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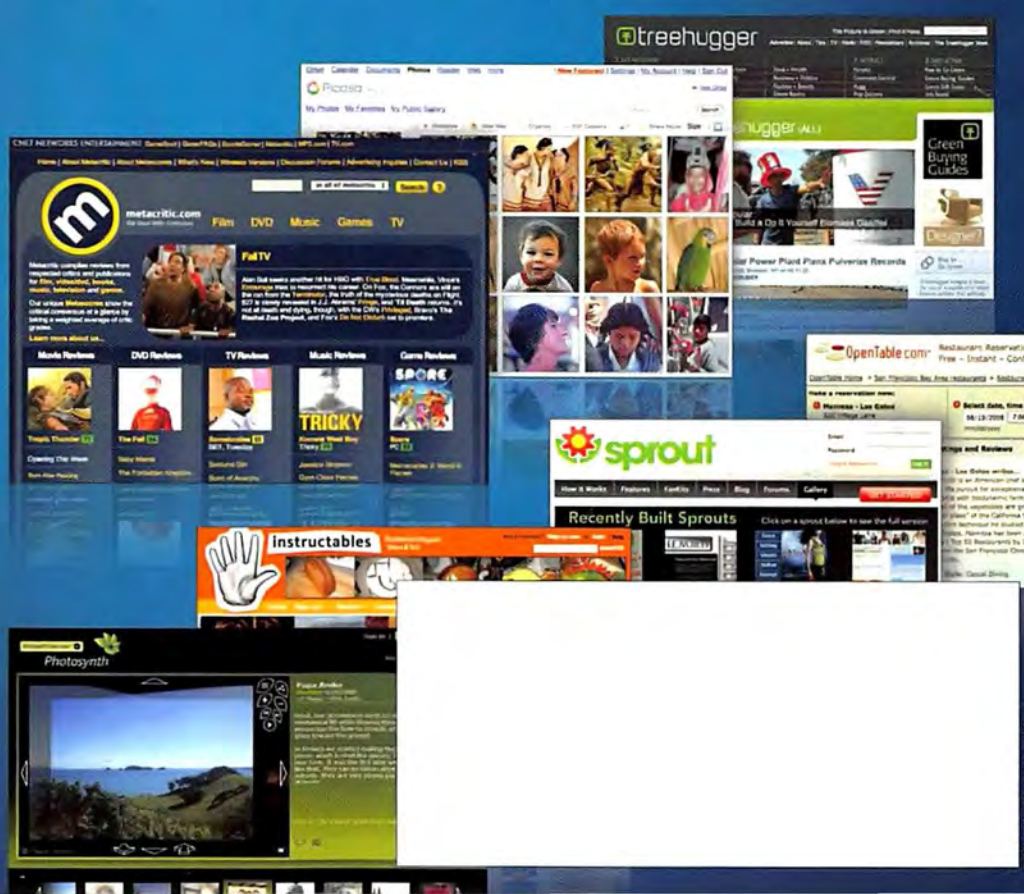
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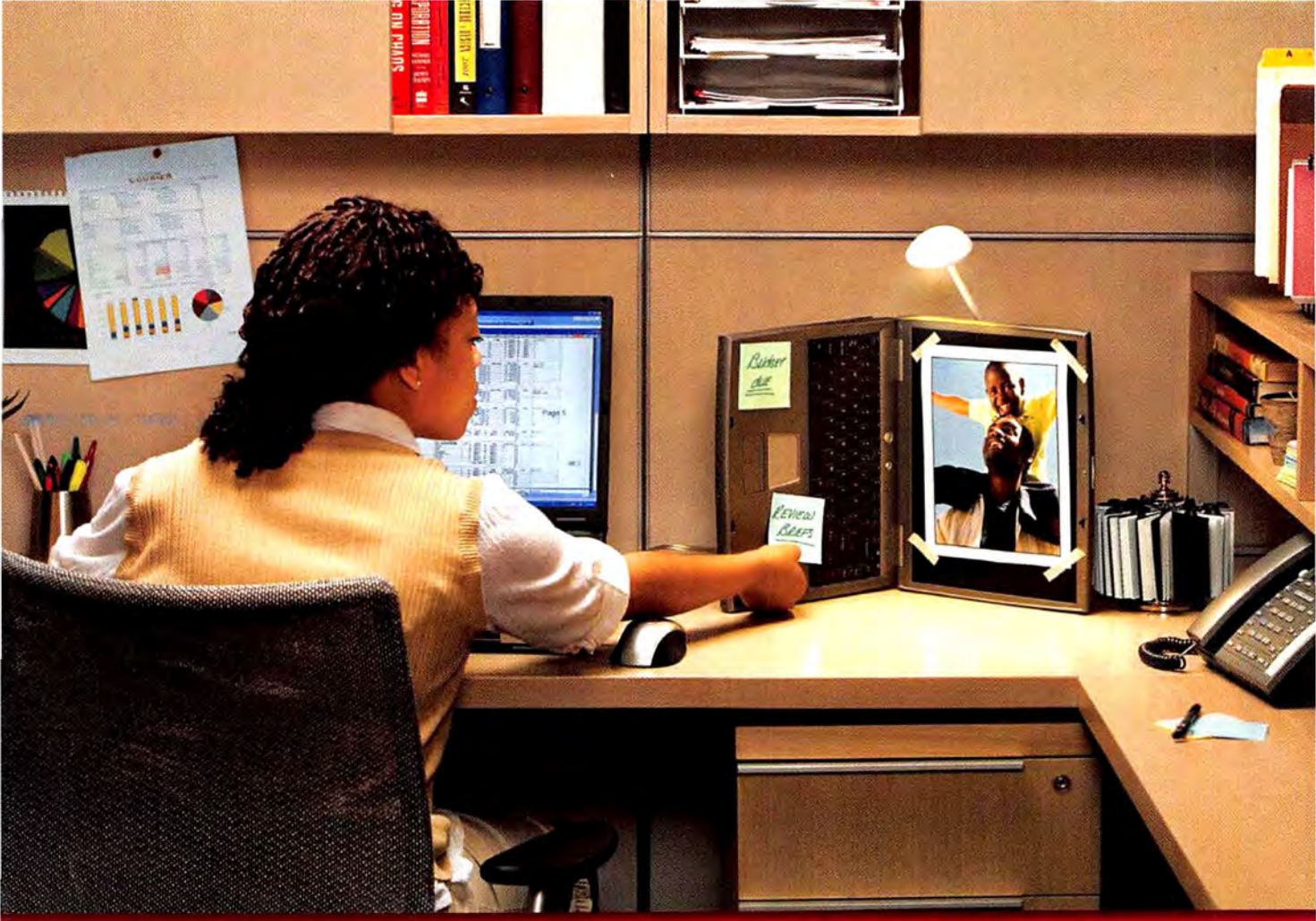
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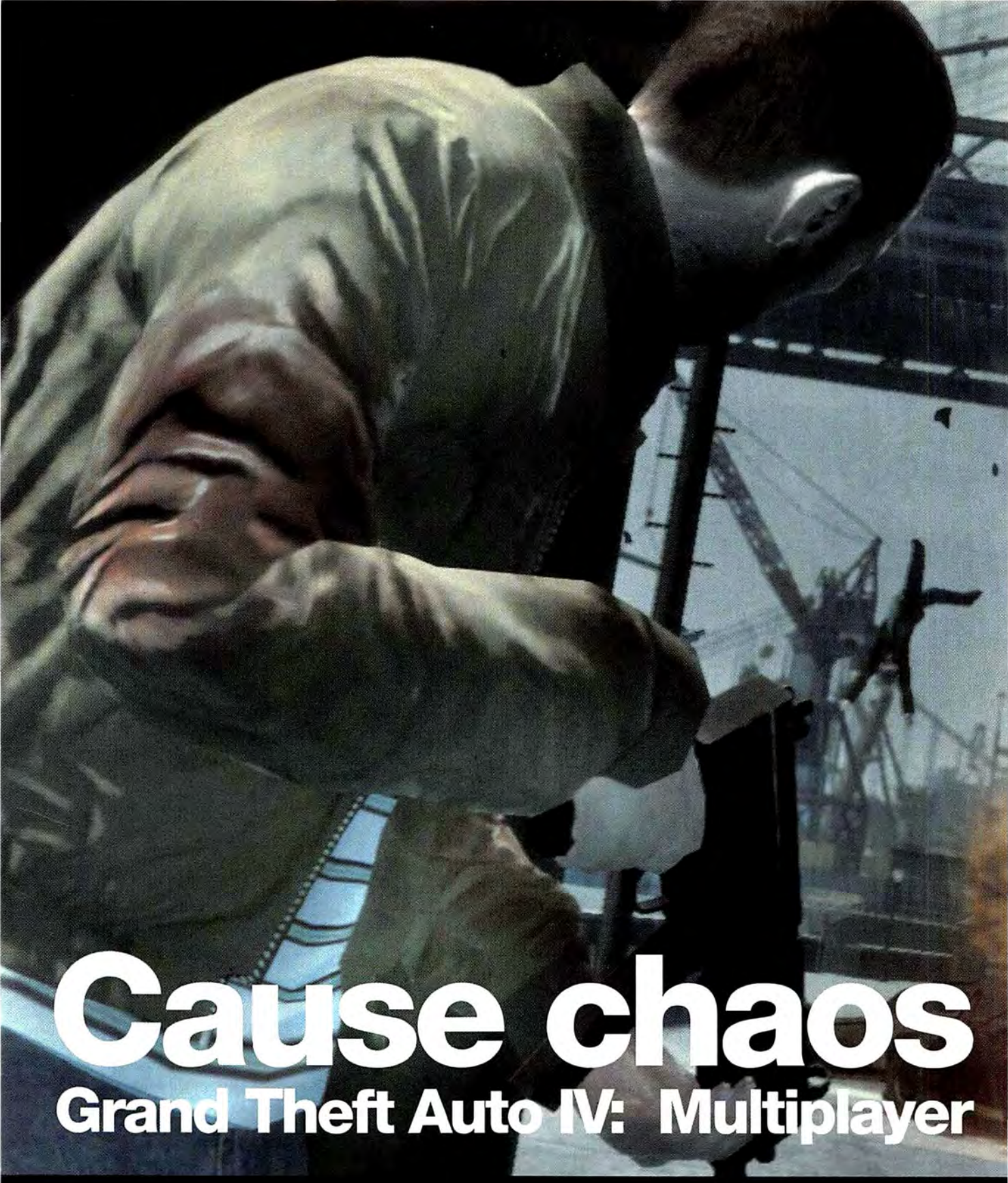
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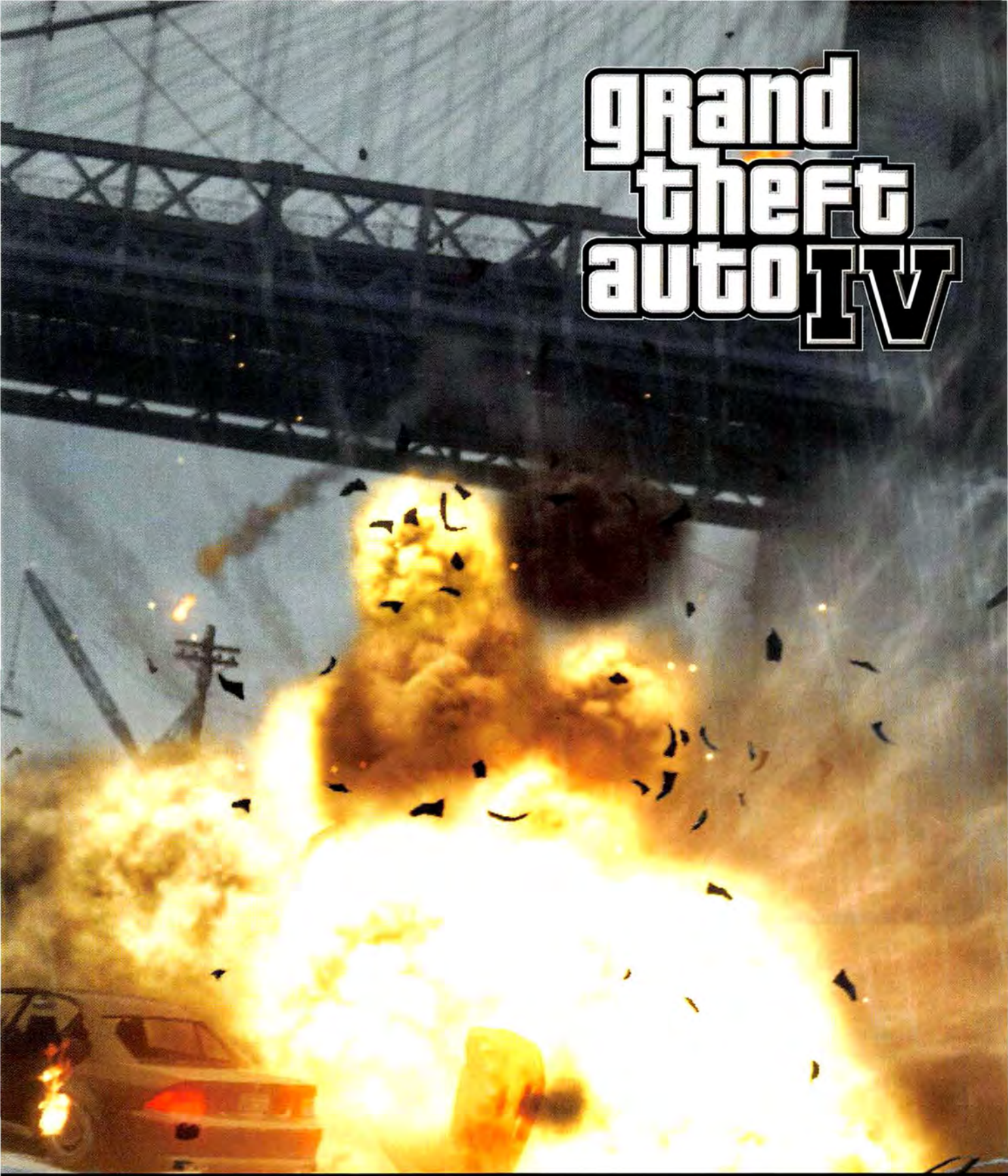
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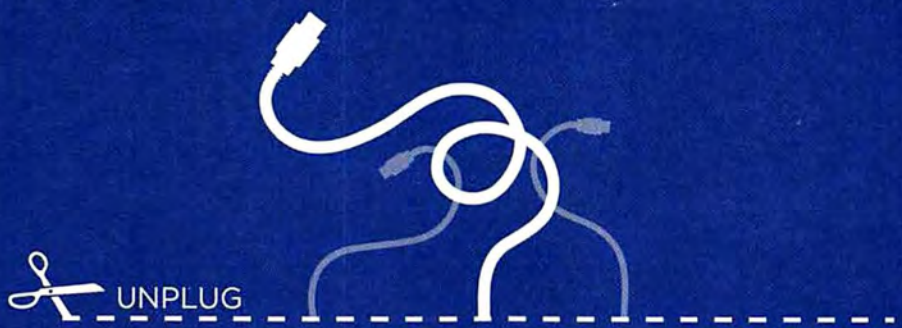
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Five Ways Tech Stores Can Regain Our Trust

Best Buy, Circuit City, Office Depot, Radio Shack: If you don't want Amazon and Newegg to bury you, follow this advice.

Special LIST Issue

THIS MONTH WE'VE gone loony for lists: Most of the articles in this issue follow the easy-to-read list format that we've found popular on PCWorld.com. We continue to draw lessons from working on our Web site—but apparently, some of the biggest electronics store chains haven't. CompUSA is mostly kaput. Gateway Country Stores: Out to pasture. Good Guys: Gone. Sharper Image: Shuttered.

And many of the chain stores that remain have become poor places to buy tech products. If they don't get it together, soon we'll all be shopping at stores with names ending in *.com*, and we'll have to buy everything sight unseen. Here's my list of five things that retail chains must do to survive.

Don't suck

BestBuySux.org doesn't bash Best Buy anymore (the former owner says he got tired of it), but IHateBestBuy.com and others have taken its place. The Web is rife with complaints from people upset over big retailers' treatment of them.

My advice: Lighten up on the high-pressure sales tactics, focus on customer service rather than on customer yield, and do a better job with services—like repair work—that we can't get online.

Don't make products in the store cost more than online

Someday, it will be second nature for customers to compare retail prices with online ones by whipping out their cell phones. When that time comes, retailers who haven't adjusted will only serve as hands-on showrooms for lower-margin online retailers—and then disappear.

Best Buy, for example, often sells items for less online than at its stores. A Kodak EasyShare M1033 camera was priced at $200 in a Best Buy store; the same camera, albeit in different colors, cost $180 if you agreed to buy it online. This is still the case more than a year after the company was accused of maintaining in-store kiosks that quoted shoppers higher prices than on Bestbuy.com (see find.pcworld.com/61720).

But why should I purchase something from Bestbuy.com when I could just as easily buy it instead from Amazon for less money (the M1033 went for $170)—and not have to pay sales tax?

If Best Buy and other retailers want people to shop at their Main Street stores, their store prices must be consistent with their online prices. And with gas as costly as it is, their prices had better be good, or people will stop investing in trips to the stores.



Tell me what you have—before I get to your store

A few weeks ago, I saw the Canon SD790 IS listed in Office Depot's Sunday flyer; but when I drove to a local store, the camera wasn't on display. In its place was a piece of paper that said, in effect, "Take this form to the register to buy this product." Sorry, but I didn't burn $10 worth of gas to try out a piece of paper.

Online databases often show what is available at a particular store—great information—but some stores lack them. They should also say whether the product is actually on display.

Don't treat your employees like soon-to-expire meat

In 2007, Circuit City fired 3400 workers who made too much money—on average, a whopping $10 to $11 an hour. In 2006, Radio Shack fired 400 employees via e-mail. Meanwhile, stores pressure sales reps to pressure customers to buy accessories and extended warranties.

Not only would I not want to work at one of these stores, I wouldn't want to buy anything from one, either. Why should I want to shop at a store where the employees are likely to be either angry and afraid for their jobs or new and clueless about the products?

Stop playing price games

Enough with the mail-in rebates, instant rebates, prices after instant savings, and prices *before* instant savings. Just tell me the price, make it good, and have it last longer than 4 hours.

Oh, that Canon I wanted? I ended up buying it on Amazon for $90 less. ●

Alan Stafford is executive editor of PC World.

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PCW Forum



Is Microsoft becoming passé? September's "15 Ways Microsoft Can Reinvent Itself" provoked readers into showing just how strong feelings about the software giant can still be. Tell us what you think of Microsoft and its future by going to find.pcworld.com/61701 and clicking 'Comment'.

Reinventing Microsoft

In "15 Ways Microsoft Can Reinvent Itself" [*Forward,* September], I liked #4—"Treat customers like kings, not peons"—the best. The company should vastly improve customer service and communication. Did you know it is impossible to send a complaint or suggestion to Microsoft unless you use snail mail or call a paid support line? That I can't just send an e-mail is ridiculous. Every company should care about what its customers are thinking or saying, and be willing to help if possible.

Suzanne Lanoue, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

I'm all for Microsoft offering Web-based programs, but where do you expect these things to be hosted? The Microsoft/Yahoo merger would have made all of that possible, and Yahoo blocked it. Microsoft isn't stupid; it wouldn't intentionally refrain from innovating because that would bury the company. But it's seen as the big evil entity, and I'm sure that had a major impact on Yahoo's decision.

phantasm74, from the PC World forums

The problem with Microsoft is simply a lack of competition. The end result for the consumer can be higher prices and reduced innovation. And when it comes to service, how many companies would dare pass off flawed beta-level (test) software on consumers as finished products—and then force them to act as evaluators without providing any free technical support?

Kip Koehler, Prescott, Arizona

I have to say, "Right on!" If Microsoft were a human being, it would be on a huge ego trip. Its attitude that all other computer companies should be crushed and that everyone should use Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office and not ask any questions is very annoying and arrogant. This latest deal about dropping Windows XP reaches the height of absurdity. I know that the bank I deal with uses Windows XP, and other banks still use Windows 2000. Microsoft's edict about discontinuing Windows XP support could easily backfire on the company.

Beth Jane Freeman, Wantagh, New York

PC Audio Reborn

I am a fairly blasé audio buff, and my PC audio setup is mostly pretty conventional. But I still like to read about audio (especially about audio-fools and their $400 speaker cables). So I was interested but skeptical when September's *Geek Tech* by Tom Mainelli claimed that software could upgrade a PC's audio.

As he suggested, I installed both foobar2000 and the ASIO4ALL driver. Then I fired up one of the good audio files on my computer.

It took about 1 second for me to notice something was definitely different, definitely better—such clarity out of recordings I thought I knew well!

I am rediscovering my digital music, and I can only say, "Thank you, Tom!"

Didier Juges, Shalimar, Florida

TV on the Web

The article "The Best TV on the Web" [September] was one of the best I have read in your magazine. I immediately went to Hulu to sign up and quickly caught up on the minutes I had missed in new episodes of *Prison Break*. I will probably get around to watching some of the movies available on Hulu, too. I didn't mind the limited ads by the sponsoring companies, either. All of this for free...life is good.

Keith A. Beauregard, Wheaton, Illinois

Regarding '12 Sly Web Tricks' [find.pcworld.com/61700]: Beware! Some bosses visit PCWorld.com or receive its newsletters too; forewarned is forearmed! So be careful out there!

LHart, from the PC World forums

Google, Cloud Computing, and Chrome

Steve Bass's article to the contrary [find.pcworld.com/61703], Web browsers like Google's new Chrome cannot and will not be operating systems until they start providing basic input/output services between the hardware and the user.

In my opinion, this whole app-on-a-server business (the poorly named "cloud computing") is no more than »

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a fad. And even if it isn't a fad, the trend certainly won't even begin to threaten any real operating system.

Will Chrome threaten IE? Quite possibly. At least I hope so. Microsoft seems to do good work when backed into a corner. Will Chrome destroy Windows? Don't make me laugh.

nulluser123, from the PC World forums

12 Sly Web Tricks

These "tricks" [find.pcworld.com/61700] are entirely irresponsible, especially coming from a heretofore reputable entity. You are just feeding the fires of trouble that immature people create on the Internet already.

housknecht, from the PC World forums

I must admit, the Upside-Down-Ternet is hilarious. I had just encrypted my own wireless connection, so wish I had found this neat trick sooner. I may give it a try someday.

Kilme, from the PC World forums

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CORRECTION

IN SEPTEMBER'S ARTICLE "Store Your Music Online With MP3tunes," we stated that MP3tunes.com provides 25GB of free music storage. After we went to press, however, the company downgraded its free storage offering from 25GB to 2GB.

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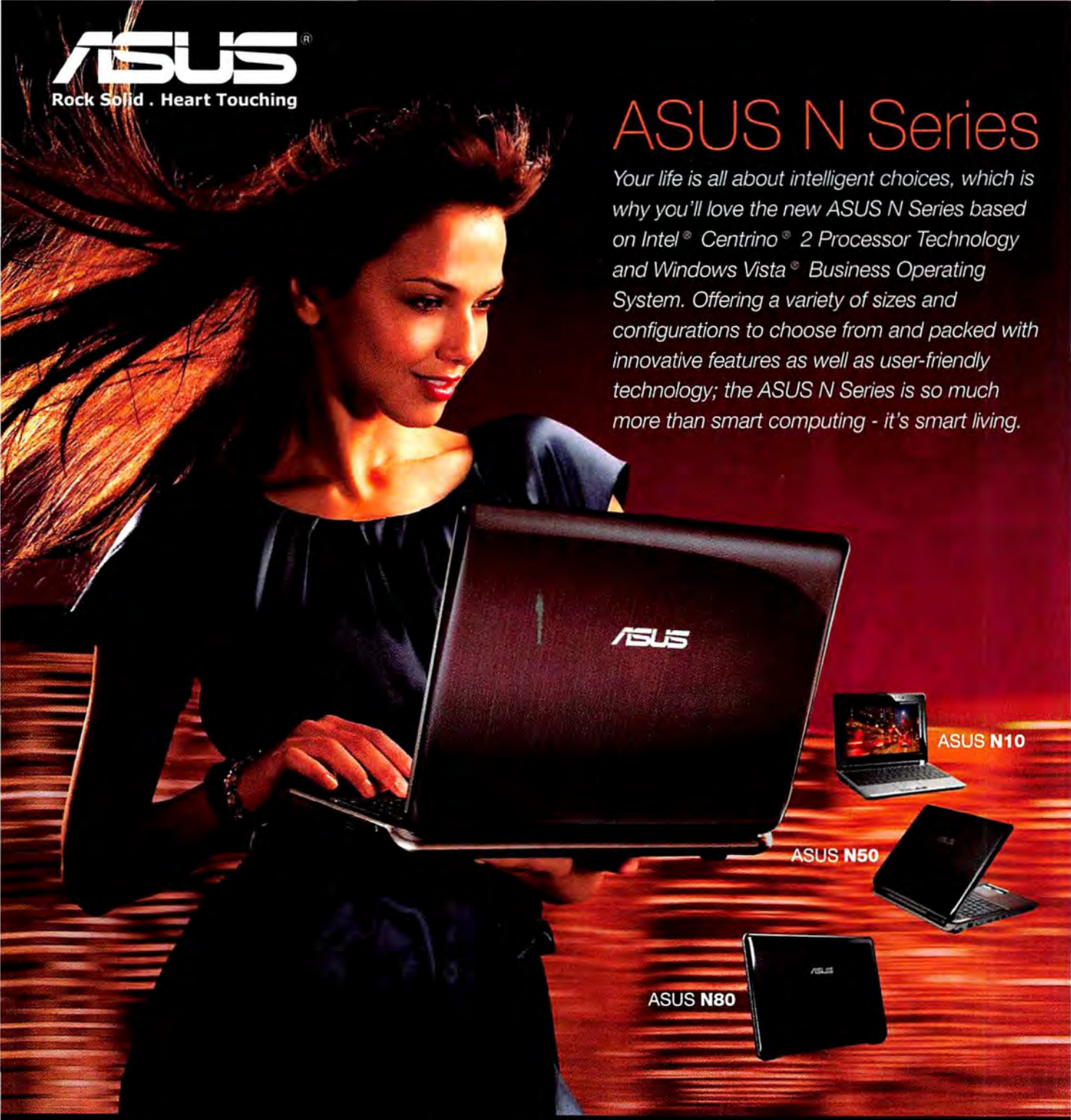
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Eight Ways Twitter Will Change Your Life

BY DAN TYNAN

People are using the microblogging service that allows posts of 140 characters or less for bigger, more important tasks; here's how it's evolving.

Special LIST Issue

IT SEEMS THAT everyone is atwitter about Twitter. Yes, other microblog services with insufferably cute names, such as Pownce, Jaiku, and Plurk, are around. But Twitter has quickly become the de facto choice for creating really, really short blogs.

