those little individually wrapped alcohol wipes. I keep a pile here in the office, another pile in the car and more in the shop. When my scissors get gunked up with adhesive from Velcro straps (See item 10) these help me clean them up. My little pocketknife I use to open my mail or Amazon packages gets the same treatment. My phone screen is filthy? Yep. Even the radios themselves sometimes need some TLC.

What seems to benefit most from these little cleaners are my mice and computer keyboards. The silicone pads get pretty well caked with stuff from the desks and the keyboards get pretty gross after a while. Once a month or so I tap the keyboard upside down to get the dust out then clean the keys with the alcohol wipes. On the mice I clean off the gunk from the silicone pads. Back in the days before optical mice ruled the day I would use alcohol pads to clean the mouse balls and rollers.

10) Velcro Straps

These things are invaluable! I have them holding together all kinds of cables all over the house.

I buy 3 main types of Velcro stuff: Pre-cut straps with retaining slots, rolls of double-sided strapping that I cut to length and Velcro strips with adhesive. The precut straps are used to bind cables in the cabinet, around the desk or when stored. The rolls of double-sided Velcro (with hook on one side and loop on the other) are great for larger tasks such as coax or larger bundles.

I use the adhesive stuff for mounting things like power strips, USB hubs and multicouplers in a cabinet or under a desk. It is remarkedly strong and can hold a lot of weight. It allows one to install devices where otherwise they might not be able to. For example, in my radio cabinet I have 2 USB hubs, one mounted on the side and the other in the ceiling of the interior of my cabinet.

I have pretty much stopped using Zip Ties nowadays in favor if Velcro straps.

11) Fingernail polish

Yeah, this is kind of weird but bear with me here. With multiple radios it is easy to forget which knob is for volume. That is the knob I most often use so I grabbed a bottle of my wife's best (and most expensive as I found out later) fingernail polish and started to paint the volume knobs of each of the radios in my shack a bright red. When I realized I did not have the artistic genes in my person, I asked

her to do it for me. When she saw the bottle I was using, she freaked out. Apparently, this was a hard-to-find color she was saving for New Years, and she paid $50 for it. She went back and grabbed a cheaper bottle that was a bit less bright but still sufficient for the job.

In retrospect I suppose I could have used White-Out instead. It would be cheaper but not as durable. Also, I didn't have any at home at the time, so fingernail polish it was. Just ask the wife first to be sure you don't get in trouble.

12) Parts Bins and boxes

These are indispensable these days. I have 3 parts drawers out in the garage, one for machine screws (I even bought a thread sizer to allow me to separate them for size), another for other hardware (wood & sheet metal screws, nails, etc.) and the last for RF adapters. This is just the start of my insanity though.

I have several dozen of those plastic shoebox sized boxes. I keep them in my garage cabinets and have them labeled for their contents. One is for Icom parts and accessories, one is for Uniden, another is for 12V wall-warts, another for PowerPole devices etc. In my Radio cabinet in the garage, I have about 40 of them on two shelves, 3 or 4 boxes high, 6 stacks on each shelf. In my Computer cabinet next to that I have a similar arrangement. I have stacks of these elsewhere around the house and in the shop.

13) Canned Air

Hand in hand with the microfiber clothes, canned air is a great tool for dusty environments like this. I buy the multi-packs from the warehouse club, and I use up a can every couple months. I also use it to blow out shavings when I have to drill into the case of a radio. Recently I used canned air to clear out the applicator of a can of "Good Stuff" foam filler I used on my PVC pipe containing the coax runs to my attic from my office.