Twitter has grown by 600 percent in the past year, according to co-founder Biz Stone. Aside from telling the world what they're doing every blessed moment, people often use Twitter to drive traffic to Web sites or to promote products and services. But users have begun adapting it for a variety of other tasks—and before long, you too may be using it for the things in this list. A second list, on page 22, identifies obstacles that may trip up Twitter. But first, the eight positives.



Blow the Weather Channel Away

Forget rain-soaked reporters in flapping windbreakers. You want real-time updates as the hurricane, tornado, or brush fire approaches? Tune in Twitter on your cell phone.

"I like to use the earthquake this summer in Southern California as an example," says Twitter's Stone. "It struck at 11:42 a.m. That very same minute the first tweets starting coming in. Nine minutes later the Associated Press put out a 57-word wire story, but by then we already had 3600 updates containing the word 'quake'."

Find Your Next Job or Employee

When Jackie Peters, founding partner of marketing firm Heavybag Media, was looking for a new social media strategist, she naturally turned to Twitter. "Using Monster.com or Craigslist would have generated a stack of resumes from unqualified candidates," she says. "I figured if the candidate wasn't on Twitter, they most likely weren't right for the job."

It can help people seeking work as well. Stephanie Martin's quest for a job started with searching Twitter for people in her field (public relations) and in her target market (Phoenix). She began following the head of PR for her alma mater, Northern Arizona University. Soon she was following—and being followed by—some of the top PR agencies in the area, and then flying to Phoenix for interviews. "The hardest part was explaining how I knew the person who'd arranged the interviews," Martin says. "Because I'd never met or spoken to him; we just tweeted."

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ILLUSTRATION: GREG CLARKE

Ditch Google—for Some Things

Human-powered search engines like Mahalo.com and ChaCha.com may be struggling to capture a small fraction of Google's market share, but Twitter trumps them without breaking a sweat.

"Twitter has displaced Google for some kinds of searches," says Jonathan Yarmis, who tracks emerging technologies for AMR Research. "Sometimes Google results are good, and sometimes they're funky. When I put a query out on Twitter, I instantly get back two or three contextually relevant answers."

Round up Your Posse in a Hurry

Take Meetup.com, add Twitter, and you get tweetups—where Twitter users agree to meet at some IRL (in real life) location. There's no way to measure how many Twitterati attend them, but a Google search reveals thousands of tweetups in locales from Tokyo to Tallahassee.

The biggest challenge, according to Yarmis, who has attended tweetups in the Boston area, is getting people to stop tweeting on their cell phones long enough to actually talk to each other.

Boost your Boob Tube's IQ

And the first Twitter TV star is...CNN's Rick Sanchez? The newscaster broke new ground in August when he put viewer tweets—along with cell-phone photos and videos taken from Facebook and MySpace—on screen during his daily program.

At press time, Al Gore's Current TV cable station announced that it would stream filtered user tweets across the screen during this fall's presidential debates. Expect more tweet-on-the-street reports coming to a television set near you.



THE HEAVY-HITTER TWITTERERS: You can sign up to follow the U.S. State Department's tweets alerting you to global instabilities while you travel.

Tweet the CEO

Got a beef with a company? Twitter may be your best route to the people who can help. At the same time, a company can gauge what customers are saying about it and prevent small problems from becoming big ones.

Online shoe store Zappos encourages its employees to use Twitter, and the company set up its own Twitter site to capture every tweet that mentions it, says CEO Tony Hsieh. "Customers really like feeling more personally connected," says Hsieh, who occasionally gathers feedback on new ideas from his more than 11,000 followers. "It's a way to develop a deeper relationship with them."

Comcast, Dell, Kodak, and JetBlue also use Twitter for customer outreach and support. Of course, the odds of your getting a personal reply from a firm's CEO are slim. But you might get lucky.

Save Your Skin

Berkeley grad student James Karl Buck discovered the life-saving properties of Twitter when he was arrested by Egyptian authorities last April after photographing an anti-government protest. He had time to tweet one word—"Arrested"—on his cell phone before he was hauled off. Buck's Twitter friends besieged the U.S. embassy with inquiries, and he was released a day later.

The State Department recently began using Twitter to issue advisories to citizens traveling abroad. So, should you ever find yourself in a tight spot while overseas, »

PLUGGED IN ALAN STAFFORD

GOOGLE ANDROID APPEARS: But on T-Mobile only. So now geeks can hack their iPhones to work on T-Mobile, or alter their Androids to work on AT&T.

GOOGLE GIGS UNITED: Airline's stock crashes after an analyst digs up old story. Was it old news, or does Google have a crystal ball (in beta, of course)?

GOOGLE WOOS YAHOO: Search giant says proposed deal with Yahoo won't increase online ad rates. Oh, Microsoft's acquisition try? *Totally* anticompetitive.

I WANT PRIVACY: Google announces it will remove users' search records after nine months. Your Googledentity will then be completely Googlenonymized.

IT'S OLD NEWS: Google says it's going to digitize old newspapers. Are we sure it's not just looking for alternative fuel sources to power its data centers?

IS GOOGLE OVEREXPOSED? Let me google that and get back to you; I'll either Gmail you, Blogger it, IM you on GoogleTalk, or call you on my Android.

Twitter could be your get-out-of-jail-free card. Talk about changing your life in a single tweet!

Twitter by the Numbers

Total Twitter accounts: **2,980,083**

Most followed: Barack Obama, **79,693**

Most tweets: Internet Radio, **511,402** updates

Average tweets per hour (3 pm UTC): **27,000**

Number of Twitter tools and add-ons: **140+**

NOTE: ALL figures as of 6 PM ET, September 16, 2008.
SOURCES: Twitdir, Twitterholic, TweetRush, Mashable



Stay on Top of Breaking News

CNN Breaking News, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* all maintain Twitter feeds. Nevertheless, tiny operations such as BreakingNewsOn that also have a Twitter presence can sometimes beat them to stories, and mere citizen journalists often provide live snapshots of important events as they unfold.

When police arrested protesters at the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis last August, Twitter-fueled news teams were out in force. As MinnPost blogger David Brauer wrote, "By late afternoon...a well-fed Twitter 'follower' would've seen far more of the landscape than anyone not at a surveillance camera: live raid video (via iPhone!), detainee interviews, search warrants, press conferences, post-bust interiors, maps, and more."

Four Reasons Twitter Could Tumble

Twitter's ascendancy from Web 2.0 curiosity to essential tool isn't a sure thing. It could still be tripped up in several ways, assuming that it isn't snapped up first by an industry biggie like Microsoft, Google, or Facebook. It faces at least four pitfalls.

Too Darn Popular

Too often Twitter users log on, only to see the "fail whale"—the cetacean icon Twitter shows when the volume of tweets overwhelms the site's ability to keep up. The site claims better than 99 percent uptime for the previous three months, says Biz Stone. That's with an estimated 3 million users, per the Twitdir user directory. (Twitter doesn't release actual subscriber numbers.) What happens when the user number reaches 30 million?

The Evils of Crushing Banality

Does anyone else really care what your cat ate for lunch? Whether the shampoo you just tried out makes your hair oh so shiny? As Twitter continues to grow, the volume of self-indulgent tweets may drown out more-useful information—and drive more productive tweeters to other venues.

Spam and Scams

Twitter spam is already a depressing reality, though the company has dedicated staff to eradicating the fake profiles that spammers set up. "Spam is an ongoing battle, and we're not backing down," says Stone.

Business Model? What Business Model?

"Spam is an issue for Twitter, but the lack of a business model is or should be of far greater concern with respect to Twitter's viability," says Kevin Restivo, a senior analyst with IDC.

The flip side of the issue? An advertising-based model might turn off people drawn to Twitter because it's both free and ad-free. Stone says Twitter has experimented with advertising on its Japanese site, but he won't comment on future plans. AMR's Yarmis believes that ads or fees are probably inevitable.

"I think we're getting to the point where Twitter will offer privacy for sale," says Yarmis. In other words, if you don't want to see ads, you may have to pay for the privilege or get a less functional version of the service.

TWITTERING BY TWITS

Three Ways You Probably *Shouldn't* Use Twitter

BIRTH: Ah, the miracle of birth, filled with joy, wonder, screaming, and blood. And yet, Carmen Leilani tweeted it all. As she notes in her blog, "Some people think it's insane that I was updating my Twitter stream throughout my childbirth/labor experience—as in during my contractions, from the hospital bed, through my water breaking, my epidural, and immediately after pushing out the Pod." What's worse, we wonder—obsessively announcing how many centimeters you're dilated, or referring to your newborn as "the Pod"?

DEATH: Reporter Bernie Morson of the *Rocky Mountain News* probably thought he was being cutting edge when he tweeted the funeral of a three-year-old boy, but it was just morbid. Let's hope we never have to read "family members shovel earth into grave" on Twitter again.

THERAPY: In September, licensed clinical hypnotherapist Wendi Friesen launched "hypno-twitter," which she says "will use my hypnosis skills to give my tweeples an instant hypnotic boost of confidence, stress relief, focus, and mental toughness during their day." Right now, we are feeling sleepy, very sleepy. Soon we will submit to being called "tweeples."



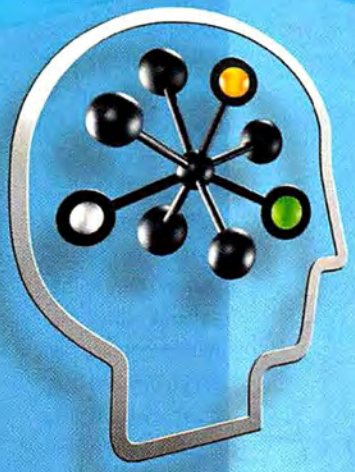
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Photo Printing Sites' Prices Plummet

SITES SUCH AS Shutterfly, SmugMug, and Snapfish have dropped the cost of turning your digital images into prints by as much as 30 percent from two years ago.

In 2006, a *PC World* review of the leading online photo companies found an average cost of 15 cents for a 4-by-6 print, with the low end bottoming out at 12 cents. Today you can snag a snapshot from those same services for less than a dime. For example, Snapfish charges 9 cents per 4-by-6 print, versus 12 cents two years ago. SmugMug charged $2.99 for 8-by-10 prints back then; today it charges just $1.99.

Competition is also fierce from lesser-known entrants, such as PhotoFun.com, which offers 4-by-6 images for as little as 5 cents a pop, and PhotosFree.com, which charges nothing for 4-by-6 prints and ships them free.

"One of them goes down in price, the other ones are forced to respond," explains Dimitrios Delis of the Photo Marketing Association International. He says the sites make their profit by selling you items such as scrapbooks and custom calendars.

For a list of services' printing and shipping fees, see find.pcworld.com/61691.

—J.R. Raphael

GADGET FREAK DAN TYNAN



Small Gestures: Talking to Tomorrow's Tech

IT WAS A typical Saturday morning, and my children were swinging nunchuks at each other again. Though my son and daughter go medieval on each other several times a day, I wasn't worried. They were just using the Wii.

The Wii's success is truly phenomenal. All but dead in the console race three years ago, Nintendo is now leaving Sony and Microsoft in the dust. (In July, Nintendo sold more Wii consoles than Sony did PlayStation 3s or Microsoft did Xbox 360s combined, The NPD Group reports.) The biggest reason, aside from its low price: its easily mastered, gesture-based interface.

> Forget about typing, clicking, or talking; the interface of the future will be—literally—in your hands.



"Gesture interfaces are the most natural, intuitive, transparent ways to interact with the digital world," says Michel Tombroff, CEO of Softkinetic, which makes gesture-recognition software used in games and other applications. In fact, gestures are easier for computers to handle than speech recognition, since they don't have to account for differences in pronunciation.

The Clapper's Great Legacy

The Wii has inspired consumer electronics manufacturers to reach beyond the handheld remote, says Scott Nazarian, principal designer for Frog Design, a San Francisco–based product design consultancy. For example, at the 2008 Consumer Electronics Show, JVC demonstrated a prototype LCD TV that let you turn it on or off, control the volume, and change channels just by snapping your fingers or clapping your hands.

Nazarian says in a couple of years you'll be able to buy an HDTV with infrared sensors and cameras built into the bezel that create a 3D topographical map of the room. When someone walks in—or if you turn your head to talk to them—the TV will detect that and pause the action, then resume when it has your attention.

Likewise, gesture recognition is coming to mobile handsets in a big way, says Daniel Longfield, strategic analyst for Frost & Sullivan. The iPhone, of course, responds differently depending on how you move your finger across its touch screen; but other phones, like Sony Ericsson's F305, have built-in motion sensors, so you can play games using Wii-like movements to, say, toss a bowling ball down a virtual alley or cast an imaginary fishing line.

Nazarian believes that such interfaces could even spawn a gesture-based language that influences pop culture; in ten years our children may communicate via gestures learned from using tech devices—a new vocabulary totally alien to older generations.

Eventually we'll move beyond playing charades in front of our PCs to controlling devices using nothing but brain waves, says Longfield.

Sound like science fiction? It's not. OCZ's Neural Impulse Actuator (or "NIA") will let you control video games by wearing a headband that detects electrical biosignals in the body. The device is available at Amazon for $140. And Brown University scientists have created a brain implant that allows quadriplegics to move a mouse cursor just by thinking about it.

The full convergence of man and machine is probably still decades away, so mice, keyboards, joysticks, microphones, and remotes won't disappear entirely, at least not anytime soon. But over the next few years we'll be using them less and less, and controlling devices with our bodies more and more.

ILLUSTRATION: EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM

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Intel's New SSD Drive Delivers Fast Performance

PCW Test Center

A drive with new technology lives up to the promise of the solid-state format's advantages over traditional, magnetic disk–based media.

FINALLY, a solid-state drive capitalizes on the theoretical advantages that solid-state memory offers over platter-based hard drives. Intel isn't new to SSD, but it looks to reinvent the rule book with its latest—and most mainstream—storage product, first announced at August's Intel Developer Forum.

The Intel X18-M and X25-M drives were to begin shipping in September as OEM drives in laptops, but later in the year Kingston Technology will sell the drives at retail under its name. The drives are designed to fit 1.8-inch or 2.5-inch laptop SATA hard-drive bays, respectively, and both lines come in 80GB and 160GB versions. The units employ multilevel-cell (MLC) flash technology, with complex wear-leveling algorithms to handle the write stresses placed on drive technology.

The biggest news, however, lies in the new drives' performance. In the PC World Test Center's evaluation of an engineering sample, the X25-M dramatically outperformed a 4200-rpm platter drive, a 7200-rpm platter drive, and another SSD drive from Ridata.



INTEL'S NEW SSDs come in 1.8-inch and 2.5-inch versions, and in 80GB and 160GB capacities.

Solid Performance

Compared with a 4200-rpm Toshiba MK2035GSS hard drive, the 80GB Intel X25-M SSD showed big gains in all but one of our seven tests. Disk-intensive tasks generally showed improvements.

It most cases the results were dramatic: For example, to copy 3.06GB of files and folders, the X25-M required just 63 seconds; the Toshiba drive took four times as long (256 seconds) to perform the same task. A 7200-rpm, 200GB Hitachi hard drive and a 128GB Ridata NSSD-S25 drive fell in between.

On one test, the Intel drive barely outpaced the other SSD drive we examined. The Intel took 323 seconds to scan our test PC's 3.2GB folder for viruses, while the Ridata took 329 seconds; both the Toshiba and Hitachi drives trailed significantly.

For all tasks combined, the Intel SSD required 35 percent less time than the next-fastest unit, the Ridata SSD. And in power-consumption tests, the Intel drive drew 27 percent less power than the average of the others.

Intel's Fresh Take

To understand why Intel's model has the potential to deliver improved performance over previous attempts at SSD, you have to understand how data is written to flash storage.

The SSD's controller manages both the flash memory and the data flow to and from the host. To write 1GB of data, a typical SSD needs to write 20 to 40 times that amount of data to complete the 1GB write. Data gets written in blocks into both DRAM and flash memory; by the time the drive is finished with one operation, it has actually written, in a common example, 32GB of data to change 1GB of data. The complex process bogs down the movement of data through the SATA II bus controller, as well.

Intel has changed the write strategy by introducing its so-called write amplification technology. Write amplification is defined as the amount of NAND flash writes performed for a requested amount of data writes from the host computer. Instead of requiring 32 times the write cycles, as mentioned in the example above, the multiplier is now only 1.1 (or slightly less, according to the company)—and the amount of overhead is dramatically less, too.

Intel rates its drives for five years of useful life, assuming up to 20GB of data written each day. The company also rates its drives for 1.2 million hours mean time between failure—a specification that hard-drive makers typically reserve for their enterprise-class drives.

—Melissa J. Perenson

Intel's SSD Dusts Platter Drives, Older SSD

INTEL'S SOLID-STATE DRIVE shows great performance on most tasks, and it's a power-saver, too.

HARD DRIVE	Drive size	Task[1]					Total watt-hours
		Copy files and folders	Virus scan	Install OpenOffice	Nero disc imaging	WinZip file compression	
Intel X25-M (SSD)	80GB	**63**	**323**	**22**	**266**	**252**	**12**
Ridata NSSD-S25 (SSD)	128GB	177	329	62	476	353	16
Toshiba MK2035GSS[2]	200GB	256	564	52	847	272	22
Hitachi HTS722020K9A300[3]	200GB	152	452	34	579	281	17

FOOTNOTES: [1]All performance times are in seconds; best results are in red. [2]4200-rpm drive. [3]7200-rpm drive.

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New Nanos, Walkmans, and Zunes

APPLE MAY OWN the digital audio player market, but that doesn't stop Microsoft and Sony from trying for a piece of the pie. All three companies introduced new flash-based players in September that are similarly sized, priced, and equipped.



SONY'S NWZ-S738 COMES with noise-canceling earphones.

The latest iPod Nano combines the larger screen of the third-generation Nano with the slender design and vibrant colors of the second generation. The 8GB unit sells for $149 ($50 less than its predecessor), and the 16GB version comes in at $199. At its thickest point, the iPod Nano is 0.24 inch—a barely perceptible 0.06 inch thinner than the previous model. This Nano is also about 0.5 ounce lighter than its predecessor.

The latest flash-based Zune holds 16GB and costs $199; a new hard-drive model holds 120GB and costs $249 (the same as a 120GB iPod Classic). New software will let Zune owners discover, tag, and purchase songs they hear on the built-in FM radio. It will also give personalized music recommendations, similar to what the Nano's Genius feature does.

At about 0.3 inch thick, Sony's new player is the slimmest Walkman yet, but it's the same thickness as the previous-generation iPod Nano. The NWZ-S738 will include noise-canceling earphones, as well as an FM radio; it holds 8GB and costs $180. It will also have Sony's new SensMe Channels function, which automatically creates channels based on the user's preferences.



THE NANO REVERTS to a vertical orientation; its dimensions are similar to the new Zune's.

For more on these players, see find.pcworld.com/61699.

—PC World Staff

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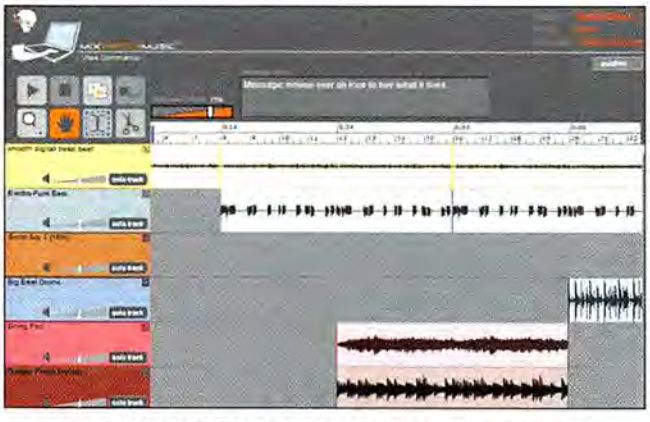


GreenSherpa: Financial Forecast

Lots of financial services are good at telling you what you've spent in the past and how much money you have right now. But so far few online money-management systems have attempted to explain to you how much you'll have next week or next month, especially if you decide to buy the cool new laptop you've had your eye on for a while. Making cash-flow projections is difficult, but GreenSherpa's system (now in private beta) looks as though it could work. While it lets you account for regular bills, it also simplifies the task of entering one-time expenses or factoring in a bonus check you're expecting. greensherpa.com

MixMatchMusic: Getting the Band Together

Traditionally, bands have been some variation of four guys from Liverpool—friends who start out just playing music together and later decide to get serious. But what if you live in Livermore instead of Liverpool and you can't find three other musicians in the local scene who are interested in playing the kind of music you like? MixMatchMusic's service should help. Individual musicians can upload their favorite bass lines or drum patterns. Then a guitarist looking for good accompaniments to his or her new lick can browse through the various offerings and mix the individual components together to form a complete song. If other visitors to the site like the tune enough to download it, all of the artists involved get paid automatically. mixmatchmusic.com



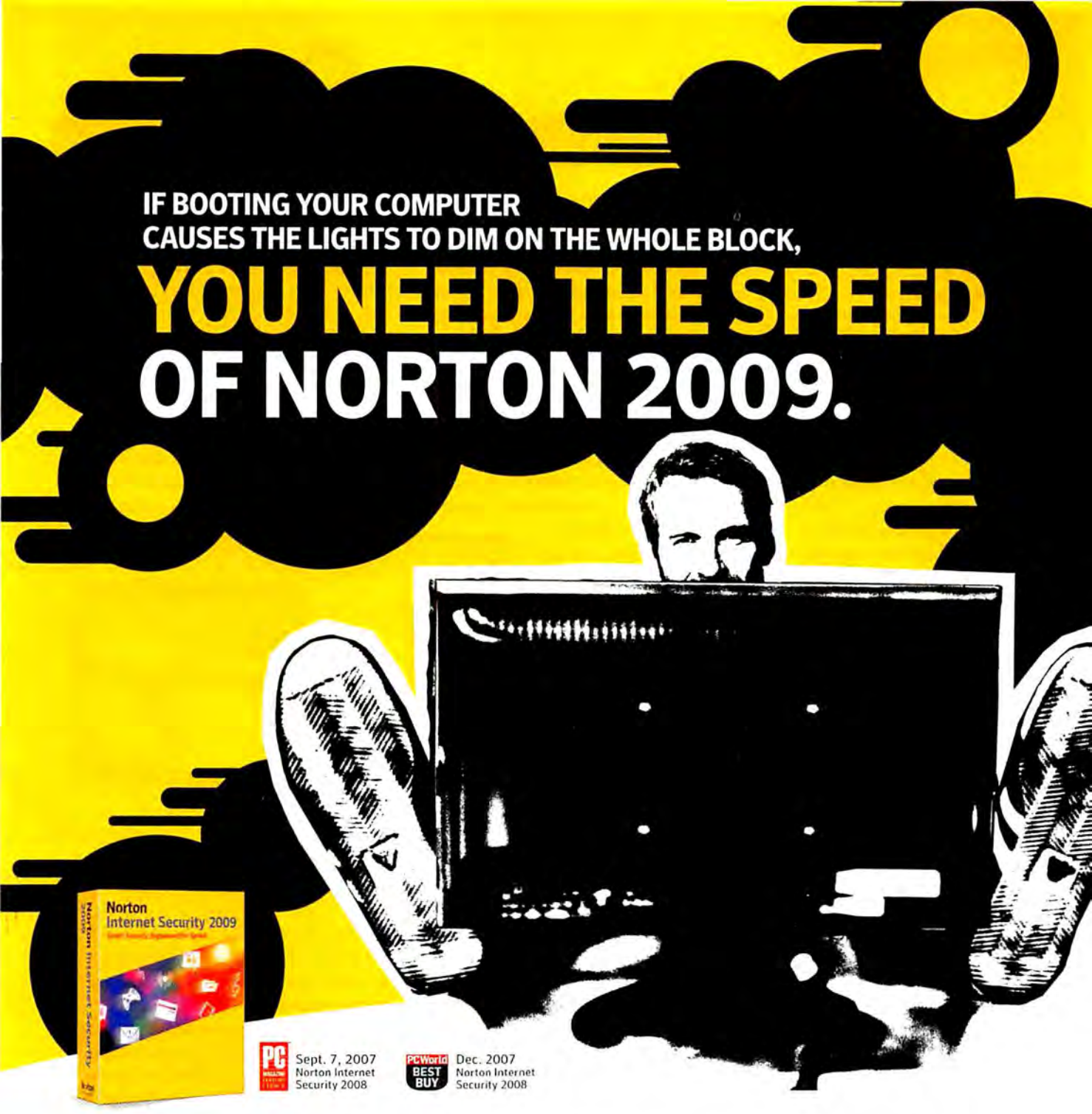
MIXMATCHMUSIC.COM HELPS MUSICIANS get together to develop a song, share it—and even get paid for their collaborative efforts.

iSearch: Find Long-Lost Friends

Whenever a company pitches a new search engine designed to track down people, I test it by searching for a guy with whom I shared a cockroach-infested apartment in Boston. iSearch is the first people-finding engine to pass my test. The free site conglomerates information from public records, social networks, white pages, news sources, and professional connections. I can't wait to reconnect with my old friend. I just hope he's forgotten all about that $200 I owe him. isearch.com

IF BOOTING YOUR COMPUTER
CAUSES THE LIGHTS TO DIM ON THE WHOLE BLOCK,

YOU NEED THE SPEED OF NORTON 2009.



PC Sept. 7, 2007 Norton Internet Security 2008

PCWorld BEST BUY Dec. 2007 Norton Internet Security 2008

Introducing the revolutionary Norton Internet Security™ 2009. Intelligent security software that won't slow your system down. Norton Internet Security 2009 features Norton™ Insight, a new technology that delivers precision security by targeting only those files at risk resulting in fewer, faster, shorter scans. And Pulse Updates refresh your protection every 15 minutes or less for up-to-the-minute defense against breaking online threats. And all this protection adds less than 10 seconds to your boot process. Norton Internet Security 2009. Buy it for the protection. Love it for the speed.
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Coming Next: Gigabit Wi-Fi

THE IEEE GROUP putting the finishing touches on the 100-megabits-per-second 802.11n wireless LAN standard will soon launch a project for a 1-gigabit-per-second WLAN standard.

The study group is looking at two frequency bands: 60 GHz (where lots of unused spectrum is available), for relatively short ranges; and under 6 GHz, for ranges similar to those of today's WLANs in the 5-GHz band—that is, 802.11a and 11n.



"The basic idea right now, and that's subject to change, is that the 'maximum mandatory mode' on a single link would be [at least] 500 mbps," says Tushar Moorti, director of systems architecture for chip maker Broadcom's WLAN Business Unit. "But the further requirement is that [an access point] device that supports very high throughput (VHT) would be able to sustain multiple links, so the aggregate would be over 1 gbps."

VHT will also be backward-compatible with the full range of existing and emerging 802.11 standards, such as 11i for security and 11s for mesh networking.

One version of the IEEE proposal suggests a completion target date of 2012 or 2013 for the standard.

—John Cox

GEEKTECH TOM MAINELLI



Visualize Your Data in Whole New Ways

I SPEND AN inordinate amount of time working in huge Excel spreadsheets that represent data about the worldwide PC monitor market. Excel's pivot tables and charts are useful, but sometimes I still struggle to find the trends buried in all those numbers.

So I did what any geek would do: I looked for an app that could help me. I found Tableau Software (www.tableausoftware.com), which recently launched version 4.0 of its Desktop and Server analytical software clients. Put simply, you point Tableau at your data file, and it creates an interface that lets you drag and drop elements of the data to create visual representations that can be easier to understand than Excel's own pivot tables and charts.

> Tableau's visual representations of data are easier to understand than long lists of numbers.

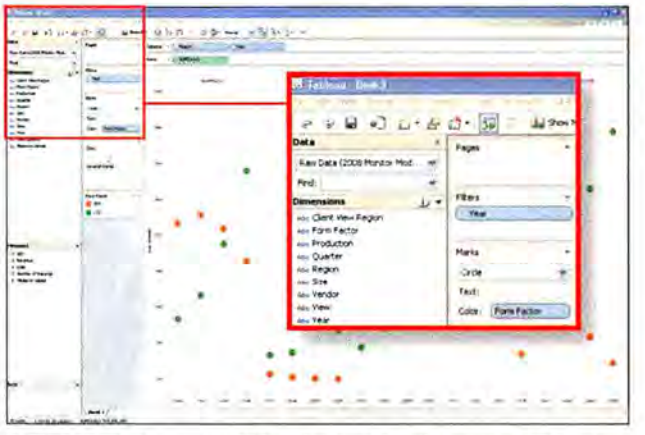
Tableau Basics

Here's a simple example: My data shows that in recent years, CRT monitor shipments have declined steadily in all five of the global regions that I track, while LCD monitor shipments have been on the rise. To start creating a graphical representation of that trend in Tableau, I point the software toward the Excel file where all of the data is contained.

After a few moments of processing, Tableau generates an interface that displays all the dimensions and measurements in my Excel file. I drag and drop dimension elements into the columns and rows in Tableau, and then the Units measure into the table itself; afterward, Tableau generates what looks like a pivot table. When I click the 'Show Me' button, the software shows a list of the possible visual representations it can offer based on the data set I've given it. For this example, I select the Circle chart.

Tableau thereupon generates a chart using small orange circles or dots for CRTs and green ones for LCDs, graphically displaying four years' worth of sales results in a way that is easy to grasp (see the screen shot). And the graphic immediately shows me details such as when each region made the crossover from CRTs to LCDs as a majority of monitor sales. I can roll my cursor over the data points for more details.

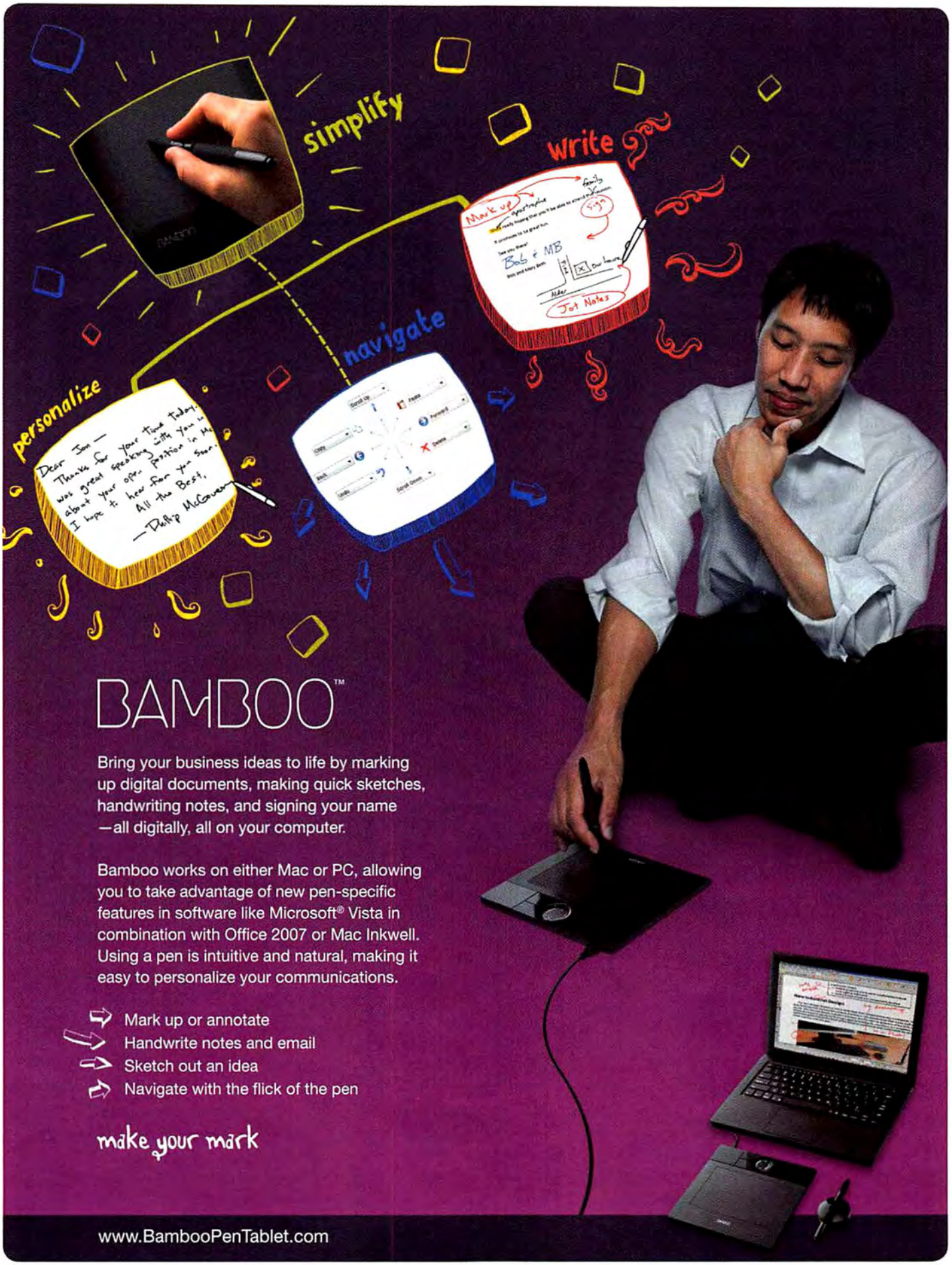
If I want to add another measure to the mix, such as the total revenue for LCDs and CRTs, I can simply drag that measure into the chart, and Tableau generates another visual representation. In this case, the size of the circles changes to represent the amount of revenues (Tableau also creates a new legend for easy reference). This is good, useful stuff, and it's just the tip of the iceberg. The more data you have, the more Tableau can provide in a graphical form.



IN THIS SIMPLE example, Tableau lets me visually compare CRT and LCD shipments across years and across regions.

The company offers two versions of the Desktop application: the $999 Personal, which opens data from Excel, Access, and text files; and the $1800 Professional, which supports a longer list of sources and works with the Server product (about $20,000 for 20 users). The Server client lets you share and manipulate data simultaneously over a network. A free reader lets non-Tableau users view existing files.

The pricing may sound a bit steep, but in the right hands Tableau can give significant insight into your data. The company offers a free 30-day trial of a full version of either Desktop application, so you can give it a spin before you buy. Getting the hang of it took me a short while, but the results were well worth the effort.



BAMBOO™

Bring your business ideas to life by marking up digital documents, making quick sketches, handwriting notes, and signing your name —all digitally, all on your computer.

Bamboo works on either Mac or PC, allowing you to take advantage of new pen-specific features in software like Microsoft® Vista in combination with Office 2007 or Mac Inkwell. Using a pen is intuitive and natural, making it easy to personalize your communications.

- Mark up or annotate
- Handwrite notes and email
- Sketch out an idea
- Navigate with the flick of the pen

make your mark

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amazon.com BEST BUY CDW MacMall PCConnection PCMall

Fun, Fashion-Forward Phones Coming for Fall

NIFTY DESIGNS, SNAZZY interfaces, and music and video galore: A whole slew of trendsetting mobile phone models are slated to debut this fall. It's not enough for your phone to let you make calls, of course—now the handset must also play music, show live video, snap high-resolution pictures and movies, incorporate large touch screens and QWERTY keyboards, write to massive amounts of flash memory, communicate over high-speed cellular and Wi-Fi data networks, and have GPS.

Otherwise, you might as well carry around a tin can and some string.

For more information, see find.pcworld.com/61718.

—Ginny Mies and Melissa J. Perenson





THE LG LOTUS, from Sprint, is a full QWERTY flip phone; folded, it resembles a square makeup compact. It has built-in GPS, a 2-megapixel camera, and a 2.4-inch display, and it holds up to 12GB of memory.

VIRGIN MOBILE USA'S Shuttle provides access to social networking communities. It's also the first to use location-based services from uLocate.



SAMSUNG'S OMNIA HAS a 3.2-inch WQVGA screen (which is slightly smaller than the iPhone's) and an optical mouse for navigation. It sports a 5-megapixel camera, too.



RESEARCH IN MOTION'S BlackBerry Bold 9000 features a 480-by-320-pixel, 65,000-plus-color display. It can import iTunes music via BlackBerry Media Sync.



ENCASED IN STAINLESS steel, Sony Ericsson's Xperia X1 offers a 3-inch touch screen with a QWERTY slide-out keyboard. You can customize it with up to nine desktop screens.

Acer recommends Windows Vista® Ultimate.

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October/November 2008

intel Centrino inside™

Performance to go



ASPIRE GEMSTONE blue

Explore the edges of mobile computing

BLUEPOWER

Power is a strong emotion.
You can feel it, sense it, crave it or enjoy it.
The Aspire Gemstone Blue will transform digital entertainment into an unforgettable experience. Enjoy faster multimedia performance with Intel® Centrino® processor technology.
Explore the edges of mobile computing.

Acer® Aspire® 6920

- Intel® Centrino® processor technology
- Genuine Windows Vista® Ultimate
- 4GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 250GB[1] hard drive
- Integrated Blu-ray Disc™ drive
- 6-in-1 card reader
- Acer CineCrystal 16.0" WUXGA (1920 x 1080) TFT display
- NVIDIA® GeForce® 9500M GS graphics
- 802.11a/g/n WLAN, Bluetooth®, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem, webcam
- Fingerprint reader
- One-year limited warranty[2]

Blu-ray Disc™

Acer Aspire 6920-6422

$1,999

Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor T9300
(6MB L2 cache, 2.50GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Ultimate
(LX.APQ0U.090)



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circle-line.eu - ADV

Acer recommends Windows Vista® Business.

Empowering

Acer® TravelMate® 4720

- Intel® Centrino® processor technology
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Genuine Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Ready (60-day trial)[4]
- 1GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 120GB[1] hard drive
- Integrated Super-Multi drive
- 5-in-1 card reader
- 14.1" WXGA (1280 x 800) TFT display
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator X3100
- 802.11a/b/g WLAN, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem
- Fingerprint reader
- One-year limited warranty[2]

The webcam shown in this image is not included on the advertised model.



Acer TravelMate 4720-6220
$769
Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor T7300
(4MB L2 cache, 2GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(LX.TKJ0Z.015)

Acer Monitors



Acer X263WBi
$499
- 25.5" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1920 x 1200 maximum resolution
- 3000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 170°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, HDMI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 350 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms gray-to-gray response time

(ET.GX3WP.001)

Acer B243W bdr
$399
- 24" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1920 x 1200 maximum resolution
- 3000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 160°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 400 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Height, pivot, tilt and swivel adjustments

(ET.FB3WP.001)

Acer SignalUp
This technology strategically positions two PIFA antennas on the notebook's top panel to generate an omni-directional signal sphere for superior wireless reception.

Acer GridVista
Easy-to-use software designed to automatically split the screen in up to four separate windows and make the most of available screen space.

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Acer® TravelMate® 5730

- Intel® Centrino® processor technology
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Genuine Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Professional 2007 (60-day trial)[4]
- 2GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 160GB[1] hard drive
- Integrated Super-Multi drive
- 5-in-1 card reader
- 15.4" WXGA (1280 x 800) TFT display
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator 4500MHD
- 802.11a/b/g/Draft-N WLAN, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem, webcam
- Fingerprint reader
- One-year limited warranty[2]

intel Centrino inside™
Performance to go



Acer TravelMate 5730-6984
$899
Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor T5870
(2MB L2 cache, 2GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(LX.TQH0Z.379)



Acer B223W B bmzdr
$299
- 22" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1680 x 1050 maximum resolution
- 10000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 170°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP), USB signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Height, tilt, swivel and pivot adjustments

(ET.EB3WP.003)

Acer Bio-Protection
Gain an extra layer of security while eliminating the need to remember passwords and PINs with the Acer Bio-Protection fingerprint reader.

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Acer recommends Windows Vista® Business.

Empowering

Acer® TravelMate® 6292

- Intel® Centrino® processor technology
- Genuine Windows® XP Professional
- 2GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 120GB[1] hard drive
- Modular Super-Multi drive
- 5-in-1 card reader
- 12.1" WXGA (1280 x 800) TFT display
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator X3100
- 802.11a/g/n WLAN, Bluetooth®, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem, webcam
- Fingerprint reader
- Three-year limited warranty[2]



Acer TravelMate 6292-6856

$999

Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor T7500 (4MB L2 cache, 2.20GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows® XP Professional
(LX.TG606.082)

Acer Monitors



Acer B223W bdmr
$269

- 22" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1680 x 1050 maximum resolution
- 2500:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 170°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers
- Height, tilt, swivel and pivot adjustments

(ET.EB3WP.002)

Acer B203W bdmr
$229

- 20" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1680 x 1050 maximum resolution
- 2500:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 160°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers
- Height, tilt, swivel and pivot adjustments

(ET.DB3WP.002)

Acer DASP
Disk Anti-Shock Protection is a technology that safeguards the hard disk against knocks and provides an unmatched level of protection.

Acer QuickCharge
Found on select models, Acer QuickCharge technology enables the notebook's battery to be 80 percent fully charged in just one hour.

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Acer® TravelMate® 4720

- Intel® Centrino® processor technology
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Genuine Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Ready (60-day trial)[4]
- 2GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 160GB[1] hard drive
- Integrated Super-Multi drive
- 5-in-1 card reader
- 14.1" WXGA (1280 x 800) TFT display
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator X3100
- 802.11a/g/n WLAN, Bluetooth®, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem, webcam
- Fingerprint reader
- Three-year limited warranty[2]

intel Centrino inside
Performance to go



Acer TravelMate 4720-6218

$999

Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor T7500
(4MB L2 cache, 2.20GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(LX.TK50Z.042)

Acer Acer V223W bmd

$235

- 22" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1680 x 1050 maximum resolution
- 2500:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 170°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers

(ET.EV3WP.002)



Acer CrystalEye

Enjoy all the potential of video conferencing with the integrated Acer CrystalEye, simple to use and compatible with Internet-based video and voice communication services.

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Acer recommends Windows Vista® Business.

Empowering

Acer® Veriton® M460

- Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor or
  - Intel® Pentium® Dual-Core Processor
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Professional 2007 (60-day trial)[4]
- 160GB[1] hard drive
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator 3100
- Gigabit LAN
- One-year limited warranty[2] with limited on-site service[5]

Monitor sold separately



Acer Veriton M460-ED7201C
$579
Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor E7200
(3MB L2 cache, 2.53GHz, 1066MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(PS.V520Z.056)
2GB DDR2 SDRAM, Super-Multi drive

Acer Veriton M460-ED4700C
$549
Intel® Pentium® Dual-Core Processor E4700
(2MB L2 cache, 2.60GHz, 800MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(PS.V520Z.053)
2GB DDR2 SDRAM, Super-Multi drive

Acer Veriton M460-ED7200C
$479
Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor E7200
(3MB L2 cache, 2.53GHz, 1066MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
1GB DDR2 SDRAM, DVD-ROM drive
(PS.V520Z.055)

Veriton Service Upgrades
Next-business-day limited on-site service[5] for years 2 and 3 of Veriton L460 or M460 ownership
(146.AB769.003)
$173

Mail-in/carry-in depot repair coverage for years 2 and 3 of Veriton L460 or M460 ownership
(146.AB769.004)
$68

Acer Monitors

Acer B193 bdmh
$249
- 19" TFT LCD
- 1280 x 1024 maximum resolution
- 2000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 160°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers
- Height, tilt and swivel adjustments

(ET.CB3RP.002)





Acer B193W bdmh
$229
- 19" wide-screen TFT LCD
- 1440 x 900 maximum resolution
- 2000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 160°/160° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA, DVI (HDCP) signal connectors
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers
- Height, tilt and swivel adjustments

(ET.CB3WP.002)

Acer eLock Management
Acer eLock Management locks and unlocks storage media with password protection for additional security.

Acer eRecovery Management
Acer eRecovery Management is an easy-to-use utility to create backups or restore from your archives.

Acer® Veriton® L460

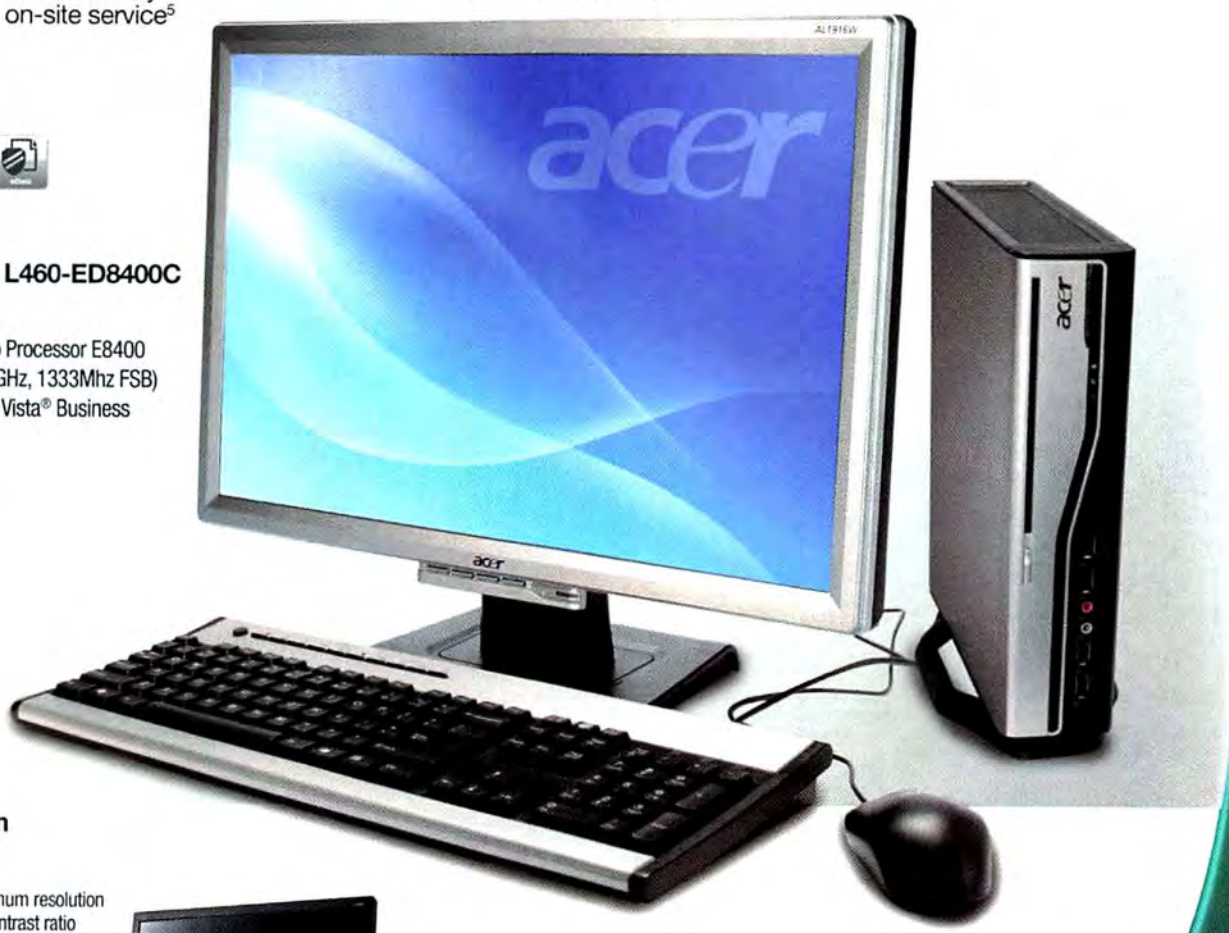
- Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Professional 2007 (60-day trial)[4]
- 2GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 160GB[1] hard drive
- Super-Multi drive
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator 3100
- Gigabit LAN, 802.11b/g WLAN with antenna
- One-year limited warranty[2] with limited on-site service[5]

Low power consumption for longer component life and reduced long-term costs

intel Core™2 Duo inside™

Do More

Monitor sold separately



Acer Veriton L460-ED8400C

$679

Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor E8400
(6MB L2 cache, 3GHz, 1333Mhz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(PS.V570Z.057)

Acer V193 bm

$225

- 19" TFT LCD
- 1280 x 1024 maximum resolution
- 2000:1 dynamic contrast ratio
- 176°/176° horizontal/vertical viewing angles
- VGA signal connector
- 300 cd/m² brightness
- 5ms response time
- Two 1.0W integrated speakers

(ET.CV3RP.002)



Acer eDataSecurity Management

Conveniently integrated into the Windows® environment, Acer eDataSecurity Management provides one-click encryption and decryption of your files.

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Acer recommends Windows Vista® Business.

Empowering

intel Centrino 2 inside

Performance to go

Acer® TravelMate® 5730

- Intel® Centrino® 2 processor technology
- Genuine Windows Vista® Business
- CD with Genuine Windows® XP Professional[3]
- Microsoft® Office Professional 2007 (60-day trial)[4]
- 2GB DDR2 667 SDRAM
- 160GB[1] hard drive
- Integrated Super-Multi drive
- 5-in-1 card reader
- 15.4" WXGA (1280 x 800) TFT display
- Intel® Graphics Media Accelerator 4500MHD
- 802.11a/b/g/Draft-N WLAN, gigabit LAN, V.92 modem, webcam
- Fingerprint reader
- Three-year limited warranty[2]



Acer TravelMate 5730-6953

$999

Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor P8400
(3MB L2 cache, 2.26GHz, 1066MHz FSB)
Genuine Windows Vista® Business
(LX.TQH0Z.378)

Prices shown are estimated street prices and do not include tax or shipping. Retailer or reseller prices may vary.

Protect Your Investment with an Acer Notebook Service Upgrade

Quality is built into every notebook PC Acer makes, and each comes with a one-year or three-year standard limited warranty.[2] It includes hardware technical support via toll-free phone plus a concurrent International Traveler's Warranty for travel outside the U.S. and Canada.
For extra protection – and peace of mind – consider a warranty extension or, even better, the **Total Protection Upgrade**. This plan covers the cost of a replacement unit if, as determined by Acer, your covered notebook cannot be repaired.

2-Year Extension of Limited Warranty (146.AB820.EX2)
for Notebooks with 1-Year Limited Warranty
$99

2-Year Extension of Limited Warranty + 3-Year Total Protection Upgrade (146.AD077.002)
for Notebooks with 1-Year Limited Warranty
(Total Protection Upgrade runs concurrently with limited warranty and limited warranty extension)
$199

3-Year Total Protection Upgrade (146.AD339.004)
for Notebooks with 3-Year Limited Warranty
(Total Protection Upgrade runs concurrently with limited warranty)
$99

Each of these upgrades prepays freight from the Acer repair depot and excludes extension of the International Traveler's Warranty.

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[1] When referring to storage capacity, GB stands for one billion bytes and MB stands for one million bytes. Some utilities may indicate varying storage capacities. Total user-accessible capacity may vary depending on operating environments.
[2] For a free copy of the standard limited warranty end-users should see a reseller where Acer products are sold or write to Acer America Corporation, Warranty Department, P.O. Box 6137, Temple, TX 76503.
[3] Genuine Windows® XP Professional can be installed in place of, not in addition to, Genuine Windows Vista® Business.
[4] The 60-day trial of Microsoft® Office Ready is available with Genuine Windows Vista® Business only, not with Genuine Windows® XP Professional.
[5] For next-business-day response customer call must be received by 4:00 p.m. Central Time. Next-business-day response does not apply to service calls missed for reasons outside the control of Acer, such as airport closures or parts shortages. Next-business-day response and on-site service applies to the continental U.S. and Canada only and may not be available in all locations. In those areas where on-site service is provided, a technician will be dispatched, if necessary, following efforts to resolve the problem by telephone support.

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10 Things We Hate About iTunes

BY RICK BRODA

Special LIST Issue

WE ALL USE iTunes. Its software is free and fantastic, and it's an online gateway to millions of songs, thousands of TV shows and movies, the killer new App Store, and an outstanding selection of podcasts.

But iTunes drives us crazy sometimes, too. It lacks several obvious features, hobbles others, and does some things that are just plain dumb. Here are ten iTunes annoyances, all of which Apple could address in about 5 minutes if it wanted to. Where it's possible, we've listed workarounds for these flaws—because, after all, we don't hate iTunes so much that we're willing to live without it.

> iTunes may be the dominant software for managing digital media—and it sure is free—but some parts of it drive us nuts.



Inefficient Updates

Kudos to Apple for frequently updating iTunes, fixing bugs, and adding features along the way. But big-time demerits for forcing us to download and reinstall the entire program (77MB for version 8) for every update. And bundling QuickTime, whether it's new or not? Hasn't Apple heard of patches?

DRM

iTunes gave us the 99-cent song download, thereby paving the way for honest people to purchase music at a fair price. So why does the iTunes Store continue to employ digital rights management (DRM) technology for most of the songs in its library? To its credit, iTunes no longer charges extra for EMI's "iTunes Plus" selections; but it should take the next logical step and give DRM the heave-ho altogether, as other music services have.

No Monitoring of Music Folders

Apple doesn't exactly knock itself out trying to help people get music from sources other than iTunes. For one thing, the software can't monitor designated folders and automatically add new music to the library. But iTunes Folder Watch (find.pcworld.com/61645), a free Windows utility, does precisely that. And the download utilities for both AmazonMP3 and the Rhapsody MP3 Store instantly add new purchases to your iTunes collection—with no intervention required.

Pushing Other Apps

Earlier this year, when Apple added its new-for-Windows Safari Web browser to its Software Update tool, Safari was poised to download every time you updated your iTunes. Since then, the browser has been relegated to a 'New Software' category, and by default the check box for installation is cleared, but do we need to see it at all? Meanwhile, Windows users who install iTunes version 7.7 (which introduced the App Store) or later get MobileMe Preferences in Control Panel, whether they subscribe to MobileMe or not.

Still No Subscription Service Offered

If DRM stays, how about offering an Apple music-subscription service to go with it? For a subscription fee of $15 a month, a Zune Pass permits us to buy unlimited (but not unrestricted) downloads for our high-capacity iPods. The arrangement is an unbeatable way to discover new artists and music—and the more music we're invited to discover, the more music we're likely to purchase. »

ILLUSTRATION: ZOHAR LAZAR

PCWORLD.COM

Software you love to hate: Is Apple's iTunes becoming the new AOL? Senior Writer Tom Spring suggests seven reasons why iTunes may be the new king of annoying software, at find.pcworld.com/61643.

Podcasts Stop Downloading

If you neglect to listen regularly to the podcasts that you subscribe to, iTunes will stop downloading new ones—but shouldn't that be your decision?

The Mystery Check Box

A little check box appears next to every item in your library—songs, TV shows, podcasts, and so on—but iTunes' Help doesn't say what it's for. The explanation is pretty simple: Unchecked items don't play when you listen to your library or to a playlist, and don't sync to your iPod if you enable the 'Sync only checked songs and videos' option in the device's Summary menu. It's too bad, though, that iTunes doesn't explain these handy options somewhere.

Weak Dockable Player

The iTunes toolbar has only basic player functions. We'd like a toolbar with more than volume, seek, and play/pause—and we want a song-info ticker option.

Playlist Export Hostility

Want to use your playlists with another program or with a non-iPod player? Sorry: iTunes eschews the industry-standard M3U playlist format in favor of its proprietary one. But a couple of workarounds do exist: Eric Daugherty's iTunes Export (find.pcworld.com/61644) turns any iTunes playlist into an M3U file, and iTunes Sync (find.pcworld.com/61647) lets you sync your song library and playlists with various non-iPod players. Best of all, both are free.

No E-Books

"People don't read books anymore," Steve Jobs once said. (They must listen to them, though: iTunes has had audiobooks for years.) True, smallish iPod screens aren't ideal, but the iPhone and iPod Touch are perfect for reading on the go. Bibliophiles have eReader (find.pcworld.com/61646), a free iPhone/Touch app linked to eReader and Fictionwise bookstores. But iTunes and e-books seem like a natural fit: Together, they might encourage people to read more.

SKEPTICAL SHOPPER YARDENA ARAR



Scout for Deals Long Before Black Friday

You shouldn't wait until the very last minute to snap up great deals. But you have to know what a bargain looks like.

I'M WRITING THIS column on the eve of Labor Day, and chances are you've not yet celebrated Halloween as you read it. But if you think it's too early to begin your holiday shopping, think again.

The most important thing I learned last year was that shopping on a timetable (the holidays, in this case) isn't always productive. I bought my HDTV (a 42-inch Panasonic 1080p plasma) during a Veteran's Day sale at Sears.com, and the price went up the next day, never to sink to the same level until well into the new year. So my top holiday-shopping tip is, if you see a great deal, pounce on it.



Of course, I wouldn't have known the price was good if I hadn't done research earlier in the year. So my second holiday-shopping tip is to start checking prices now so that you'll be able to recognize—and snap up—a genuine bargain when you see one.

Holiday-Shopping Preparation

You probably don't have time to scour all the deal sites every day, so tip number three is to get on one or more good deal-site mailing lists (see my column at find.pcworld.com/61408), and sign up now, not the day before Thanksgiving. I was alerted to the Sears.com sale by e-mail from a Black Friday site, Black Friday Ads (bfads.net), that I'd signed up for in a prior year.

Other Black Friday sites with mailing lists include Black Friday@GottaDeal.com (blackfriday.gottadeal.com) and BlackFridayAds.com. And check out some of the deal sites discussed in my earlier column, especially if you're serious about year-round bargain hunting. If you're not, the Black Friday strategy guide posted at Dealnews.com last year (find.pcworld.com/61651) looked pretty sound to me.

Black Friday Ads is dormant most of the year. Michael Brim, who's responsible for most of the editorial content, says he started it as a high-school senior in San Jose, California (he's now a college senior), as a place to gather deal information scattered across multiple bargain-hunter sites and message boards.

Black Friday Ads and its competitors cater to holiday shoppers by sneakily obtaining major retailers' Black Friday special ads before they're published, but Brim doesn't believe in shopping on a timetable. For one thing, Black Friday isn't what it used to be: "I've seen better prices in April," he says.

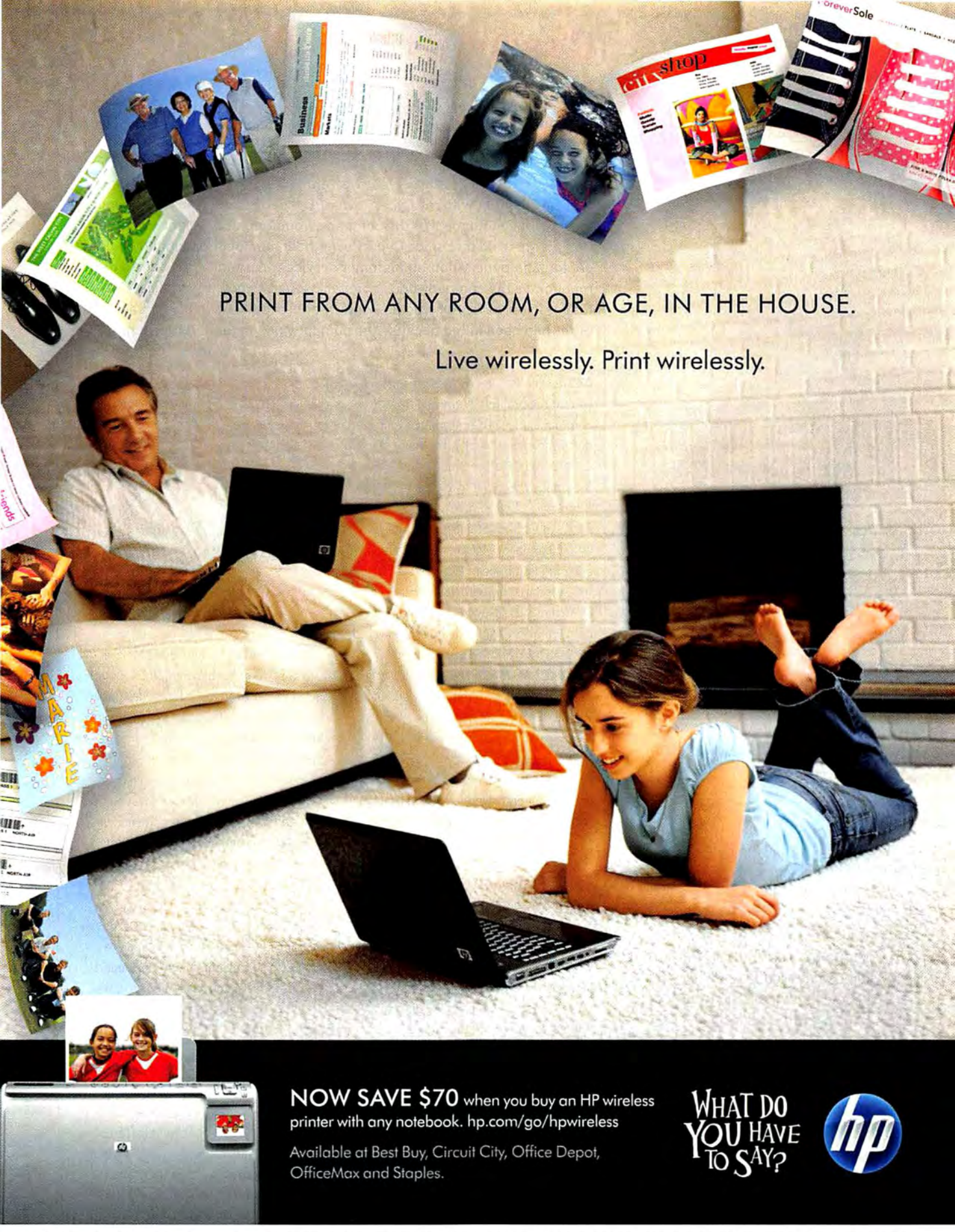
When he wants a specific item, he has learned to be patient. "I wait for a good deal to come," he says. "I'll wait six months for the best deal if I have to."

The flip side of Brim's strategy is that when he does see a great deal, he goes for it, even if he doesn't have a particularly strong need for the item at the moment. He once bought three Shuttle PCs in a single month because "it was such a good deal that I couldn't afford not to buy it." One of them ended up as a gift.

The tip here: Unless the recipient has specified an item, brand, or model, be ready to turn on a dime in your gift choices. That might not always be possible: Kids, for example, aren't usually big on delayed gratification—they want that Wii now! But you'll probably have lots of good options for a family member who has put a laptop PC on a holiday wish list.

This year I'll be on the prowl for a good Blu-ray Disc player. But I, too, can wait six months if need be.

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WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY?

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Consumer Watch



ON YOUR SIDE AMBER BOUMAN

SIX MONTHS INTO a three-year warranty, the power supply on the monitor that I bought with my CyberPower PC failed, so I called tech support. A rep initially told me that the company would replace the power supply, but later he said that since CyberPower hadn't made the monitor, he couldn't help me. Another customer service rep promised to send a new monitor, as the company does not stock separate power supplies. But that monitor never showed up—and when I called back, the rep said the order had been killed because the company no longer had the monitor.

Bernard Neyer, Chanute, Kansas

OYS Responds: CyberPower officials told us that the problem stemmed from a miscommunication. The company's tech support reps meant to say that Neyer should contact the third-party company (Fuji) that made the monitor to pursue a warranty claim. CyberPower's Web site, however, states that "Monitors, keyboards, and mice that are included on CyberPower's standard price list are covered under [its standard computer] warranty."

Furthermore, Neyer says that he did contact Fuji, which told him that it would not send him another power supply. Fuji insisted that Neyer send it a letter via snail mail, and said that in response to that notice it would begin processing a return merchandise agreement (RMA).

CyberPower apologized to Neyer for the confusion and sent him a replacement monitor; Neyer confirmed that he has received the monitor and that, so far, it is working properly.



Two TVs—Better Than One?

Reader James Willis of Marathon, New York, returned a fritzed HDTV to Westinghouse, which promised to replace it; ten weeks later, it hadn't arrived, and Westinghouse wasn't returning calls. We contacted Westinghouse, and within a week Willis had a new set; three days later, a replacement for the first set showed up. Westinghouse said that the delay in shipping the replacement unit was due to the set's being on back order.

Smart Phone Lacks Smarts

Reader Jordan Nave from Marshall, Illinois, contacted us about an I-Mate JAQ Windows Smartphone that he had purchased on eBay; Nave needed MMS and GPRS settings for his area. Unfortunately, his service provider, CellularOne, did not have the information, and Nave was unable to get a response from I-Mate, despite attempting to contact the vendor via both e-mail and live chat support. After we contacted I-Mate on Nave's behalf, the company gave him the necessary settings and apologized to him for not responding to his previous inquiries.

Shock Me All Night Long

RadioShack has recalled 13.8V DC power supplies due to electrocution and fire hazards. No incidents have been reported, but RadioShack says that the power supplies, which let you use household AC power to run DC-connected devices, are incorrectly wired and pose a threat. The affected power supplies have catalog numbers 22-507 and 22-508 with date codes from 08A04 through 01A08. Affected customers should unplug the power supply at once and take it to any RadioShack store for a free repair. For more information, call RadioShack at 800/843-7422 or visit www.radioshack.com/recall.

ILLUSTRATION: HARRY CAMPBELL

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S510 S300

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Consumer Watch

The A's Have It—More Spam, That Is

A CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY researcher says that the letter that your e-mail user name begins with appears to influence the amount of spam you receive.

Richard Clayton, a security expert at the University of Cambridge Computer Laboratory, based this conclusion on his study of e-mail traffic logs from Demon Internet, a major ISP in the United Kingdom, over eight weeks in early 2008. After filtering out mail from known spam sites as well as messages sent to addresses that didn't receive enough nonspam messages to be deemed "real" addresses, Clayton found that people whose user names began with the letter *a* perceived 35 percent of their e-mail to be spam, while those whose user name began with *z* found less than 20 percent of their messages to be spam.

However, as Clayton noted in a paper titled "Do Zebras Get More Spam Than Aardvarks?" (find.pcworld.com/61649), the position of the letter in the alphabet was less important than the total number of addresses that began with a given letter. "As the number of 'real' addresses per letter increases, the proportion of spam increases," he wrote.

Clayton speculated that the varying percentages of spam may be attributable to a particular method that spammers use to create mailing lists—a tactic that involves combining user names that are known to be valid at one domain with other domains. (This ploy is known among security experts as a dictionary or Rumpelstiltskin attack.)

Noting that half of the messages that make it to Demon Internet's spam filtering system are directed toward nonexistent accounts, Clayton said ISPs might filter out spam more efficiently by making their e-mail reception systems aware of current real addresses.

—Yardena Arar

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20 Best Business Software Tools and Web Services

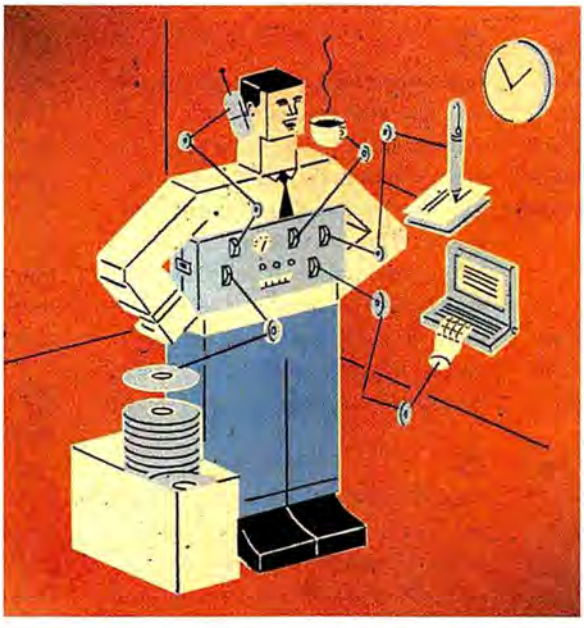
BY CHRISTOPHER NULL

Special LIST Issue

ANYONE WHO SAYS their business "runs itself" probably owes a big debt of gratitude to a small army of software applications and Web services working tirelessly behind the scenes.

With capability and frugality firmly in mind, we collected the 20 software tools and Web services that we think are the best for powering a small or medium-size business.

We've rounded up the 20 software tools and services that we deem the best for powering your small or medium-size business.



Accounting Software

Intuit QuickBooks Pro (www.quickbooks.intuit.com): QuickBooks' flowchart-based accounting is as close to a standard in financial management as the small-business world has, and it is arguably the easiest way for nonprofessionals to transfer their financial records from the filing cabinet to the computer, where they belong. *($200)*

Backup/Recovery

Mozy (mozy.com): You can, and should, back up files regularly to an external hard drive or NAS (network-attached storage) device in your office—but what if the whole place goes up in smoke? Hedge your bet with an online backup service such as Mozy, which automatically archives whatever files you'd like across the Internet, safe and sound. *($5 per month for unlimited service)*

Blogging Tool

WordPress (wordpress.org): If your business doesn't have a blog, you're only about three years behind the curve. Hey, it's not too late to catch up: WordPress installs in minutes and is dazzlingly easy to use. It even offers a free, hosted option at its Web site. *(free)*

Calendar

Sunbird (www.mozilla.org): Thunderbird (our e-mail pick; see page 50) lacks a calendar, so most business users rely on the equally free Sunbird for scheduling. It's a very straightforward application, with day, week, and month views, and even a publishing feature to enable sending your calendar to a Web site. Get the Lightning plug-in to integrate Sunbird with Thunderbird. *(free)*

Collaboration

Vyew (vyew.com): With Vyew, anyone can host a Web session where colleagues can work together on a project in real time. Vyew gives you a very simple whiteboard where you can upload documents for discussion, share your desktop, or create designs from scratch. *(free for up to 20 live participants; additional services extra)*

Office Suite With Collaboration

Google Docs (docs.google.com): If your team members all have Google accounts (and why wouldn't they?), sharing files and collaborating on them simultaneously and in real time is a snap with Google Docs. A word processor and spreadsheet are your only choices—no free-form whiteboarding here—but the service is free and easy as pie to operate. *(Standard Edition is free)*

CRM

Salesforce.com: Customer relationship management isn't just for the Fortune 500. Even one-person shops can benefit from a more ordered approach to managing the sales process, including »

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To access more information on these products and many more in all of the above categories, visit the Software and Services section of PC World's online Business Center (find.pcworld.com/61662).

tracking leads and ensuring that follow-ups happen in a timely fashion. Salesforce.com requires some training and patience due to its vastness, but its exhaustive feature set and affordable pricing options make it a business must-have. *($8.25 to $250 per user per month)*

Database

FileMaker Pro (www.filemaker.com): Access is a part of many editions of Microsoft Office, but if you don't already have that database program in your tool kit, consider springing for FileMaker Pro instead. FileMaker Pro is more intuitive than Access, and it offers high-end features such as live SQL data source support and easy Web-publishing capabilities, so your whole team can access the database via a browser. FileMaker's array of prebuilt templates helps you get up and running in no time, too. *($299)*

E-Commerce Service

Yahoo Small Business (smallbusiness.yahoo.com): You'd be surprised at some of the sophisticated things being done with the simple e-commerce service at Yahoo Small Business. Yahoo now provides everything from templates and wizards to credit-card processing and sales-tax collection tools. If you sell less than 50,000 units a month, this is definitely one of the easiest and quickest ways to go online. Even better: A cadre of third-party developers stands ready to create Web designs that work specifically with the service. *($40 per month and up, plus transaction fees)*

E-Mail

Thunderbird (www.mozilla.org): If you have Microsoft Office, you already have Outlook, the industry-standard e-mail application. But if you're looking to save a buck while still getting most of Outlook's features, Thunderbird is a capable, free alternative. Message tagging and a speedy, integrated search system actually offer a few improvements over off-the-rack Outlook. *(free)*



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E-Mail Marketing

Topica (www.topica.com): Communicating via e-mail with your customers is cool, as long as they opt in. Topica has been in the e-mail marketing/mailing-list game for years, and most spam filters are pretty kind to messages sent through the service. It's also one of the most affordable services of its type on the Web—and it sure beats running a mailing-list server yourself. *($50 per month and up, depending on e-mail volume)*

Instant Messaging

Pidgin (www.pidgin.im): You don't have to run four different IM apps just to communicate with your clients and with everyone in your office. A multiprotocol program like Pidgin lets you communicate with users across more than a dozen IM services. *(free)*

Mobile Remote Access

SoonR Desktop (www.soonr.com): It's one thing to be stuck in an airport without access to a critical file back at the office, but what if you don't even have access to a computer? SoonR lets you snag files from your PC or Mac via a mobile phone. SoonR isn't built for large data transfer needs, but the service might get you out of a jam when it counts. *(free)*

Office Suite

Microsoft Office (office.microsoft.com): Like it or not, any business, big or small, probably needs at least one copy of Microsoft Office somewhere in the building. All of the suite's apps are simply too close to being industry standards to ignore. It can be pricey, but you likely needn't worry about upgrading to the latest edition—any version released since 2000 should do. *($85 to $400 per user, depending on version)*

Project Management

Basecamp (www.basecamphq.com): Build complex project timelines, to-do lists, and message boards, and share files among your team members—all via one simple Web tool. Basecamp can keep all your workers on task while letting everyone else know what other team members are up to. *($24 to $149 per month, depending on number of projects)*

Remote Access/Syncing

Syncplicity (www.syncplicity.com): If you regularly use more than one computer, keeping track of which machine has which version of which report can get a little confusing. The solution: Synchronize the PCs so that you can ensure they're all up-to-the-minute, while protecting yourself in the event you »



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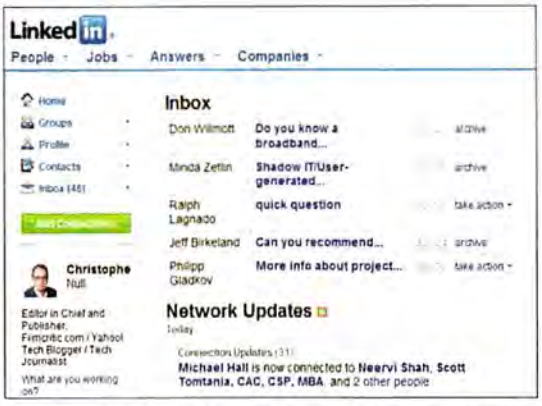
made different changes to the same file on more than one system. Unlike most traditional sync software, Syncplicity works over the Web, so you can sync from anywhere. *(free for 2GB limit, to $10 per month for 40GB limit)*

Security Suite

Avira AntiVir (www.avira.com): At its most basic, Avira offers solid security for individual PCs for free (if you're willing to deal with one pop-up ad per day); but if you need protection for file and mail servers or other central services, Avira can provide such tools as well, for a generally reasonable price. *(pricing varies by protection level)*

Social Networking

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com): When it comes to finding employees, contractors, service providers, and even outsourcing partners, LinkedIn has proved an invaluable tool. But the beauty of LinkedIn is that as you expand your network, you might find other LinkedIn users recommending your business to potential customers or employees, also. A Q&A system lets you ask for advice on all matters business, as well. *(free to $50 per month for premium services)*



LINKEDIN IS BY far the biggest business networking site, with more than 25 million members from 150 industries.

VoIP

Skype for Business (www.skype.com/business): Should you spend megabucks on your own PBX (private branch exchange), or instead spend nothing for a Voice-over-IP setup like Skype for Business? If you're on a shoestring, and you place a lot of international calls, Skype is a solid and hugely affordable choice. *(free software; subscription up to $10 per month for unlimited international plans)*

VPN

LogMeIn Hamachi (secure.logmein.com): You don't have to set up complicated VPN (virtual private network) servers to give remote users access to your corporate network. Hamachi (which recently became part of LogMeIn) does the job with managed peer-to-peer technology, so no centralized VPN server is necessary. *($5 per month)*

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by Richard Thalheimer

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Other chargers use disposable AAs, or cheap plastic cases, or gray-market connectors, and may even damage your iPhone. Ours has a tough aluminum case, and is certified for iPhone. Lithium-ion takes hundreds of charges and doesn't develop memory. Three LED lights indicate charge status. Works with all iPhone and iPod models except shuffle.

Reviewers give it top marks.

"So does the RichardSolo Battery (made by Sharper Image Founder Richard Thalheimer) make for an easy-to-use, no-nonsense backup battery?...Yes! This thing is great. It's that good." — ***CrunchGear***

"Do you often find yourself in the middle of the day with your iPhone battery in the red? If so, I might have the perfect product for you...I found out how amazing this product was." — ***iPhone24x7***

"With its simple, easy-to-use design, the Backup Battery will zap your Apple iPhone and iPod partway back to life when you're running out of juice." — ***CNET***

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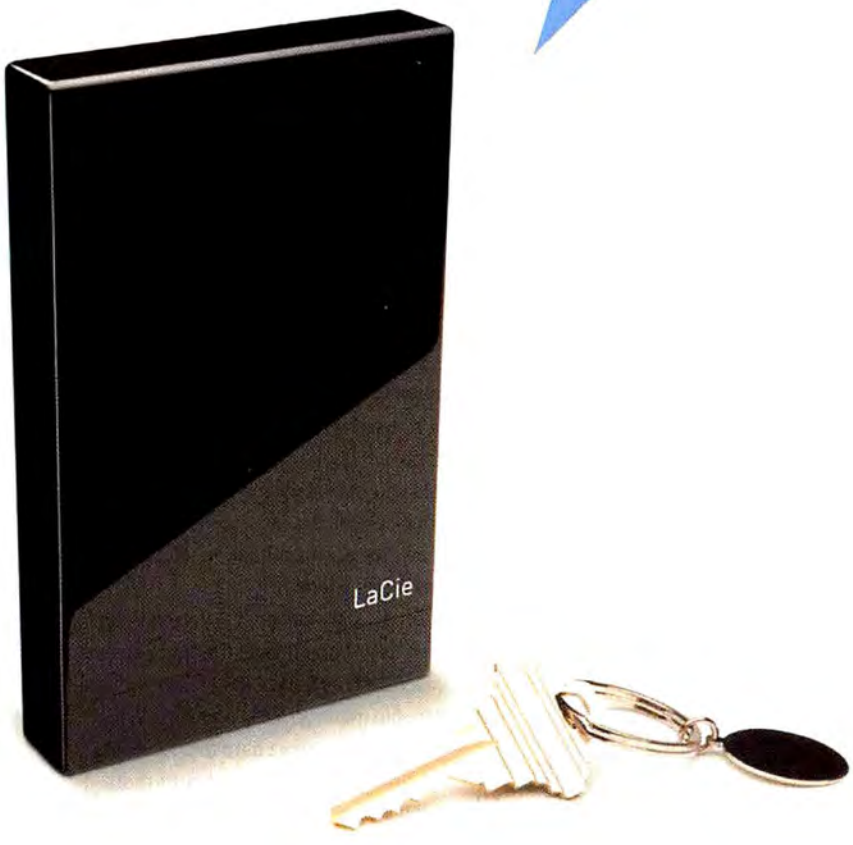
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*Magic Quadrant for U.S. Network Service Providers, 1H08 by T. Chamberlin, et. al. April 2008. Copyright © 2008 Qwest. All Rights Reserved.



NET WORK RICHARD MOROCHOVE

Zoho Takes Billing and Collections Online

Zoho offers a simple and inexpensive way to send invoices, track receivables, and collect payments—all online.

ALL BUSINESSES need to invoice their customers for products and services supplied. Invoicing is, of course, available in accounting packages that also track accounts receivable and handle many other chores such as financial statement preparation. But if you don't want the hassle of installing full-fledged accounting software, you can use an online service that covers just the billing and collection services you require.



Zoho Invoice, part of a growing suite of online business services from Zoho (www.zoho.com), lets you invoice customers by e-mail, track receivables, and collect payments online.

Zoho's suite design lets you share common data with other, extra-cost Zoho services, such as Zoho CRM (customer relationship management) and Zoho Projects. You can also export data to accounting apps in CSV, Excel, and other formats. But if invoicing is all you need, you can use and pay for just that.

Zoho Invoice offers five plans in all, including a free, 5-invoices-per-month plan. The cheapest paid plan supports up to 25 invoices for $5 a month; the high-end Elite plan handles 1500 invoices—sufficient for most small businesses—for a modest $35 per month. None limits the number of customers you invoice.

Despite its low cost, Zoho has enough flexibility in invoice forms and sales reporting to suit the billing needs of almost any small business. If you simply want to automate your sales invoicing and collections, Zoho Invoice could provide just the right mix of services for you.

Signing up for Zoho Invoice, if you don't already have a Zoho account, is easy. Invoice is highly customizable, too; you could spend 20 to 30 minutes choosing options.

I particularly liked the service's selection of estimate and invoice templates designed for selling services or products, or to collect fixed-price amounts (generally used for recurring bills). You can also design your own custom templates, with sales tax rates that you define.

You can opt to skip most of the configuration steps until you create your first invoice. Zoho lets you select most invoicing options on the fly, as you create the bill.

After the invoices have been mailed, Invoice allows you to decide how to follow up on unpaid bills. You can select up to three e-mail reminders, and set the number of days after the payment due date they should be sent. The language in the reminder messages, too, is customizable.

Zoho Invoice is well suited for exporters, since it supports multiple currencies.

Payment Options Limited

My problem with the service, however, is that it supports only PayPal for online payment of invoices. While PayPal is easy to use and not unreasonably priced for very small businesses, cheaper payment options exist for businesses with larger monthly sales volumes—say, more than $10,000 per month. For instance, FreshBooks (www.freshbooks.com), perhaps the best-known online invoicing service, supports more online payment gateways than just PayPal, and it lets you opt to have your bills printed remotely and sent via postal mail (at extra cost).

Overall, Zoho Invoice will appeal to two types of users: businesses that do not use automated invoicing or use a less-capable package, and businesses that currently use full-fledged accounting software but don't require all its capabilities. ●

ILLUSTRATION HARRY CAMPBELL

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT...



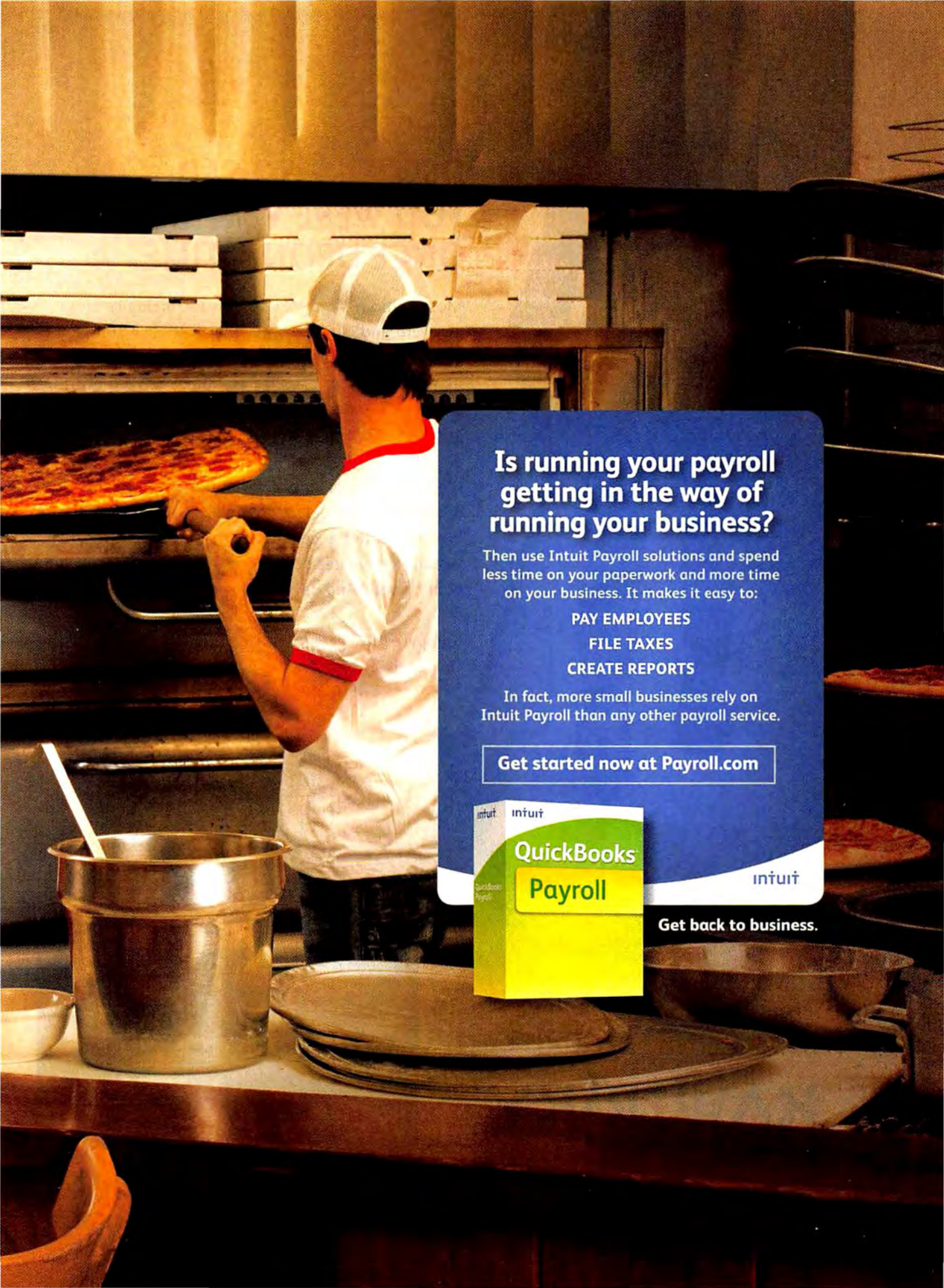
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Qwest received the highest numerical score among data service providers serving large enterprise businesses in the proprietary J.D. Power and Associates 2008 Major Provider Business Telecommunications Data Services Study℠. Study based on 2,422 total responses measuring four providers and measures opinions of large enterprise businesses (companies with 500+ employees). Proprietary study results are based on experiences and perceptions of businesses surveyed in March-April 2008. Your experiences may vary. Visit jdpower.com.


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Five Password Utilities for Portable Freedom

BY ERIK LARKIN

Special LIST Issue

PASSWORD MANAGERS ARE a huge help in dealing with our exponentially growing numbers of accounts. But stand-alone apps introduce a new problem: If you aren't sitting at the PC with the software installed, you can't get to your credentials. Luckily, you have alternatives. These five password tools are all accessible either from a portable device (such as a thumb drive) or over the Web.

Here are five free and paid tools that can help you manage your trove of passwords without leaving you tied to one PC.



ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTOPH NEIMANN

RoboForm

RoboForm (www.roboform.com) is one of the better-known password-management applications, but the $30 software (with a free version limited to saving ten passwords) is normally tied to one PC. Its built-in access to GoodSync.com lets it synchronize its account files across multiple systems, but doing so requires Windows network, FTP, or WebDAV access. In other words, setting it up between PCs across the Internet—such as your home and work PCs—could be a pain.

Instead, use Microsoft's free FolderShare utility (www.foldershare.com) to sync the directory where RoboForm keeps its account files: My Documents\My RoboForm Data\Default Profile. Newly created files will automatically transfer between PCs, though you may have to restart RoboForm to see a new account created on another PC.

Passpack

The latest online storage features let Web sites tackle what has long been a security no-no: storing all your user names and passwords online. In addition to a site log-in, Passpack (passpack.com) employs a "Packing Key" passphrase to encrypt your stored cache of account data. Once downloaded and decrypted, that cache stays only on the computer you're using until you save it, at which point it's encrypted again and re-sent to Passpack for storage. Passpack doesn't ever have access to the packing key, and you can't decrypt your passwords without it—so be careful not to lose the key.

You can use PassPack to log you in automatically to sites, though you might need to train it on a specific site. The free service allows you to store only up to 100 log-ins, but the company may add premium levels of service. While Passpack includes some good anti-phishing measures, password-stealing attacks could prove to be an Achilles' heel if they target the service's log-in and packing key, so you might want to use it solely for less-important (namely, nonfinancial) sites until it has been around a while to prove itself.

Password Hash

Another free browser-based option takes an entirely different approach to password security. If you have the PwdHash (Password Hash) add-on for Firefox and Internet Explorer installed, pressing <F2> prior to typing in a password runs that password through some mathematical "hashing" calculations.

The end result is a unique and strong password that transmits to the site and doesn't have to be saved anywhere; meanwhile, you have to remember only one password. The tool will always generate the same password for the same site (provided you give it the same starter password), even if you use a different browser. If you're at a PC where you can't »

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Get the skinny on the latest dirty spammer tricks at find.pcworld.com/61693, and nab a free download for encrypting sensitive data and files on thumb drives at find.pcworld.com/61694.

install the add-on, you can instead visit www.pwdhash.com to run the calculations manually, after which you can simply cut and paste the resultant password.

OpenID

Wouldn't it be nice to use one account to log in to many different sites? Try OpenID. First sign up for free with your choice of OpenID provider; the pool includes big names such as Flickr, Verisign, and Yahoo. Then, when you visit a site that supports the technology, give it your OpenID. You'll be sent to your provider for verification.

Once you're vetted—which might entail your providing a password or correctly identifying preselected elements of an image map, as in myVidoop.com's interesting setup—the provider tells the original site that you're okay, and voilà, you're logged in.

Not many sites use OpenID yet, largely because some security risks, such as phishing, still threaten the relatively new system. But you can save yourself a fair amount of hassle by using it for those nonsensitive sites that do support it. For a list of such sites (and providers), visit openid.net.

ID Vault

Guard ID's thumb drive, available from guardid.com, can securely store all your online account data, and it can help guard against phishing by launching a stripped-down custom browser for use with financial accounts. While it's easy to use, it's not cheap: It costs $50 plus a $40 yearly subscription renewal.

Before you can use the device with a given PC, you'll need to install downloadable software (available for Windows XP or Vista). Then you can add accounts from a list of known financial or shopping sites, or input data for other accounts you specify.

From then on, you connect the thumb drive, right-click the ID Vault system-tray icon, and select an account. After you provide a numeric code (which you choose during the device setup), ID Vault logs you in.

BUGS & FIXES STUART J. JOHNSTON

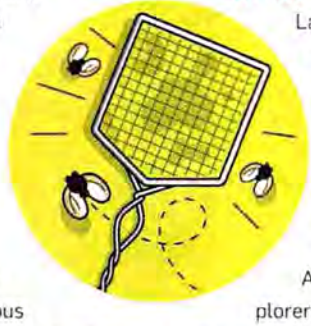


Just What Color Is a Security Hole?

Patch critical flaws in a color manager and IE. Plus: Opera, Office fixes.

COMPUTER ATTACKS IN space are no longer the stuff of science fiction: Recently, laptops on the International Space Station turned out to have computer viruses. NASA believes that the malware—a password stealer that targets online games—may have infected the laptops via a USB thumb drive that one of the astronauts carried aboard. While it wasn't much of a threat, it just goes to show that the little buggers are everywhere.

One flaw in the largely forgotten Windows Image Color Management (ICM) system allows a villain to take over your PC if you view a tainted image displayed on a Web page or embedded in an Office document or e-mail. This is one of 19 holes for which Microsoft issued six "critical" patches; attackers could use them for their malicious creations (no booster rocket required). Though ICM (meant to ensure that colors display correctly on different devices) never caught on, the insecure code still resides in Windows 2000 Service Pack 4 (SP4) through XP SP3 and Windows Server 2003. Vista users are safe.



Luckily for us, Microsoft distributed the patch via Automatic Updates before real-world attacks could erupt. You can also get it from find.pcworld.com/61650.

Browser Busters

Another must-have patch fixes five major holes in Internet Explorer. Both IE 6 and IE 7 are vulnerable on all supported versions of Windows, from Windows 2000 SP4 through Vista SP1. The flaws allow targeting of an affected PC via, as usual, rigged Web pages or poisoned banner ads. Crackers have published proof-of-concept code online for one of these holes, but no known active attacks have struck against any of them. Before that changes, grab the fix from Automatic Updates or find.pcworld.com/61653.

IE isn't the only browser at risk: On the heels of last month's Opera 9.51 update, the company issued another seven serious security fixes in version 9.52, along with a fix for a Gmail display problem.

Opera lacks an auto-update feature, so you'll need to download the new version of the browser at find.pcworld.com/61654.

Office Takes a Hit

Last month I warned you about an unpatched hole in Microsoft's Snapshot Viewer for the Access database, which could allow a crook to nail anyone with a vulnerable version of Office with Access or an Internet Explorer plug-in that displays database reports. Office 2000, 2002 (XP), and 2003 are at risk, but not Office 2007.

Microsoft has since released a patch batch, and it closes similar holes that are rated "critical" for Excel and PowerPoint 2000, along with three other critical flaws in Excel and two PowerPoint bugs.

Yet another Office 2000 patch corrects five security glitches in various filters for importing .eps, .bmp, and .pict graphics files into Office. Grab all the fixes using Automatic Updates, or get the Snapshot patch from find.pcworld.com/61655 and the Excel fix from find.pcworld.com/61656. The PowerPoint fix is at find.pcworld.com/61657, and the Office 2000 graphics patch is at find.pcworld.com/61658.

BUGGED?

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ILLUSTRATION: HARRY CAMPBELL

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Phishing Botnet Goes After Those Who Complain

USERS WHO GET wise to phishing attacks and then talk back to the bad guys are being targeted with exploits designed to hijack their computers, a security researcher says.

In a new twist, phishers using the Asprox botnet are striking victims who recognize the scam and use its fake log-in screen to give the crooks a piece of their mind. The scammers fire off a multipronged assault from a common attack kit against anyone who uses profanity in place of a user name or password, says Joe Stewart, director of malware research at SecureWorks.

Botnets consist of a group of PCs infected by the same type of bot malware. A single bad actor can control a botnet remotely. Stewart estimates that the Asprox botnet encompasses at least 50,000 infected computers.

"The phishers are looking for [any of] three things," says Stewart, who regularly researches botnets. "First, if you don't fill out the form completely; second, if you use the term 'phish.' And third, if you use any bad language."

Although users who talk back sidestep the initial identity-theft attempt, they may be at risk from the second attack, which launches through a recent version of Neosploit, a well-known attack kit that hackers often employ.

Users who have not kept Windows up-to-date or applied patches for popular browser plug-ins (such as QuickTime and Flash) are vulnerable to the Neosploit attacks, Stewart says.

Many people are inclined to blast back at phishers in the log-in screens, Stewart says. He notes that when SecureWorks locates a phisher's data cache in the course of its security research, it frequently includes a "fair amount" of profanity and other uncomplimentary remarks. "People think, 'While I'm at it, I might as well take some retaliatory action,'" says Stewart.

"I can't recall seeing an attack quite like this before," he adds.

—Gregg Keizer



PRIVACY WATCH ERIK LARKIN

Comcast's Cap May Mean Less Snooping on Your Net Browsing



COMCAST'S MOVE TO limit its broadband customers' throughput to 250GB per month starting in October might anger those who want unlimited access, but it's actually good for privacy. Because the cap applies to all traffic equally, it doesn't require that Comcast snoop for particular types of application data. Contrast that with its previous (and initially undisclosed) practice of interfering with peer-to-peer traffic (in an effort to limit customers' downloading of huge, bandwidth-hogging files). The ISP says less than 1 percent of customers will be affected.

> The cable provider's new cap should increase privacy, since the company won't sniff traffic.

Of course, there's nothing to stop broadband companies from snooping in other ways. AT&T, for example, said earlier this year that it's investigating ways to dig deep into its customers' Internet traffic in search of copyrighted material, according to the *New York Times* (find.pcworld.com/61663). Meanwhile, AT&T is still getting flack because of its alleged spying on Internet traffic for the National Security Administration, without warrants.

The fight between Comcast and the FCC isn't over yet, either. In August, the FCC ruled that Comcast had violated federal policy by interfering with P-to-P traffic, and mandated that it stop doing so. In early September the service provider appealed the ruling. If Comcast is ultimately successful in overturning the agency's ruling, the company's customers could be capped *and* snooped on.

A usage cap can be applied poorly, too. Time Warner Cable, for instance, is testing a system in Beaumont, Texas, that applies caps and overage charges—its Internet access plans look a lot like cell phone plans. Time Warner customers choose plans that range from $30 per month for 5GB and a 5-mbps connection to $55 per month for 40GB and a 15-mbps connection. Considering that nifty but high-bandwidth online services such as Mozy backups (mozy.com) and Netflix movie streaming could easily push someone over 40GB in a month, let alone 5GB, I really don't like Time Warner Cable's idea, to put it mildly. To my dismay, Comcast says it's "very interested" in seeing how the Beaumont trials turn out, and that it might move toward such a model in the future.

Faced with such alternatives, I would be content if ISPs were to stick with applying high usage caps that don't affect the majority of people and don't require invading anyone's privacy.

On a final note, if you're a Comcast user or you just want to get an idea of how much bandwidth you're consuming on your connection, some free downloads can help (Comcast doesn't offer any). You can nab one such tool, BitMeter 2, at find.pcworld.com/61664. It requires Microsoft's .Net framework (which you can find at find.pcworld.com/61665 if you don't already have it). ●

ILLUSTRATION: HARRY CAMPBELL

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The increasing proliferation of broadband connections has turned the average Internet-connected home into a home network. Now consumers are able to tap into some of the benefits that businesses have long enjoyed, but without the heavy lifting that requires IT expertise.

Network attached storage, or NAS, is one of those benefits, and it allows home users to easily set up a central electronic file cabinet that can be used for storing family photos, digital music, and other content that are better off shared than tucked away on an individual PC.

Market research firm IDC says that more than 60 million homes have multiple PCs, a home network, and a broadband Internet connection. That number is expected to grow to nearly 100 million by 2012.

A household with multiple PCs increasingly needs to find an efficient means to backup individual disk drives and an efficient way to share files with family members. Computer storage is no longer about backing up word processing and spreadsheet files; it's also about storing the huge amounts of data required for video files and digital music libraries.

Buffalo Technology recently combined the ease of use of USB drives with the convenience of centralized storage. The company's DriveStation FlexNet takes the mystique out of network storage and automated backup. The Buffalo device is a no-hands unit that allows it to switch between a simple USB drive to a network storage system—or back again—at the touch of a button.

The FlexNet system plugs into any network router and installs quickly, utilizing an install wizard that automatically configures each PC with easy access to a shared public folder. Included is Memeo AutoBackup, which easily and automatically backs up personal files, videos, photos, music, and any other digital asset.

Not only does the Buffalo system enable backup of multiple PCs to one location, it also offers sharing capabilities that ensure other files and content are safe and secure.

Some of Buffalo's NAS systems even provide Web access so that family members can access files while away from home. You can also share photos and videos with friends outside the home by simply sending them a link that provides Web access to designated content. With central storage and easy setup, network storage is quickly becoming a hub of activity for the family network.

Storage, Style, and Substance

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Reviews & Rankings



PCW Test Center **CORE HARDWARE (from left): Hewlett-Packard's 22-inch w2207h monitor, Dell's XPS 630 desktop PC, and Brother's HL-4040CN color laser printer.**

8 Best Buys for Essential Gear

Here's what to buy among the gear everybody needs.

Special LIST Issue

POP QUIZ: WHICH would you rather have on a business trip, clean socks or your laptop? These days, clean socks are nice, but the laptop is indispensable, just as a desktop is at home, a camera is on vacation, and a cell phone is pretty much everywhere.

But tech is continuously in flux, so it's always the right time to upgrade your gear in one or another of the following key categories. Here's our look at today's best of the best: the top product in each of eight essential tech categories, including printers, hard drives, monitors, and HDTVs.

Laptop

Monstrous desktop replacements and supersmall ultraportables exist, of course, but for us, the all-purpose laptop offers the best combination for anyone seeking a well-rounded notebook.

Our choice in this category best represents the delicate balance that considers cost, specs, and performance. The top-ranked portable on our all-purpose laptops chart (find.pcworld.com/61676) right now is the $1299 Micro Express JFL9226. This 6.6-pound model lacks the sleek lines and polish of its competitors, but it delivers the right mix of performance and features, for a good price.

Our test system, which came configured with a 2.53-GHz Core 2 Duo T9400 processor and 3GB of RAM, whipped through our WorldBench 6 tests as if the other members of the all-purpose laptop pack were standing still. Whether the task was to burn disc images or to encode video, no other model could keep pace; the JFL9226 earned an impressive score

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARC SIMON

INSIDE



74 EYE-FI EXPLORE



76 PENTAX OPTIO A40



82 ASUS EEE Box



84 CREATIVE ZEN X-Fi

of 103 on the WorldBench 6 test suite. And it did all that while lasting almost 4.5 hours in our battery tests.

The next-fastest all-purpose laptop, Sony's VAIO VGN-SZ2791N, scored nine points lower on the test suite but costs almost twice as much.

The Micro Express notebook's 256MB nVidia GeForce 9600GT GPU knocked out reasonably solid numbers in our graphics tests. The results indicated that this system would be good enough to handle most tasks, but not sufficient to support modern, top-flight games jacked up to the 15.4-inch screen's native 1280-by-800-pixel resolution.

84 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: The Micro Express JFL9226 cuts most of the right corners to produce a capable, budget-friendly companion for the road. find.pcworld.com/61675

Desktop

Desktop PCs can be had on the cheap today, of course, but in our estimation the power desktop holds the most appeal: You'll get better graphics handling (such as for gaming), as well as greater customization options and more-nimble performance for tasks such as editing 21-megapixel images or cutting your video masterpiece.

The leading pick on our current power desktop PCs chart (find.pcworld.com/61690) is the Dell XPS 630, a system that came in at under $2000. Our test system came configured with a 3.16-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E8500 processor, 4GB of memory, a 512MB nVidia GeForce 9800 GT graphics card, and 640GB of hard-disk storage, plus a Dell SP2208WFP LCD monitor.

Our test machine notched a WorldBench 6 score of 114 (just nine points shy of the mark that a $3229 gaming-centric XPS 630 equipped with an Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850 quad-core CPU posted). The GeForce 9800 GT card helped the system attain an average frame rate of 138 frames per second in running Doom 3 at 1280 by 1024 resolution with anti-aliasing turned on.

As for the Dell's case, for one of its size it provides a respectable amount of expansion room, with one open 5.25-inch drive bay at the front (a DVD±RW drive occupies the other). Four internal slots—two regular PCI, one PCI Express x8, and one PCI Express x1—are open.

82 VERY GOOD

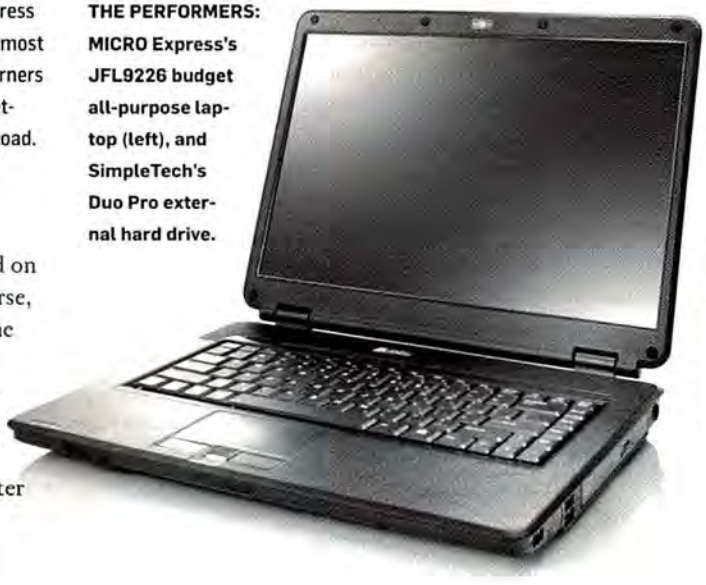
BOTTOM LINE: The customizable Dell XPS 630 desktop system provides strong, affordable performance within a stylish package. find.pcworld.com/61678

Printer

A versatile multifunction printer such as the Canon Pixma MX700 (find.pcworld.com/59701), which tops our chart on page 88, minimizes desk clutter by combining the capabilities of several devices into one package.

We decided, however, to focus here on the straight-ahead speed and professionalism of a color laser printer. Our pick in this category, currently leading our *Top 10 Color Laser Printers* chart (find.pcworld.com/61679), is the $400 Brother HL-4040CN, which delivers satisfying and speedy performance. »

THE PERFORMERS: MICRO Express's JFL9226 budget all-purpose laptop (left), and SimpleTech's Duo Pro external hard drive.







CANON'S BARGAIN-PRICED PowerShot A590 IS (left), and RIM's Wi-Fi-equipped wonder, the BlackBerry Pearl 8120.

The printer itself is simple enough to set up, though at about 64 pounds it's heavier than many other models we've tested. At its default settings, the HL-4040CN printed competently.

Its speeds, average overall, ranged from 19.3 pages per minute for plain black text to 4.2 ppm for graphics. Text looked perfectly crisp in all tested fonts. Color images had a few shortcomings at default settings, but with the print driver's 'Fine (2400 dpi class)' setting, image quality improved noticeably.

The cost per page (based on Brother's specs) of this model is very appealing: A half-page print of black text uses less than 2 cents' worth of toner, and a color page (using a small amount of black plus all three colors) costs less than 12 cents.

84 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: The Brother HL-4040CN color laser printer offers good pricing, speed, and print quality, but a somewhat awkward design.

find.pcworld.com/61680

Cell Phone

The Apple iPhone 3G commands much attention—and rightfully so, considering the handset's slick looks and numerous innovations (the iPhone 3G ranks fifth on our latest *Top 10 Smart Phones* chart, at find.pcworld.com/61725). But the iPhone and its on-screen keyboard aren't for everyone—especially if you plan to do messaging.

T-Mobile's Wi-Fi-equipped Research in Motion BlackBerry Pearl 8120 ($200 with a two-year contract) stands out for more than just its excellent messaging capabilities (owing to RIM's e-mail-friendly software and 20-key SureType keyboard). The T-Mobile Pearl occupies the top of our chart (the AT&T Wireless version ranks number two) because it works with T-Mobile's innovative HotSpot@Home technology, which lets you make VoIP calls over a Wi-Fi network.

The voice-over-Wi-Fi feature provides a viable calling alternative in locales where cell signals are weak, and the service has worked well in our testing. Wi-Fi speeds up Web browsing and data-intensive tasks, too. The HotSpot@Home Talk Forever Mobile service, required for voice-over-Wi-Fi calls, costs $10 a month.

The T-Mobile version of the phone is less attractive than its AT&T counterpart, in part because of its mousy-gray case; the icons in the BlackBerry menu look cartoonish, as well. The cluttered interface is mostly a result of all the software that T-Mobile loads on the device. Some of the add-ons are versatile (such as a voice-command application that worked very well for dialing contacts), while others aid productivity (RepliGo views, prints, and faxes Microsoft Office documents). You get a couple of games, too.

The phone packs a sharp 2.0-megapixel camera and an excellent multimedia player. The Pearl's SureType predictive text-entry system turns this candy-bar-style phone into one with an effective 20-key keyboard. And both voice quality and talk-time battery life were excellent: The T-Mobile 8120 lasted the full 10 hours of our tests.

91 SUPERIOR

BOTTOM LINE: The sleek T-Mobile BlackBerry Pearl 8120 not only has RIM's excellent messaging capabilities, but it lets you place voice calls over a Wi-Fi connection, too.

find.pcworld.com/61681

Digital Camera

Digital SLRs are hot items in the camera category, with models such as the Canon EOS Digital Rebel Xsi (find.pcworld.com/61682) leading the way. But in our increasingly photo-centric society, simpler digital camera models, such as those occupying our *Top 10 Point-and-Shoot Cameras* chart (find.pcworld.com/61683), have evolved into must-have products.

The 8-megapixel Canon PowerShot A590 IS is attractively priced at $150, and it gives you such features as 4X optical zoom, optical image stabilization, face detection (which recognizes faces in the frame and optimizes the autofocus accordingly), and a serviceable 2.5-inch LCD screen.

This model is a starter camera, with 19 shooting modes and limited manual controls (though you can program the shutter speed and aperture settings, Canon designed this PowerShot primarily for automatic use). The camera conveniently runs on two AA batteries, which makes it a great travel companion; it has an easy-to-hold hand grip, too, but that means the camera may be less pocketable for some owners.

The A590 IS scored significantly higher in our image-quality assessments than point-and-shoots that have higher megapixel counts and cost more than twice as much. In particular, our panel of judges noted superior colors and flash exposures in our subjective tests.

81 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: For a beginner's camera, the Canon PowerShot A590 IS has excellent image quality and superb stabilization.

find.pcworld.com/61685

External Hard Drive

As hard-drive prices drop and as people's collections of digital stuff balloon, external hard drives—ideal for »

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON



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Reson8 Sound Chamber Technology

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storage and backup—have become a staple of every gear kit. The direct-attached SimpleTech Duo Pro Drive rose to first place on our *Top 10 External Hard Drives* chart (find.pcworld.com/61684) for various reasons, including the device's excellent performance, its generous capacity, and its thoughtful design.

Sturdily built yet attractive, the Duo Pro Drive features what the company calls a "smart" fan, which adjusts its speed based on how much heat it senses inside.

The unit comes in three sizes (we tested the 1TB model, but you can get up to 2TB) and connects to your PC via USB 2.0 and External SATA-300. The drives are mounted in two internal bays; regrettably, the bays are not replaceable by the user, so you can't easily upgrade the drives at a later time. By default the drives come striped together in a RAID 0 configuration for maximum performance, but you can easily switch to RAID 1 for mirroring.

Most important, though, this model is blazingly fast. It sprinted past the other contenders to take top performance honors.

86 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: Terrific design, fast performance, and versatile backup software make the SimpleTech Duo Pro drive a strong choice.
find.pcworld.com/61684

Monitor

Monitor shopping can present you with Goldilocks' bed conundrum: too small, too big, or just right. The 22-inch category feels "just right" to us: At this size, a monitor provides plenty of viewing flexibility—for crunching spreadsheets, editing photos, or watching movies—but at the same time it won't overwhelm your desk.

Our favorite display in this category is the $350 Hewlett-Packard w2207h. The w2207h stands out for several reasons, but we especially like its thin (1-inch), contoured, glossy black bezel, which doubles as a clip-on spot where you can easily attach optional accessories to the monitor's frame.



VIZIO'S 42-INCH HIGH-DEF TV, the VO42L, provides superior image quality, with few sacrifices, at an impressively competitive price.

The w2207h has a native resolution of 1680 by 1050 pixels, and it did well in our tests overall, producing attractive-looking images and sharp text. The unit's base provides tilt, pivot, swivel, and height adjustments; the monitor also has easily navigable menus, two side-mounted USB ports, HDMI, and VGA inputs.

This model's only major weakness is a very common one across all the monitors we've tested: The unit's built-in speakers generate weak bass, which translates into flat, tinny audio.

84 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: The HP w2207h is a nicely priced, full-featured LCD monitor with pleasing image quality for text and graphics, plus useful physical-adjustment options.
find.pcworld.com/61689

HDTV

Admit it: You're just about ready to put a gorgeous high-definition monument to couch-potato-dom in your living room. Or maybe it's time for TV number two, in advance of the impending digital-TV switch-over (set to happen in February 2009). What's your best HDTV bet?

We've tested televisions in multiple size categories (see all of the televisions we've reviewed at find.pcworld.com/61686). But for most people today, 42-inch TVs offer a sweet balance of size and price, so we're zeroing in on that category. (We expect to see that sweet spot migrate from 42-inch models to 46- and 47-inch televisions in the coming year; for the moment, however, viewer attention focuses on TVs with 40- and 42-inch screens.)

One benefit of a TV of this size: It translates well to a variety of living spaces. For example, your couch should sit 7 to 9 feet away from a 42-inch television.

The Vizio VO42L claims the top spot on our latest *Top 5 42-Inch HDTVs* chart (find.pcworld.com/61687) because it delivers a well-rounded package that provides very good picture and sound quality, at a price that won't max out your credit line.

Our judges thought the VO42L produced a natural-looking picture, and they gave it an image-quality mark just below the LG 42LG60's top-of-the-heap score. But when you compare the Vizio's $1100 estimated street price with the cost of the LG model, which comes in at more than double the Vizio's price, the slight difference in quality hardly seems to matter.

As much as we like the Vizio, we have to admit that its case design disappoints. The set's side-mounted connectors are recessed, making them harder to reach than the easy-access inputs on other TVs. And the rest of the inputs face down, making access unduly difficult.

81 VERY GOOD

BOTTOM LINE: The 42-inch Vizio VO42L HDTV delivers very good picture and sound quality, and it does so at a reasonable price.
find.pcworld.com/61688

—Melissa J. Perenson and PC World staff

PHOTOGRAPH: ROBERT CARDIN



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Battle of the Black Business Smart Phones

PCW Test Center

IN THE WORLD of smart phones, new Windows Mobile 6.1 handsets offer corporate users alternatives to Apple's iPhone 3G and RIM's BlackBerry Bold. I looked at shipping versions of HP's iPaq 910c Business Messenger and Palm's Treo Pro.

Both models are sold unlocked, meaning that you can use them on any GSM carrier worldwide simply by inserting a SIM card. This flexibility is great if you're a frequent traveler, since you can save on charges by using overseas carriers, but it also means you don't get a carrier subsidy. The Palm Treo Pro debuts at $549, and the iPaq 910c costs $499.

Both of these thin, glossy black handsets support Wi-Fi, GPS, and high-speed HSDPA/UMTS networks. Both also provide a microSD Card slot that lets you use removable media to store images, music, documents, applications, and so on; here Palm outclasses HP by supporting cards with up to 32GB of capacity, while HP supports only 4GB or less.



PALM'S TREO PRO (right) is skinnier and lighter than HP's iPaq 910c.

Each of the phones has a touch screen; The Palm's is a transflective 320-by-320-pixel display, while the HP's is a transmissive 320-by-240-pixel display—but both look crisp and bright. Conveniently, each phone offers multiple navigation options, including a stylus and a central navigation touchpad. A scroll wheel and an OK button on the iPaq's right side make single-handed operation particularly easy. Palm, meanwhile, provides a handy dedicated button on the right side for turning Wi-Fi off and on.

The HP and the Palm have removable rechargeable batteries, which may come in handy given their poor battery life (not unusual for 3G phones on the AT&T network we use in our lab tests). The iPaq lasted 4 hours, 58 minutes, while the Treo Pro lasted 4 hours, 25 minutes.

In my hands-on tests, call quality on both phones was adequate. I give the HP the edge at typing because of its superbly sculpted keys and slightly wider form. But the Treo Pro's keyboard, reminiscent of the Palm Centro's, wasn't shabby either.

HP's enterprise focus is apparent from its software bundle, which (on top of Windows Mobile's own Office applications) includes apps for security, remote control, voice control, printing, using the device as a modem, and viewing PDFs.

I'd recommend the HP if you can use its software. The Treo Pro has pluses—it's slim and has a handy feature for shutting down WinMobile apps—but it's pricey if IT isn't paying.

—Yardena Arar

81
VERY GOOD

iPaq 910c | Hewlett-Packard
Handset is easy on the eyes, with lots of business-friendly features.
Street: $499
find.pcworld.com/61729

73
GOOD

Treo Pro | Palm
Sleek, well-connected Treo is a bit pricey for noncorporate users.
Street: $549
find.pcworld.com/61728

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARC SIMON

Motorola's Adaptable Rokr E8

PCW Test Center

THE MOTOROLA ROKR E8 is a chameleon: Its touch-sensitive interface changes depending on what you use it for. For calls, a virtual phone keypad lights up. When you switch to music player mode, a few simple MP3 controls appear.

The E8 comes with a capable music-syncing application and surprisingly robust speakers. But the touch-sensitive navigation wheel is hard to control, and keypad typing—even with haptics feedback enabled—isn't much fun.



COOL-LOOKING music phone isn't great for text entry.

T-Mobile's two-year service contract price is $150. Check out the Rokr E8 if you want a chic music phone and text entry isn't a big deal.

—Yardena Arar

79
GOOD

Rokr E8 | Motorola
Poor controls and messaging undercut excellent music features. List: $150 (with a two-year contract)
find.pcworld.com/61731



The IRISCard™ 4 quickly scans your paper business cards, captures the information they contain and instantaneously creates electronic contacts to be sent to your favorite contact manager such as MS Outlook.

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Photoshop Elements Adds Online Features



A PHOTOSHOP.COM PLUS account lets you receive tips and tutorials.

ADOBE KNOWS WHAT'S hot these days. And online photo sharing is more popular than ever, thanks to sites like Flickr and Facebook.

With Photoshop Elements 7, Adobe provides ties to its new online service, Photoshop.com, and adds enough fresh features to the desktop application to make version 7 a worthwhile upgrade.

Photoshop.com, which incorporates Adobe's Photoshop Express online editing service, is offering two levels of membership: a free, 2GB Basic membership; and a $50 per year Plus membership that entitles you to 20GB of storage. The free membership provides automatic backup of your images. When you edit pictures on the site, the revised files will sync up with your home PC's files—and vice versa.

New to version 7 of Photoshop Elements is a Smart Brush tool borrowed from the full Photoshop, as well as a handy Scene Cleaner that has been added to the Photomerge tool. This edition also lets users adjust the background tint from charcoal all the way to stark white. More good news: Photoshop Elements 7 has FTP settings. Unfortunately, it still lacks the Fade slider tool available in Photoshop.

The application continues to straddle the line between novices and more-seasoned users. It offers three levels of editing: Full Edit, Quick Fix, and Guided Editing. This arrangement feels a bit clunky at times, especially when you must blunder through menu options and tabbed screens to find advanced options such as editing color curves.

For anyone seeking a combination image editor and organizer that doesn't break the bank, Photoshop Elements 7 is a powerful contender. The online components permit you to do more from within a familiar interface, and its new tools alone make it worth the upgrade.

—Kathleen Cullen

Photoshop Elements 7 | Adobe
Not rated, Beta
Image-editing features and online photo sharing justify the upgrade.
List: $100
find.pcworld.com/61722

Eye-Fi SD Card Does Location Tracking

HAVE YOU EVER looked at a picture and wondered where you snapped it? The Eye-Fi Explore digital camera memory card can help.

Like last year's $100 Eye-Fi Share, the $130 Eye-Fi Explore is a 2GB Wi-Fi–enabled SD Card that will automatically upload your pictures to the Web site of your choice or to your computer. But the Explore adds two significant new features: automatic geotagging of images and the ability to upload pictures at a Wayport wireless network hotspot, at no extra charge.

Wayport hotspots can be found in many McDonald's restaurants, Hertz car rental outlets, hotels, and other venues. But since the Eye-Fi Explore doesn't provide an interface on your camera, you must keep an eye out for golden arches or Hertz signs, or you must use a computer to find a hotspot.

Hotspot uploading functioned very inconsistently in my tests. Initially, the card wouldn't upload at all. After some discussions with Eye-Fi, I tried again; this time, however, I reduced the capture resolution of my 10-megapixel Canon SD790 IS to 0.3 megapixel. That booted everything into gear.

I found the Eye-Fi's geotagging capability far more flexible. Most of the pictures I took appeared with location tags in place, and most of the locations were correct. But some of them—perhaps 20 percent—were off, sometimes significantly: A couple of pictures I took in South San Francisco were tagged as having been taken in Mountain View, California, about 30 miles away.

The Eye-Fi Explore card is clever, but it costs far more than an SD Card without wireless capabilities. In view of the price premium, it should work much better.

—Alan Stafford



THE EYE-FI EXPLORE uses its USB reader only for setup.

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON

77
GOOD

Eye-Fi Explore | Eye-Fi
Innovative geotagging and hotspot uploading, but ultimately a kludge.
Street: $130
find.pcworld.com/61721

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Top Point-and-Shoots: Substance Trumps Style

PCW Test Center

CAMERAS ARE NOW fashion statements, but the top point-and-shoot on our chart values performance over looks. What the bulky 8-megapixel Canon PowerShot A590 IS ($180) lacks in style, it makes up for in adaptability and performance: It runs on AA batteries and offers great image quality, optical image stabilization, and easy operation.

For fashion sense, consider Canon's PowerShot SD1100 IS or the 12-megapixel Optio A40, Pentax's latest chart entry. The A40 delivers very good image quality, includes



PENTAX'S OPTIO A40 jams 12 megapixels into a slick frame.

a number of manual settings, and bundles ACDSee image editing software.

Two other notable newcomers to the chart are the stylish 8-megapixel Nikon Coolpix S210, which has a neat time-lapse feature, and the Casio Exilim EX-Z80, which optimizes video and uploads it to YouTube.

—Tim Moynihan

MORE ONLINE

To see the complete rankings for point-and-shoot cameras and digital SLR models, visit find.pcworld.com/61707.

PC WORLD TOP 10 POINT-AND-SHOOT CAMERAS

	MODEL	PCW Rating	Performance[1]	Features and specifications
1	BEST BUY Canon PowerShot A590 IS $180 NEW find.pcworld.com/61685	81 VERY GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 248	• 8 megapixels • 4X optical zoom (35–140mm) • 10 scene modes • 3.7 by 2.6 by 1.6 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: For a beginners' camera, the PowerShot A590 IS has nice image quality and superb stabilization.			
2	Canon PowerShot SD1100 IS $250 find.pcworld.com/60681	81 VERY GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Very Good • Number of shots: 299	• 8 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (38–114mm) • 10 scene modes • 3.4 by 2.2 by 0.9 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: Sleek design, excellent image capability, and intuitive controls make the SD1100 IS a solid buy.			
3	Pentax Optio A40 $250 NEW find.pcworld.com/61708	80 VERY GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 250	• 12 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (37–111mm) • 20 scene modes • 3.9 by 2.2 by 0.9 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: The 12-megapixel Optio A40 assembles a great feature package in an easy-to-use camera.			
4	Panasonic Lumix DMC-LX2 $410 find.pcworld.com/56527	79 GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Very Good • Number of shots: 313	• 10 megapixels • 4X optical zoom (28–112mm) • 18 scene modes • 4.1 by 1.0 by 2.3 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: This camera's image quality and wide-screen format are its best attributes; its controls could be easier to use.			
5	Fujifilm FinePix F50fd $250 find.pcworld.com/58997	79 GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 276	• 12 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (35–105mm) • 14 scene modes • 3.6 by 2.3 by 0.9 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: It looks dull next to flashier models, but the F50fd has all of the latest features and takes great shots.			
6	Nikon Coolpix S210 $180 NEW find.pcworld.com/61709	79 GOOD	• Image quality: Good • Overall design: Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 283	• 8 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (38–114mm) • 11 scene modes • 3.5 by 2.2 by 0.7 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: This small and solid camera is appealingly straightforward to use, but nothing spectacular.			
7	Casio Exilim EX-Z80 $180 NEW find.pcworld.com/61402	79 GOOD	• Image quality: Good • Overall design: Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 272	• 8.1 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (38–114mm) • 30 scene modes • 3.5 by 2.0 by 0.8 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: This Exilim's menu includes fun creative modes, but its tiny buttons will be a problem for some users.			
8	HP Photosmart R937 $230 find.pcworld.com/58011	79 GOOD	• Image quality: Very Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 261	• 8 megapixels • 3X optical zoom (39–118mm) • 12 scene modes • 4.1 by 1.1 by 2.9 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: The enormous touch-screen display looks spectacular and makes the R937 a cinch to use.			
9	Canon PowerShot A460 $130 find.pcworld.com/57326	78 GOOD	• Image quality: Good • Overall design: Good • Battery life: Good • Number of shots: 253	• 5 megapixels • 4X optical zoom (38–152mm) • 8 scene modes • 4.2 by 1.6 by 2.0 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: You get controls such as exposure compensation, plus a super macro mode, but you're limited to ISO 400.			
10	Canon PowerShot SD870 IS $280 find.pcworld.com/58999	78 GOOD	• Image quality: Good • Overall design: Very Good • Battery life: Very Good • Number of shots: 301	• 8 megapixels • 3.8X optical zoom (28–105mm) • 10 scene modes • 3.7 by 2.3 by 1.0 inches
	BOTTOM LINE: It's not especially sturdy, but the SD870 IS has a big LCD and an extrawide zoom lens, and takes great pictures.			

CHART NOTES: Prices and ratings are as of 9/12/08. [1]We count the number of shots taken using the bundled battery, fully charged.

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON

The Bose® QuietComfort® 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling® Headphones.

Think of them as a peaceful getaway from the world around you. Whether it's the engine roar inside an airplane cabin, the bustle of the city or the distractions in the office, Bose QuietComfort 2 headphones help them fade softly into the background with the flick of a switch. You can savor delicate musical nuances without disturbing others. And when you're not listening to music, you can slip into a tranquil haven – where you can relax and enjoy peace and solitude. Clearly, these are no ordinary headphones. It's no exaggeration to say they're one of those things you have to experience to believe.





Use them as a concert hall – or a sanctuary.

"It's as if someone behind your back reached out, found the volume control for the world, and turned it way, way, down," reports *TechnologyReview.com*. Bose QC®2 headphones incorporate patented technology that electronically identifies and dramatically reduces noise, while faithfully preserving the music, movie dialogue or tranquility you desire. We designed these headphones primarily for airplane travelers. But owners soon started telling us how much they enjoy using them in other places to reduce distractions around them. They're excellent for listening to music whether you're on the go, at home or in the office.

"Forget 'concertlike' comparisons; you'll think you're onstage with the band." That's what *Travel + Leisure Golf* said when these headphones were first introduced. You'll relish the sound of a bass guitar. Or a flute. Or the delicate inflections of a singing voice. The audio is so clear you may find yourself discovering new subtleties in even your favorite music.





"The QuietComfort 2 lives up to its name, enveloping you in blissful sound in the utmost comfort. It's easy to forget they are on your head." That's what respected columnist Rich Warren reports. To enjoy peace and tranquility, simply turn them on. To add Bose quality sound, attach the included audio cord and connect them to a laptop computer, portable CD/DVD/MP3 player, in-flight audio system or home stereo. They also offer a fold-flat design for easy storage in the slim carrying case.

Try the QC2 headphones for yourself, risk free. You really must experience them to believe it. Call toll free to try these headphones for 30 days. Use them on your next trip, in your home or at the office – satisfaction guaranteed. If you aren't delighted, simply return them for a full refund.

Call 1-800-901-0256, ext. Q6948 today. The QC2 headphones are available directly from Bose – the most respected name in sound. When you call, ask about making **12 easy payments,** with no interest charges from Bose.* And discover a very different kind of headphone – QuietComfort 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling headphones.

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USB Tuners Deliver HDTV to Your Computer



PINNACLE'S PCTV HD Pro Stick (left) and Hauppauge's WinTV-HVR-950Q look like USB thumb drives.

I LOVE THE IDEA of HDTV, but hate the idea of shelling out for a big screen? A TV tuner for your PC or laptop can save you cash. I tested two new USB HDTV tuners—the Pinnacle PCTV HD Pro Stick and the Hauppauge WinTV-HVR-950Q—to see how well they converted my computer into a high-def TV.

Both the $99 WinTV-HVR-950Q and the $100 PCTV HD Pro Stick look like USB thumb drives, and both come with a portable antenna that you attach to the tuner for better reception. Each bundle also includes a remote control and desktop software for playing back, pausing, and recording the TV content you see.

The two products use installation processes that are almost identical. In each case you connect the tuner to a free USB 2.0 port on your PC and then connect it to the portable antenna. Each tuner comes with a CD that automates the procedure.

Both the Pinnacle and Hauppauge products pick up analog NTSC and digital ATSC channels, as well as ClearQAM channels (to scan for this type of unencrypted digital cable channel, however, you must connect the tuner to a cable line-in).

Station reception was the first difference I noticed between these two units. At my house in suburban Boston, both picked up around 30 channels, though neither located more than a few HD broadcasts. But the Pinnacle PCTV HD Pro Stick picked up four key channels that the Hauppauge tuner missed: the high-definition feed of my nearest NBC affiliate, and standard-def feeds of my ABC, CBS, and NBC affiliates.

Channels that the Hauppauge WinTV-HVR-950Q did receive looked great; and on both tuners, digital stations came through far better than analog ones did, with crisp, clear reception and stellar HD broadcasts.

The Pinnacle tuner outshines the Hauppauge in its included desktop software, which lets you view, pause, and record TV broadcasts. Pinnacle's TVCenter 4 is attractive and extremely intuitive. WinTV v6, which comes bundled with the Hauppauge tuner, is not as easy to use. For example, to minimize or maximize the viewing window in WinTV, you have to select one of several options from a menu. To achieve the same feat with Pinnacle's software, you simply click an icon in the upper right corner of the screen.

The Pinnacle's miniature remote control stands out, as well. Though it feels plasticky, it's superior to the flat, poorly-labeled buttons on the Hauppauge remote.

New in the latest version of each product is support for ClearQAM channels. By connecting the tuner to a cable line-in, you can view unencrypted digital cable channels (typically, you'll be able to see broadcast cable channels, but not premium channels).

I wouldn't buy either of these products for the ClearQAM support alone. And neither delivers the amount of high-def content that you would get from a cable box. But they do offer a portable, affordable route to HDTV—and they let you record content in high definition.

—Liane Cassavoy

85
VERY GOOD

PCTV HD Pro Stick | Pinnacle
An easy way to view high-def and standard-def television on your PC.
List: $100
find.pcworld.com/61431

80
VERY GOOD

WinTV-HVR-950Q | Hauppauge
USB TV tuner is weighed down by software that's too hard to use.
List: $99
find.pcworld.com/61432

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON

ASK OUR EXPERTS

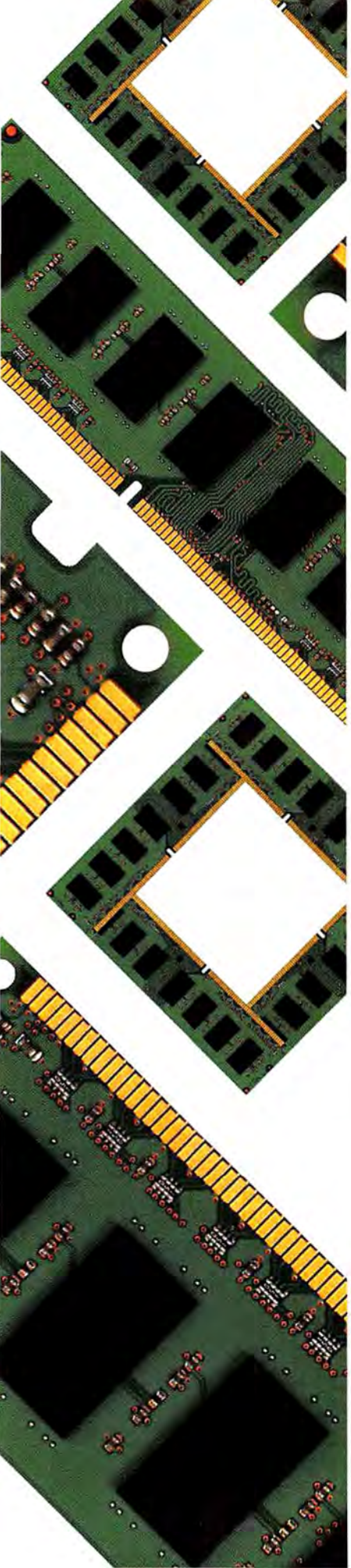


A Great MP3 Manager for Vista

I'M HOPING THAT you can recommend a free, reliable program for MP3 files that will work with Windows Vista and that will allow me to record all of my new CDs to a hard drive and then burn them to discs. *Steve W., via e-mail*

Senior Editor Tim Moynihan responds: I'm a big fan of MediaMonkey (find.pcworld.com/61705). While it's free in its basic form, a $20 upgrade brings faster CD-burn speeds (the free version burns at 4X; the paid version goes up to 48X) and more features. The easy-to-use program records CDs and converts audio files to just about any audio format you might want. MediaMonkey doesn't stop there: If you have a iPod, an iRiver player, or any USB-connected player, it will sync your songs to those devices.

E-mail your questions to askourexperts@pcworld.com, or post them online at forums.pcworld.com.



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Google's Convenient, Clever Web Browser



OPENING A TAB in Chrome brings up links to your most visited sites.

GOOGLE TAKES direct aim at Microsoft with the release of its Chrome Web browser. And Microsoft should be worried: Chrome works in clever and convenient ways.

Chrome has a remarkably minimalist interface. You'll see a row of tabs running along the top, a Web address bar, and a bookmarks bar that appears beneath the address bar. Chrome doesn't have a full-scale menu bar or a title bar, and it has few distractions in its interface.

At the touch of a button, Chrome lets you make a desktop, Start menu, or QuickLaunch shortcut to any Web page or Web application, blurring the distinction between what's online and what's inside your PC.

Chrome strips all of the toolbars from the window, leaving you with something that feels more like a desktop application than like an online app or a Web page.

Search is an integral part of Chrome, and Google introduces some clever features (for example, you can search Google or other sites directly from the address bar). Chrome surpasses its competition by searching your browser history's page titles as well as page content.

Chrome can be a little unstable, which is not surprising in a beta program. Flash did not work on my Vista-based system, for example.

Google has produced an excellent browser that manages to be friendly and uncomplicated, yet powerful enough to meet the needs of more-advanced users.

—Nick Mediati

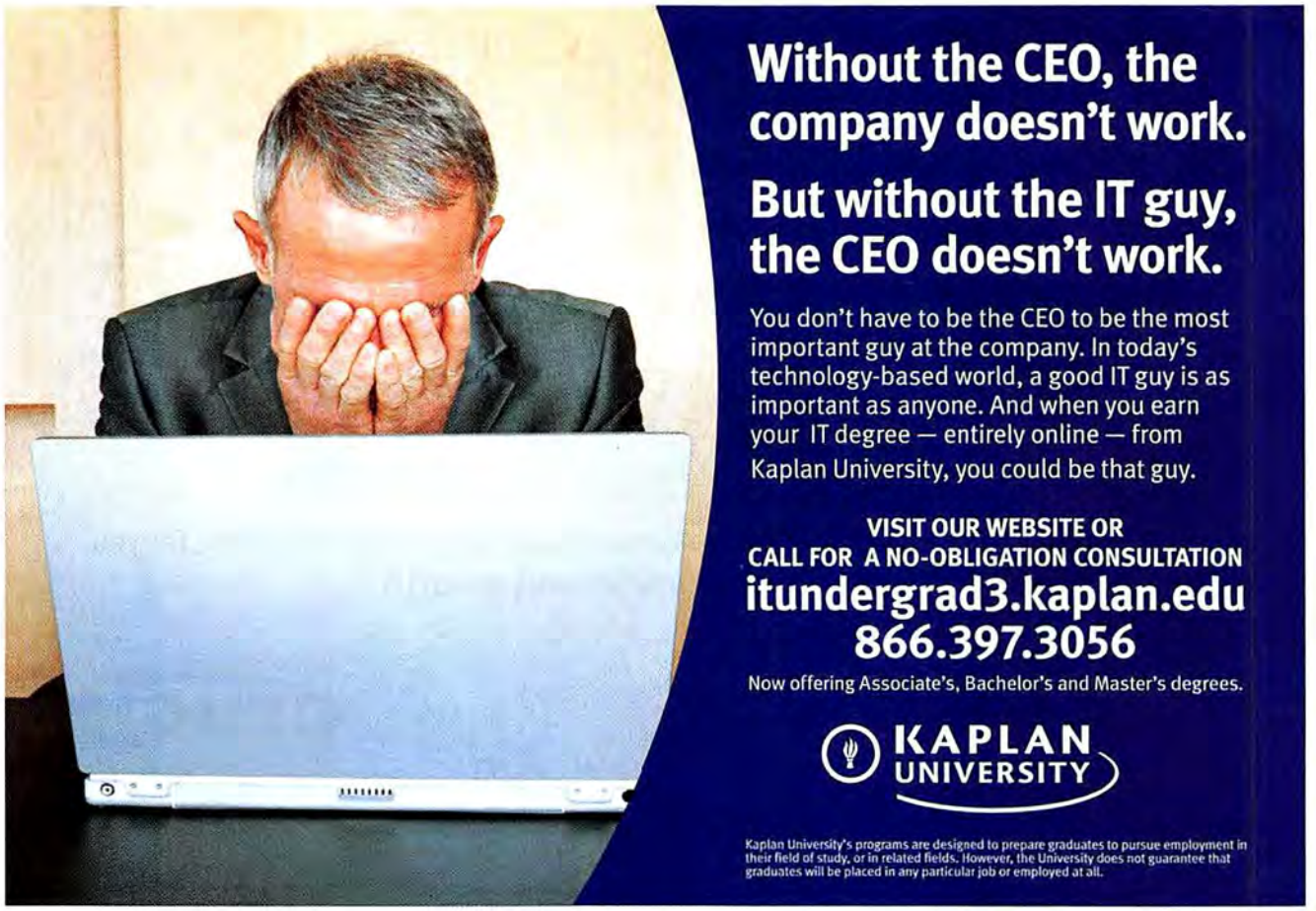
88
VERY GOOD

Chrome | Google

Google's speedy beta browser offers strong integrated search.

Free

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Asus's Unusually Compact Eee Box PC

PCW Test Center

ASUS'S EEE BOX features a smaller footprint and a slimmer profile than the average laptop—and yet it's designed to sit on your desk. The Eee Box starts at just $350, making it a bargain as a basic home PC. But the machine's performance is unimpressive.

The Eee Box—the desktop-computer sibling of Asus's Eee PC notebook—comes with a 1.6-GHz N270 Atom processor, 1GB of RAM, and a 5400-rpm, 80GB, 2.5-inch SATA-150 hard drive. It also has an integrated Intel GMA 950 graphics chip that relies on shared video memory.

Though the Eee Box will do fine for browsing online and for word processing, it is hardly a robust unit, scoring just 36 on our WorldBench 6 tests. In some ways, though, performance is not the point: The system is designed to be a basic, power-saving network-attached device. Asus says that the Box draws just 15 to 20 watts of power—a smaller amount than most laptops use.

Our test unit came with Windows XP Home; Asus says that a Linux version should ship later this year. The Eee Box starts up into ExpressGate, a pre-Windows interface that allows you to boot into Windows, enter the BIOS, or use a simplified Linux-based environment that comes arrayed with a Web browser, an instant messaging client, and Skype.

The Eee Box is a great value that's geared toward students, as well as home and small-office users. That the system comes with Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works, and Sun StarOffice only sweetens the deal.

—Nick Mediati



THE EEE BOX lacks an optical drive, but it has four USB ports.

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON

78
GOOD

Eee Box | Asus

Ultrasmall PC is well designed for basic computing, but little more.

Street: $350

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Neither your business nor the business world stands still. That's why R-Tools, the leader in world-class data recovery solutions, has once again beefed up R-Studio, its Vista-ready utility that allows users to preview file types before recovery.

Branching out from the Microsoft world, the latest improvement is **R-Studio for the Apple Macintosh**. This versatile solution can be installed on the Macintosh OS X, specifically on versions 10.4 and 10.5.

Other recent improvements to R-Studio have included a sorting algorithm that allows the sorting files according to file type, time of creation, file size and so on. R-Studio was also recently enhanced with HFS and HFS+ file systems support, UFS/BigEndian support, GPT partition layout schema support and Apple partition map support.



In addition, R-Tools has announced improvements to **R-Wipe & Clean,** which automatically keeps applications free and clear of harmful clutter. This innovative utility now supports the latest versions of Mozilla Firefox and Opera.

And that's not all. R-Tools has unwrapped a new product called **R-Disk Encryption**. This utility allows users to quickly and easily create a virtual encrypted disk on any hard drive, including network drives, or on any removable media.

R-Tools' recent enhancements to **R-Drive Image**, which gives users mission-critical capability to totally restore their systems after a major crash, included support for backup sets so that full/differential archives can be created with the same file names while old archives are deleted when specified conditions are exceeded. R-Drive Image can now create an image of a hard drive without any partition.

Other stellar solutions from R-Tools include **R-Mail for Outlook** and **R-Mail for Outlook Express**, which reconstruct inadvertently deleted email messages or damaged .pst and .dbx files. And **R-Word** and **R-Excel** recover damaged Word or Excel files that have been corrupted or attacked.

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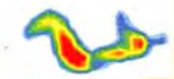
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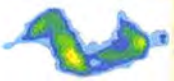


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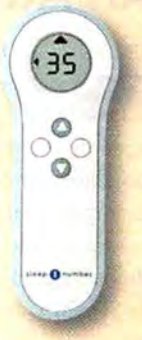
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Creative's Zen X-Fi: An All-Around Star



THE ZEN X-FI includes Creative's surprisingly good EP-830 earbuds.

PCW Test Center

CREATIVE'S ZEN X-Fi is a tremendous digital music player, offering more out-of-the-box features than Apple's recently revamped iPods. The X-Fi has great sound, superb headphones, expandable storage via SD Card, and the ability to stream and download music from your PC wirelessly. It looks great, too.

Its features differentiate this player from the competition. Not only can you download music, video, and images wirelessly to the device, but you can also stream media from your PC, from Creative's servers (which offer podcasts and free music), or from a computer that's running on an open network.

Creative's heralded X-Fi Xtreme Fidelity Audio playback deserves much of the credit for this player's amazing sound. It delivered deep, clean, well-defined audio.

As much as I found to like about the X-Fi, it does have some limitations. It doesn't work with Mac OS X (only with XP and Vista); its online chat application doesn't work well; and you won't get the same degree of integration with third-party speaker systems, car stereos, and accessories that you would with the ubiquitous iPod.

The masses may continue to think iPod first when they need a new MP3 player. But check out the X-Fi, too: It might be the most innovative, feature-packed player on the market, and it's an absolute steal for the price.

—Tim Moynihan

86
VERY GOOD

Zen X-Fi | Creative
The X-Fi delivers the goods in sound, features, earbuds, and price.
List: $200 (16GB), $280 (32GB)
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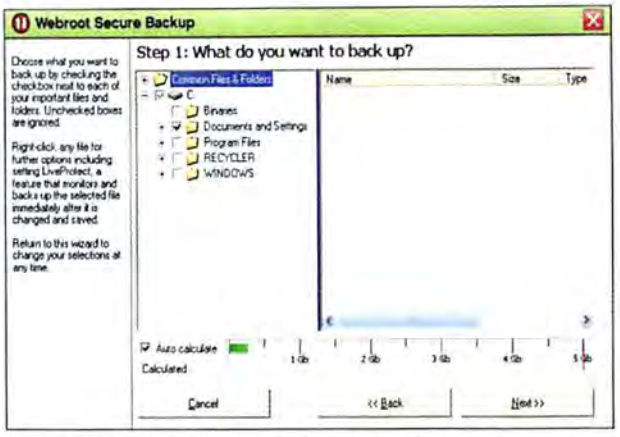
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Webroot Secure Backup Takes on Free Services



WEBROOT'S BACKUP CLIENT is simple to configure and easy to use.

THESE DAYS YOU can find sites that offer 2GB of online backup space for nothing, so you'd think that competing as a for-a-fee storage service would be hard. But many people require more storage space for their vital data than free services provide. That's the market niche that Webroot Secure Backup aims for with its storage options.

Webroot doesn't offer a free account, and its plans of $30 per year for 2GB of storage and $40 per year for 5GB of storage aren't terribly appealing next to the 2GB free offerings of competitors Fabrik and Mozy.

But Webroot offers 10GB for $50 a year, and that saves you $10: Beyond their free levels, the next step up for both Fabrik and Mozy is $60 a year for unlimited backup.

Webroot includes features that Fabrik and Mozy lack, too, such as the ability to create and share password-protected folders. Another plus is that you can back up to a local drive as well as to Webroot's online storage.

Unlike its competitors, Webroot doesn't create a virtual drive within Explorer. Instead, restore operations occur from within the backup client or via the Web.

My backups using Webroot went off without a hitch. And since reliability is not a problem, you can base your choice of a service on economics and on the features you need. If you want to share folders and you have between 5GB and 10GB of data to back up, Webroot Secure Backup makes sense.

—Jon L. Jacobi

80
VERY GOOD

Secure Backup | Webroot

A good option if you need lots of online backup space plus file sharing.

List: $50 per year (10GB)

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Epson's $100 MFP Nips at Pricier Models

PCW Test Center

IS $100 FOR a multifunction printer a good deal? Yes, but only if you have modest needs. We tested four new low-cost models to see how much bang they offer for about a Benjamin. Epson's Stylus NX400 and HP's Photosmart C4480 cost $100 at press time; Dell's V305W and HP's Officejet J4680 cost around $130.

Most are decent machines with a weakness or two. They could satisfy a small or home office, but they can't compete with faster, better-equipped (and pricier) models, such as our Best Buy, the Canon Pixma MX700.



EPSON STYLUS NX400: Low cost and speedy graphics prints.

Of the new budget MFPs we tried, only Epson's Stylus NX400 earned a place on the chart—because it matched or beat its rivals at pretty much everything. The slightly more expensive Kodak ESP 5 ($170) lacked reasonable speed and scan quality, though its cheap inks might offer a worthwhile trade-off.

—Melissa Riofrio

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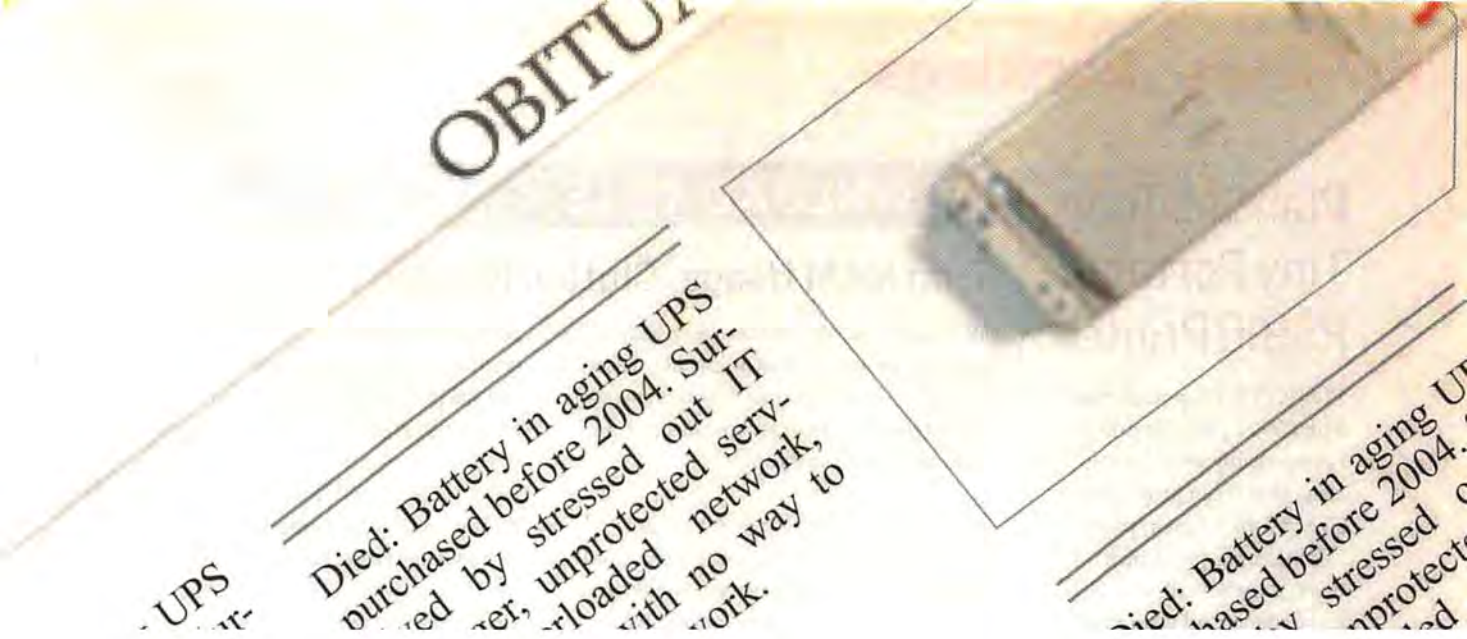
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PC WORLD TOP 10 MULTIFUNCTION INKJET PRINTERS

	Model	PCW Rating	Performance	Features and specifications
1	BEST BUY Canon Pixma MX700 $200 find.pcworld.com/59701	84 VERY GOOD	• Text quality: Very Good • Graphics quality: Very Good • Tested speed (ppm): 9.1 text/ 3.2 graphics	• 30 ppm text • 20 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: Work- and play-oriented features blend harmoniously in this unit, with just a few quality and design issues.			
2	Canon Pixma MX7600 $400 find.pcworld.com/60874	84 VERY GOOD	• Text quality: Superior • Graphics quality: Superior • Tested speed (ppm): 9.8 text/ 3.7 graphics	• 28 ppm text • 23 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: If you can afford it, this fast, full-featured MFP will suit any small business or home office.			
3	HP Photosmart C5280 $130 find.pcworld.com/58163	83 VERY GOOD	• Text quality: Good • Graphics quality: Very Good • Tested speed (ppm): 7.3 text/ 2.4 graphics	• 32 ppm text • 24 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: This versatile unit handles photo and CD/DVD printing as easily as it does everyday copies and scans.			
4	Epson Stylus NX400 $100 NEW find.pcworld.com/61640	80 VERY GOOD	• Text quality: Very Good • Graphics quality: Good • Tested speed (ppm): 5.0 text/ 3.4 graphics	• 34 ppm text • 34 ppm graphics • 5760-by-1440-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: A standout among cheap MFPs, the Stylus NX400 is generally fast and competent, with few compromises.			
5	Canon Pixma MP530 $180 find.pcworld.com/57390	80 VERY GOOD	• Text quality: Good • Graphics quality: Good • Tested speed (ppm): 8.9 text/ 3.2 graphics	• 29 ppm text • 19 ppm graphics • 9600-by-2400-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: The MP530 is a well-equipped MFP for the home office, but it prints digital photos only from your PC.			
6	HP Photosmart C8180 All-in-One $400 find.pcworld.com/59702	79 GOOD	• Text quality: Good • Graphics quality: Good • Tested speed (ppm): 7.0 text/ 2.7 graphics	• 34 ppm text • 33 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: A LightScribe drive offers soup-to-nuts digital photo processing, but this unit's office features are sparse.			
7	Lexmark X9575 Professional $250 find.pcworld.com/60873	79 GOOD	• Text quality: Very Good • Graphics quality: Very Good • Tested speed (ppm): 9.9 text/ 2.0 graphics	• 33 ppm text • 28 ppm graphics • 4800-by-2400-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: Though the X9575 is well equipped for a small or home office, its ink costs restrict it to lower-volume use.			
8	HP Officejet J6480 All-in-One $200 find.pcworld.com/60872	79 GOOD	• Text quality: Very Good • Graphics quality: Very Good • Tested speed (ppm): 7.3 text/ 2.4 graphics	• 31 ppm text • 25 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: A raft of features makes this unit tempting, despite middling performance and a few design flaws.			
9	Dell 968w $219 find.pcworld.com/60871	78 GOOD	• Text quality: Very Good • Graphics quality: Very Good • Tested speed (ppm): 10.2 text/ 2.0 graphics	• 32 ppm text • 27 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: A light-volume small or home office could appreciate this MFP's Wi-Fi and tolerate its shortcomings.			
10	Dell 948 AIO $149 find.pcworld.com/59704	78 GOOD	• Text quality: Good • Graphics quality: Good • Tested speed (ppm): 7.6 text/ 1.7 graphics	• 28 ppm text • 25 ppm graphics • 4800-by-1200-dpi maximum true color resolution
	BOTTOM LINE: Automatic duplexing and an ADF distinguish this multifunction printer from most others in its price range.			

CHART NOTES: Prices and ratings are as of 9/12/08. Speeds are in pages per minute (ppm); resolutions are in dots per inch (dpi).

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON



This year, an estimated 3.6 million UPSs will reach the end of their lives.

Is yours one of them?

A battery warning from your partner in reliability
When you bought your APC UPS, you chose it, and us, for our Legendary Reliability®...because you wanted the best product available. So as the industry leader and your chosen partner, it's our job to inform you that an aging UPS battery puts your network reliability and your peace of mind at risk. If you are converging and consolidating your networks, upgrading your equipment, or deploying new servers, be warned: an older UPS simply cannot handle the increased loads and criticality — putting your entire network at risk of costly downtime, unsafe shutdowns, and data and equipment loss.

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- capacity in volt/amps (VA)
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Step 2: Choose what's best for you by
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PlanOn's Truly Tiny Portable PS910 Printer

PLANON'S 1.5-pound PrintStik PS910 portable printer is remarkably small, considering that it can print letter-size (8.5-by-11-inch) pages.

It measures just 1 inch thick, 2 inches tall, and 11 inches long, and is intended for printing from a Windows laptop or a BlackBerry smart phone. In its quest for portability, however, the PrintStik sacrifices too much: It can print only monochrome pages, on thermal paper.

The PrintStik is useful for quick printouts on the road,



THOUGH THE PlanOn PrintStik is petite, it can print full-size pages.

such as draft documents for mark-up, rough price quotes for customers, or driving directions. But the PrintStik's poor print quality makes its $300 price seem too high. For significantly less money, you can purchase a portable printer that will produce desktop-quality color prints.

—Paul Jasper

65
FAIR

PrintStik PS910 | PlanOn

The diminutive PrintStik prints full pages but its print quality is poor.

List: $300

find.pcworld.com/61712

DOWNLOAD THIS

LAURA BLACKWELL



Trim RAM Usage, Clutter, Kitchen Consternation

MORE ISN'T ALWAYS better—especially when software, desktop clutter, or your list of kitchen duties is involved. This month's programs rein in RAM gluttons, declutter your desktop, and stimulate your culinary spirit.

Minimize Greedy RAM Gobblers

Do certain programs slow your PC to a crawl? Minimem helps you put memory hogs in their place. Unlike most memory-freeing utilities, this freebie lets you decide which programs to optimize and which to leave alone.

Programs such as Firefox 2.0 (which inspired Minimem) use more memory as they stay open. Minimem ends that leakage by removing unneeded memory pages (swaps between main memory and the hard disk). You can set it to show only programs with a RAM footprint larger than a minimum figure you set.

I performed my test drive of Minimem with my usual applications open, optimizing only Web browsers. (I wouldn't use Minimem on security software.) The resulting memory gain was small but perceptible.

Adding physical RAM is a better strategy, but if that's not an option for you, Kerkia's Minimem might make your problem apps bearable again. Free/donationware, find.pcworld.com/61659.

Slide Those Apps to the Side

Want a roomier or tidier desktop? SideSlide delivers both by creating a long, thin, nearly invisible strip at the top of the screen that turns into a launchpad when you mouse over it.

SideSlide creates little windows (or "containers") that can hold anything from desktop shortcuts to Web links to timed reminders. Alternatively, you can remove items from containers and plunk them onto the launchpad.

Whether you're a hot-key commando or a right-click-and-explore type, SideSlide offers time-saving support for the way you work.

All in all, vendor NorthGlide has created a worthy contender in the crowded field of program launchers. Slip SideSlide onto your PC, and you might find yourself asking it to stay. Free/donationware, find.pcworld.com/61661.

Live to Eat, or Eat to Live?

Whether you favor gourmet meals or subsist on franks and beans, cooking and related tasks can be overwhelming. Living Cookbook 2008 has hundreds of recipes, makes creating your own cookbooks easy, and helps with budgeting, shopping, and nutritional calculations.



SIDESLIDE KEEPS YOUR desktop tidy, launching programs, creating reminders, opening Web sites—and disappearing when not in use.

Type your own recipes—or paste them from a Web page or from a scanned-and-OCRed recipe card—into the capture window and highlight sections (Ingredients, Procedures, and so on) to send them to the correct fields.

Living Cookbook uses included dietary information to calculate nutritional statistics; if your recipe calls for ingredients that aren't listed, you can search for substitutes (reconstituted dried mushrooms instead of fresh, for instance). One caveat: The software ignores ingredients for which it has no nutritional data, so it sometimes underestimates calories and nutrients.

For budgeting, Living Cookbook lists ballpark prices for many ingredients; you can change these to match actual prices. You can also build grocery lists based on your menu plans.

The trial/demo version lacks only export and database-restoration features. 30-day free trial, $35 to keep; find.pcworld.com/61660. ●

PHOTOGRAPH: MARC SIMON



NEW GoodSync Version 7!

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GoodSync's powerful technology is years ahead of the pack. Excellent reviews by industry experts and customers alike solidify **GoodSync** as a leader in file backup and synchronization.

PC World Readers
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www.GoodSync.com/PCW


HOTEL



100 Incredibly USEFUL Web Sites

BY MARK SULLIVAN
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL

We scoured the vast Web in search of sites that truly help you get something done. Whether you need to find a home, share a huge file, or throw a wicked curve with a Wiffle ball, you'll find these picks indispensable. »

Special LIST Issue

Special LIST Issue

100 Useful Web Sites

THOUGH THE WEB has become more entertaining and certainly better-looking over the past 15 years, it has also become much more useful and practical, as the sites in this list demonstrate. Whereas Web sites used to be merely informational (online brochures, really), they're now meeting places, service bureaus, personal organizers, arcades—in short, you interact with sites, you don't just click through them.

What has changed? While I was vetting sites for this article, a couple of answers began surfacing right away. Many of the most useful sites on the Web today draw the bulk of their content from the community of people who frequent them. Other superior sites pull valuable information from various sources (listings databases, mapping, GPS, and so on), mashing up the data in useful ways.

I've organized the sites in this list by the type of task they help you with. The list is not a ranking; in every category I recommend sites that each specialize in their own, different area. I've also mixed in a smattering of sites that you might not use every day, but that provide ready answers to specific queries, when you need them—answers to questions like "How can I learn to rumba in the privacy of my own home?" or "Who should I vote for?" or "How do I make a wallet out of duct tape?"

A downloadable bookmark file containing links to all 100 sites is available at find.pcworld.com/61724. While you're there, tell us about your own favorite Web destinations in the PCW forums.

> Your teen loves video games but won't touch a book. Find good titles here. **teensreadtoo.com**

Learn Stuff

Yahoo Answers (answers.yahoo.com): At Yahoo Answers, one of the best examples of community participation on the Net, regular folks write in questions ("How do I get the ring around the collar off of my white dress shirt and make it white again?") and site users offer helpful answers. Other visitors rate the answers on usefulness.

HowStuffWorks (www.howstuffworks.com): The perfect site for the endlessly curious, it lifts up the hood on everything from carburetors to communism and explains in simple terms what they are and how they function. The explanations aren't very deep (most visitors don't want to read *Das Kapital* anyway), but it's the breadth of the topics the site explains that's so impressive.

Lynda.com (www.lynda.com): To learn new software, you likely used to sit in darkened hotel conference rooms watching a bored instructor drone on with a training demo and a laser pointer. Or you bought a manual to go it alone. Neither of those approaches works nearly as well as Lynda.com's subscription-based online videos, which teach you how to use just about any creative, design, or development software package you can think of.



Lynda.com easily gets our nod for the best place online to learn new creative software.

> Tonight's the night you'll finally learn how to play the 'Stairway to Heaven' guitar solo. **www.vanderbilly.com**

Instructables (www.instructables.com): Find out how to make anything from a corsage to a catapult. Users write in about what they do or have invented, and how they did it. The site originated with some guys at the MIT Media Lab who needed a place to demonstrate their latest inventions.

FixYa (www.fixya.com): Your iPod just flatlined. Don't panic, and don't dump it. At FixYa, a team of experts and a large group of users address common tech and gadget breakdowns and how to fix them. You can get help by posting a message on the site or by having a Web chat with one of the experts.

Treehugger (www.treehugger.com): Here you can find information on how to live in a more ecologically sound way every day. The site specializes in covering the green aspects of many parts of life, from food to business to recreation to fashion. You'll also find news and views on the Green Movement.

Livemocha (www.livemocha.com): Livemocha (in beta) is a new, free approach to learning languages, enhancing the process by establishing learning alliances with "language buddies" from around the globe.

Dictionary.com/Thesaurus.com (dictionary.reference.com and thesaurus.reference.com): The English language is complicated, and in some cases illogical. As such, you need a good user manual almost all the time. Here it is.

PHOTOGRAPHS ROBERT CARDIN

Buy, Sell, Rent

Craigslist (www.craigslist.org): Want ads work so much better on the Web than in print that newspaper classified ads are all but extinct. You can buy, sell, or rent just about anything, anywhere on this no-nonsense site.

Freecycle (www.freecycle.org): This grassroots, nonprofit site organizes and connects (via Yahoo Groups) people who might like to trade items within their own communities. It works really well for finding someone to come over and get a useless thing or two out of your house, but not into a landfill.

Zilok (us.zilok.com): Whereas Freecycle focuses on giving or trading, Zilok concentrates on renting. The site hosts rental listings from people in your community for things you might need to use only once—a power tool, a picnic table, a warehouse space, a van—things you'd usually be far better off renting than buying outright.

CarsDirect (www.carsdirect.com): A great place to buy a car online—or at least to get a good starting point on a price—this is the only Web site of its kind that instantly shows you a buy-it-now price, with no haggling and no calls from snaky salespeople.

Zillow (www.zillow.com): From some of the creators of Expedia comes Zillow, which gathers in one place a bevy of information on properties and their prices in many parts of the United States. If a house is for sale, you can find contact information, read descriptions, and ask questions of the seller. Plus it's just fun to see how much your neighbor's house is worth.

Greenzer (www.greenzer.com): Greenzer brings environmental awareness down to the local level by helping you choose products from companies that are genuinely walking the walk, not just talking the green talk to improve their bottom line.

'I've seen people do it on TV, and I really want to photocopy my buttocks on the Xerox machine at work. Is this considered appropriate?' **www.emilypost.com**

HousingMaps (www.housingmaps.com): "Mashups," to me, have been largely an overhyped, unrealized concept. HousingMaps, however, is a notable exception. It's a simple mashup of Google Maps and Craigslist housing listings. Choose the part of town in which you want to live, and see what's available in your price range.

Watch cheeky videos that help you discover the differences among dry German Riesling wines. **tv.winelibrary.com**



RoadsideAmerica.com will fill up your next road trip with fun, off-the-wall attractions.

Plan a Vacation

Tripit (www.tripit.com): This beta site brings all the travel information you need to one place, and it works very well. Before you depart, use this tool to make a master itinerary, integrating every possible detail of your journey, from restaurants to rental cars to what the weather will be like.

Kayak (www.kayak.com): Here's the online travel agent du jour. Punch in your dates and destinations, and Kayak brings back price quotes from most of the major airlines; it also checks in with other aggregators (Expedia, Orbitz, Travelocity) to capture the best deals they have. Kayak lets you see and compare fares in list, matrix, or chart views, and even provides a calendar showing the best rates that other users have found for trips similar to yours.

TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com): TripAdvisor offers the "wisdom of the crowd" view for travelers. Reading its numerous negative reviews of a hotel I almost stayed at in Denver saved me from what would surely have been a bad experience. (A friend of mine who lives in Denver says the reviews were correct, too.) The site also hosts reviews of flights, cruises, and restaurants.

RoadsideAmerica (www.roadsideamerica.com): This is a wonderful tool for people who have a taste (and the gas money) for road trips. It's the definitive guide to crazy and offbeat roadside attractions. To test its completeness, I ran a check of listings for my Midwestern home state, and it turned up some cool spots I hadn't even known about, such as the "world's largest ball of stamps" and Ole's Big Game Bar.

PlanetEye (www.planeteye.com): To plan a trip to Rome, I logged in to this beta site. It had most everything I needed, including local news and blogs from an area expert, which clued me in to bargains and seasonal goings-on that would be happening during my stay.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com): Read this site's Thorn Tree Forum posts (organized by travel destinations around the world), and you'll find discussions among folks who have just returned from the place(s) you may »

wish to visit. Many of the posts are by people who have been to the destination a number of times—veterans who should have a lot of good advice to share with first-time visitors.

Stay in Touch

Facebook (www.facebook.com): I know, I know, recommending Facebook is like recommending that you wear sunscreen at the beach. But, really, what social networking site is more functional, more organized, and more populous than this one?

WhitePages.com (www.whitepages.com): WhitePages and PeopleFinders are both good tools for tracking down people, their addresses, and their phone numbers, but the nod goes to WhitePages for its upcoming addition of voice and mobile capabilities.

> They all sound the same! Who should you vote for in '08? ABC's Match-o-Matic can help. **find.pcworld.com/61695**

FriendFeed (friendfeed.com): Many content sharing and social networking sites exist now—Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and so on—and my friends seem to be spread out evenly among them. I don't have time to visit them all. FriendFeed crawls more than 40 such sites to keep you updated on the Web pages, photos, videos, and music that your friends are sharing or commenting on.

Spock (www.spock.com): This site looks for a person's school, work, and social affiliations, then displays photos, links to social network pages, Web sites, videos, and blogs about that person.

Stay Healthy

FitDay (www.fitday.com): This site helped me work off 10 pounds by forcing me to report—honestly—the foods that I was eating every day, along with their calorie counts. No more denial ("that donut couldn't have been more than 75 calories!"). FitDay isn't the only site that assists with nutrition and weight control, but the breadth and depth of its food information and its easy-to-use layout lift it above the rest.

> What did eBay's home page look like on May 14, 1997? Hop in the Wayback Machine to find out. **www.archive.org**

iMedix (www.imedix.com): Social networking sites are everywhere, but many are focused on little worth talking about. iMedix (in beta), however, helps people form communities around their health issues (cancer, depression, and so on), so they can network with one another and share relevant news and research information.

RealAge (www.realage.com): Fill out a health questionnaire at this site, and it reports your "physical age" (the age of your body), which you can compare with your chronological age. If you're in good shape, your body may be 35, even though your calendar age is 45. Or vice versa, if you aren't fit. Either way, the site produces a detailed health plan to lower your physical age.

Take the Web With You

NextBus (www.nextbus.com): NextBus is a site for mobile devices that tells you exactly when your bus or train will arrive. It's powered by a system of GPS devices planted on the buses and trains themselves. It can even plot their comings and goings on a Google map. No more standing at the bus stop cursing.

Zeer (www.zeer.com): Zeer (beta) effectively utilizes input from readers to deliver ratings and the nutritional lowdown on all sorts of foods. It's a natural as a mobile application—you can load it up on your cell phone and shop smarter at the supermarket.

New York Times (www.nytimes.com): The Old Gray Lady looks fetching on the small screen. "All the news that's fit to print" in the palm of your hand.

Google News (news.google.com): The simplicity of Google News' design makes it the fastest and easiest way I've seen to organize and read news on a cell or smart phone.

Google Maps (maps.google.com): Compared with other mapping sites, Google Maps is simpler, more versatile, and easier to use on mobile devices. When you're moving around, whether on foot or on wheels, such attributes become very important.

MizPee (www.mizpee.com): This one is kinda funny, but undeniably useful. You're in a strange city, and you need to find a bathroom. MizPee locates one and plots it on a map for you.

Find Local Stuff

Yelp (www.yelp.com): Yelp has emerged as the leading destination for determining whether the launderette, restaurant, therapist, or manicurist »



NYTimes.com's mobile version features an elegant design that makes locating and reading news on your smart phone easy.

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across town or around the corner is worth a visit. Virtually every business receives at least a couple of bad reviews, so factor that in, and try to gauge the general vibe of the reviews.

OpenTable (www.opentable.com): OpenTable is simply the biggest and best-connected site for making dining reservations online. It has wisely added a mobile application so that you can easily select and make reservations while you're away from home.

Chowhound (chowhound.chow.com): My foodie friends say this is the place to go to dig up great restaurants, recipes, cooking and dining stories and blogs, and good discussions about food and drink. Today's featured recipe: Smoked Duck and Cherry Pressed Sandwich. I think I just drooled on my desk.

Angie's List (www.angieslist.com): Another great locally focused "wisdom of the crowd" site. How do you know whether this contractor or that auto shop is reputable and competent? Angie's List at least gives you some solid clues, and as anybody who has had work done on a house or car knows, some serious money is on the line. A small monthly membership fee applies.

StubHub (www.stubhub.com): StubHub is the alternative to Ticketmaster for sports, concerts, and theater tickets. StubHub, in effect, took ticket scalping off the street and put it on the Internet by providing a secure marketplace for fan-to-fan ticket sales. In fact, it's better than Ticketmaster, because it doesn't charge ridiculous fees, and you still have a shot at buying tickets for events that are officially sold out.

Find Music, Video, Books

Pitchfork (www.pitchforkmedia.com): One the first indie music Web sites, and arguably still the best. Not too much about Justin Timberlake here, but plenty on new indie releases. Be sure to check out the PitchforkTV beta for fresh documentaries on music legends.

Darn it all, you want to learn to rumba. But not in public. From the foxtrot to the cha-cha, BallroomDancers.com will teach you all the great dances in the privacy of your own home.
www.ballroomdancers.com

Amoeba Music (www.amoeba.com): This music chain's site gives you a pretty good flavor of the music that people are listening to on the Left Coast (the chain has stores in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Berkeley, California). The site is full of reviews of new releases, staff picks, music blogs, and video from in-store concerts. MP3s, too.

Other Music (www.othermusic.com): And here you can find the view from the East Coast—Greenwich Village, to be exact. This eclectic little neighborhood record shop, it turns out, has a wonderful online store, divided into a digital downloads section and a CD/LP mail-order site. Both sections include reviews, articles, and in-store video.

You'd like to donate to charities just by clicking around the Internet as you always do. GoodSearch is a search engine that splits its advertising revenues 50-50 with charities and schools.
www.goodsearch.com

Metacritic (www.metacritic.com): At this site you can read fresh criticism about new (mainstream) films, DVDs, music, TV, and games. The content selection is broad, and the reviews are well written and fair.

Pandora (www.pandora.com): Pandora is still one of the coolest music sites around, largely because of its uncanny ability to help you form a Web-radio playlist tailored to your tastes. Try it while you still can; the RIAA is doing its best to kill off sites like this.

Last.fm (www.last.fm): This site is another example of a social network formed around something that people want to talk about: music. I've been hipped to several new bands (Battles, Iron, and Wine) as a result of lurking on Last.fm. While Pandora may still have an edge at helping you discover new music, Last.fm really became a contender last January, when it began allowing users to stream full songs (not just low-quality samples) at its site.

Powell's Books (www.powells.com): Amazon is fine, but Powell's is the best online bookstore in America. Why? Powell's focuses primarily on books and offers superior reviews of volumes new and old by super-bookish staffers and Powell's customers alike. The site is easy to navigate and search, too. »

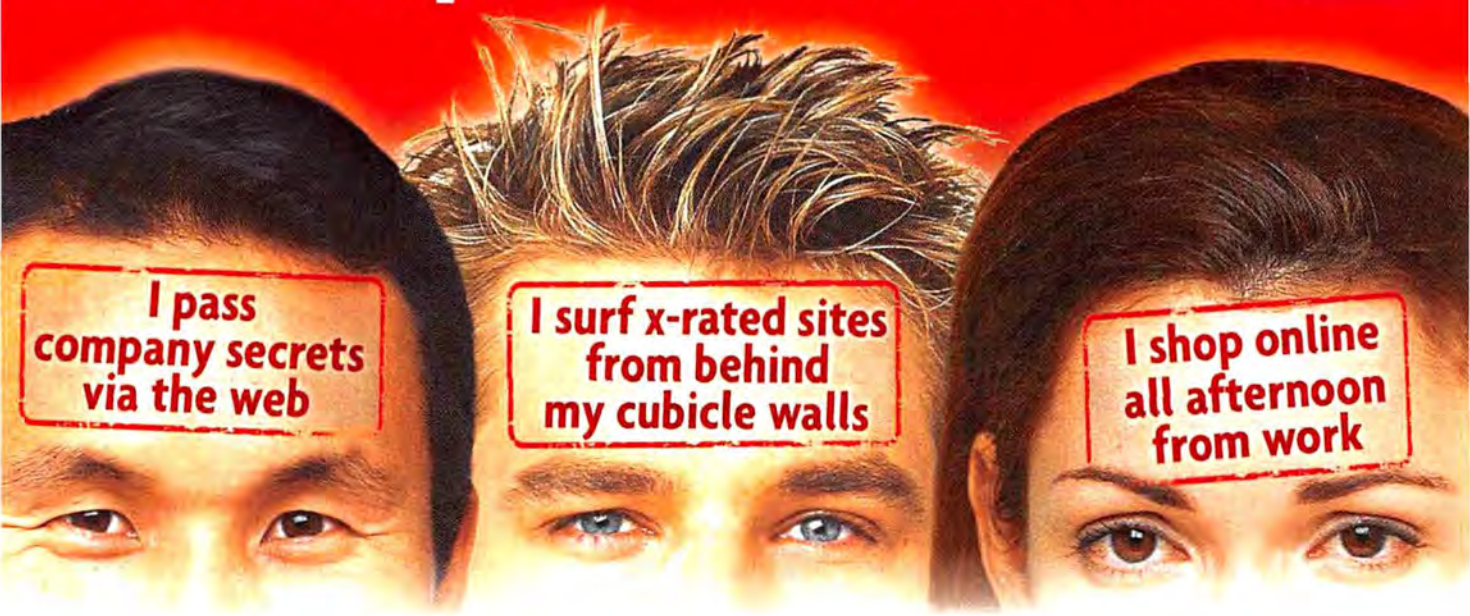
Worst of the Web: The Bottom Ten



Life not creepy enough for you? Find lonely, locked-up singles at Meet-an-Inmate.

WHILE LOCATING THE most useful sites on the Web, I felt it only fair to call out, as well, some of the most useless. I found no shortage of sites that are poorly designed or boring, but I've zeroed in on certain specimens that go beyond worthless—they set standards for the dazzlingly ugly, the patently offensive, and the mind-bogglingly pointless. For the complete list of this esteemed group, with full descriptions, see the online story at find.pcworld.com/61719.

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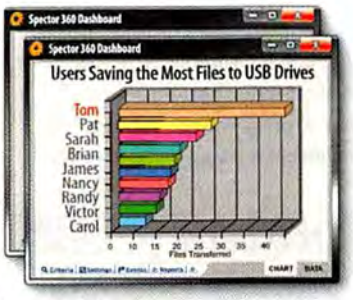
Spector 360 is the world's first monitoring solution that makes it easy to detect inappropriate employee behavior. At the touch of a button, you will see ALL PC & Internet activity for your entire company and find out which employees are working, playing, doing their job efficiently or putting your business at risk by engaging in illicit or illegal behavior.

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More than 50 charts and reports allow you to quickly and easily identify your top achievers, productivity wasters, and anyone engaging in inappropriate or potentially damaging conduct.

TOP 5 THINGS YOU WILL DISCOVER

1. Which employees spend the most time working and which spend the most time goofing off.
2. Which employees spend the most time surfing web sites and see EXACTLY what they do on them.
3. What employees search for on Google, MSN, Yahoo and more.
4. Which employees are posting resumes on Monster.
5. Who is leaking company confidential information via chat, web mail or removable media.

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Drop.io (drop.io): Here, you can dump up to 100MB of pictures, video, audio, documents, or whatever into a personal folder, and then share the URL (it would look something like 'drop.io/*yourname*1') with family or friends. It's supereasy to use, and my favorite hosting and sharing site.

> So you want to learn the 'Star-Spangled Banner' in Spanish. Babel Fish translates whole paragraphs of text into and out of English. **babelfish.yahoo.com**

eSnips (www.esnips.com): At this center for social file sharing, you can store cool content, from documents to music tracks, online, and then easily access your "snips" at a later date and share the content with other users. But what makes eSnips different is that it's really a social network that provides users ample opportunity to discuss the things they're storing and sharing.

Access 'Private' Information

Glassdoor (www.glassdoor.com): This site invites you to log in and anonymously write what you *really* think of the company you work for, the culture you work in (here's where you gripe about your boss), and the salary you're pulling down. Then (and only then) can you dig for some dirt on current or former coworkers and, best of all, see how much they make.

Search Systems (www.searchsystems.net): Public-records sites do the legwork of collecting all kinds of public records from all over the country, and then sell access to them via the Internet. Search Systems, one of the oldest and most reliable of these companies, takes a no-nonsense approach to selling access to 36,000 public-records databases from around the country. You can access marriage and death records, property records, and business permits for a $5 monthly fee, or buy the "premium" service, which includes bankruptcy and criminal records.

> Want clear instructions on how to throw a wicked curve with a Wiffle ball? What about steps to make a duct-tape wallet? **www.wikihow.com**

NETRonline (www.netronline.com): For a somewhat more hands-on approach to accessing public records, NETRonline's free Public Records portal is a very useful tool, with direct links to the actual county and state databases that contain the data. NETR also offers background checks and criminal-record searches, for a price.

Criminal Searches (www.criminalsearches.com): Do you really know the people in your neighborhood? Do some of them have criminal histories, including sex-related offenses, violent crimes, and theft (or just traffic offenses, as the site also details)? Criminal Searches provides their mug shots and even plots their addresses on a map, for free.

FundRace (fundrace.huffingtonpost.com): This clever mashup site plots political donors on a map and shows how much they contributed. What did your neighbor give to the Democrats or the Republicans this year?

Be Politically Aware

FedSpending.org (www.fedspending.org): We all pay taxes. A lot of taxes. FedSpending.org gives you easy ways to see exactly where, and on what, your federal tax dollars are being spent.

OpenCongress (www.opencongress.org): OpenCongress combines official government data with news coverage, blog posts, and commentary to give you the real story about what's happening in Congress—from bills to scandals.

PolitiFact Truth-o-Meter (www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/): You hear a lot of bluff and bluster, slips, spin, and even outright lies during campaign season. Every day the reporters and researchers at PolitiFact (a team effort of the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Congressional Quarterly*) fact-check every word of candidates' speeches, TV ads, and interviews to determine the amount of truth in the claims they make.

Project Vote Smart (www.votesmart.org): Run by a bipartisan group of interns and volunteers, Project Vote Smart publishes the biographies, voting records, and other details about all presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative candidates. ››



PolitiFact can be an invaluable "bull detector" during this year's spin-filled campaign.

Cyberpower recommends Windows Vista™ Home Premium



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T9400 2.53Ghz	$ 1185

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P8400 2.26Ghz	$ 1059



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- 600Watt Subwoofer Speakers
- Logitech Keyboard & Optical Wheel Mouse
- X-Jupiter Jr. Mid-Tower Case w/ 680Watt SLI™ Power Supply
- Asetek Liquid Cooling System
- Free 802.11G Wireless PCI Network Adapter

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(12MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

Quad Q9650 3.00Ghz	$ 1135
Quad Q9550 2.83Ghz	$ 915

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

Quad Q9400 2.66Ghz	$ 859

(8MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)

Quad Q6600 2.40Ghz	$ 789

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

E8600 3.33Ghz	$ 859
E8500 3.16Ghz	$ 775
E8400 3.00Ghz	$ 755

(3MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)

E7200 2.53 Ghz	$ 699



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Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor

(12MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

Extreme QX9650 3.00Ghz	$ 1839
Quad Q9650 3.00Ghz	$ 1359
Quad Q9550 2.83Ghz	$ 1125

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

Quad Q9400 2.66Ghz	$ 1065

(8MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)

Quad Q6600 2.40Ghz	$ 989

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

E8600 3.33Ghz	$ 1065
E8500 3.16Ghz	$ 975
E8400 3.00Ghz	$ 955



from $ 1185

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- NVIDIA® GeForce® GTX 260 896MB
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- High Definition 7.1 Surround Sound
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- CoolerMaster Cosmo Sport Gaming Tower Case 680Watt SLI™ Power
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Intel® Core™2 Duo Processor

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Quad Q9650 3.00Ghz	$ 1625
Quad Q9550 2.83Ghz	$ 1399

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

Quad Q9400 2.66Ghz	$ 1345

(8MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)

Quad Q6600 2.40Ghz	$ 1275

(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)

E8600 3.33Ghz	$ 1345
E8500 3.16Ghz	$ 1259
E8400 3.00Ghz	$ 1235

(3MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)

E7200 2.53Ghz	$ 1185



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OpenSecrets.org (www.opensecrets.org): All candidates for federal office must report the people and organizations that have contributed money to their campaigns. These revenue sources, of course, often serve as fairly accurate predictors of the decisions that a candidate might make once he or she takes office—because you don't forget your friends, right?

Survive the Recession

GasBuddy (www.gasbuddy.com): GasBuddy is actually a network of local sites (such as sanfrangasprices.com for the San Francisco area), each of which allows consumers to find and report high or low gas prices around town.

> You want to read James Joyce's notoriously difficult *Ulysses*, or *Finnegans Wake*, but you're afraid, very afraid, and you need someone to help you through it. **www.trentu.ca/faculty/jjoyce**

Fuelly (www.fuelly.com): Fuelly is a cool little Web tool that lets you track and keep a history of your vehicle's gas mileage and compare your results with those of other drivers.

RetailMeNot (www.retailmenot.com): Find coupons (about 85,000, the site says) for thousands of stores nationwide. Many of them are sent in by site users, for others to use. It's not the only online coupon community, but it's the biggest and probably the best.

BillShrink (www.billshrink.com): A big chunk of your money probably goes to your wireless carrier every month. BillShrink asks you for your locale, wireless usage habits, and current plan, and then it recommends other plans available in your area that might be better deals for you. It's a small way to trim the fat, but every little bit counts.

Prosper (www.prosper.com): Prosper is like a dating site that brings people who want to borrow money together with people who want to lend it. Borrowers post their borrowing requests, and prospective lenders bid on the interest rate at which they're willing to loan part or all of the money.

Kiva (www.kiva.org): Kiva follows roughly the same business model as Prosper, but adds a philanthropy aspect. The site allows you to extend a loan to a person in an underdeveloped nation who needs the money to launch a small business, for example.

Bankrate (www.bankrate.com): This is the largest and most complete aggregator of financial rate information that we've seen on the Web. The site constantly surveys 4800 financial institutions in all 50 states to provide real-time rates on around 300 financial instruments—mortgages, credit cards, car loans, money market accounts, and certificates of deposit—so you can find the best rates and save money.

Pageonce (www.pageonce.com): You've accumulated numerous online accounts—everything from banking sites to Netflix to shopping sites to social networking—and they all have separate log-ins. Pageonce brings all of your accounts together in one dashboard where they're easy to access. But it does much more than store passwords: Once the site is linked to the accounts, it notifies you of any changes at them—from payment alerts to new-friend requests on Facebook.

> You want to hurl insults just as the Bard did, as in "Thou mammering swag-bellied yard ape..." Zing! To learn, visit the Shakespearean Insulter. **www.pangloss.com/seidel/Shaker**

> Just want to turn on some Pink Floyd and gaze far out into the universe? See it though the lens of the Hubble Telescope (Pink Floyd not included). **hubblesite.org**

AnnualCreditReport.com (www.annualcreditreport.com): Since 2003, the Fair and Accurate Credit Transactions Act has made it possible for individuals to obtain one free annual credit report from each of the three major credit reporting agencies per year. AnnualCreditReport.com is the only site that provides them without strings attached.

Publish Your Stuff

Picasa Web Albums (picasaweb.google.com/home): Flickr is so 2007. Google's Picasa Web Albums does the same kind of stuff (that is, organizing and sharing your photos), with a smarter and friendlier interface.

Lulu (www.lulu.com): You're a genius, and your book is brilliant—the world just doesn't know it yet. Go to Lulu, which will help you self-publish hard copies of your masterpiece at reasonable rates. Its services range from design to marketing.

Animoto (animoto.com): Animoto takes your still photos and stitches them together into a little animated film using cool effects, and then adds music. It's free and easy to use, and the result is well worth the small effort.

Photosynth (photosynth.net): If you really want someone to experience what it's like to visit a place you've been to (a foreign city, an art gallery, a local pub, whatever) this site—developed by Microsoft's Live Labs research arm—assembles your digital photos to create a high-res 3D walk-through that people can enjoy via a Web browser. (See some Photosynth sample images in our slide show at find.pcworld.com/61730.)

Capzles (www.capzles.com): Here you can make digital slide shows on »

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steroids. Capzles creates highly controllable and information-rich slide shows of your photos, complete with background images and music.

Vimeo (www.vimeo.com): Vimeo is arguably the best video sharing and hosting site right now because of its generous file-size allowances, as well as its focus on professional-grade filmmaking from people who live and breathe it. Worth checking out.

Sprout (sproutbuilder.com): Sprout is the easiest way to assemble your own Flash-style widgets, which you can then embed in your site or blog.

Get the Right News, Fast

Slate (www.slate.com): In general, I find Slate to be a bit fresher and more plugged-in than Salon, though both have good collections of online news and views. But Slate has a killer section that I make a point of reading every day: Its "Today's Papers" section gives a clear and concise roundup of the news stories the major national newspapers are running on their front pages. You can have this sent to your e-mail inbox daily, with links to the full stories. (Now you have no excuse for sounding stupid at cocktail parties.)

NPR (www.npr.org): If you like listening to your news, NPR's site is a great free resource. I usually check out the "Hourly News Summary" first—it's updated throughout the day. The site includes sound files for a wide variety of commentary and special features on everything from Detroit's independent-music scene to U.S. foreign policy on China.

'I need to get the real story on the mysterious Chupacabra (goat-sucker). And why are they still covering up what happened at Area 51? Homeland Security is not returning my calls.'
www.occultopedia.com

Free Republic (www.freerepublic.com): It's not the prettiest site you'll ever visit, but if your news tastes run to the conservative side of things, you may quickly get accustomed to Free Republic's sharp daily aggregation of news and commentary on all the hot-button conservative stories and issues of the day. You can post your opinions in the site's active forums, too.

Mixx (www.mixx.com): Mixx is a social news site similar to Digg; users vote on stories, moving them up and down in the rankings. But Mixx splits the news into narrower categories than Digg does, so you can set up the site to display only news "voted up" by people who have interests similar to yours.

Techmeme (www.techmeme.com): Techmeme aggregates the best articles from a sea of tech sites, focusing on new, clever, or game-changing software, services, gear, and gadgets. It's a fast and accurate way to get a read on the day's top tech stories.

You heard someone in the lunch room say 'murketing.' Then, just a couple of hours later, someone explained how they've started 'fampooling'. You need to know what these fresh entrants into the lexicon mean.
www.wordspy.com

Drudge Report (www.drudgereport.com): Drudge's right-leaning news aggregation site has found the formula for delivering online news, and millions of people hit the citizen journalist's site to get the latest stories each day.



Slate's 'Today's Papers' sums up the day's big stories for you.

BBC News (news.bbc.co.uk): The view from across the pond can be very helpful for seeing U.S. news in a different light; and, of course, the BBC's coverage of international news is fast, comprehensive, and first-rate.

Watch TV Online

OVGuide (www.ovguide.com): This is the biggest aggregator of links to online video I've encountered to date. One caveat: Some of the video sites featured seem to contain pirated video ripped from DVDs. The company's stance? "OVGuide.com simply directs you to the site; it is not responsible for the content on the sites."

NinjaVideo (www.ninjavideo.net): I heard about Ninja through word of mouth and assumed that, like most of the "awesome video sites" I hear about, it would list a bunch of great titles—none of which would play. Wrong. I downloaded a small plug-in and began watching just-released movies and premium TV shows in no time, for free.

Truveo (www.truveo.com): Using this all-video search engine, you can search for your favorite TV shows from any network or provider hosting online content, including ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, ESPN, and others.

SnagFilms (www.snagfilms.com): Documentary film heaven. The site hosts about 250 domestic and international documentaries right now, and is growing fast. The site also has a twist: It lets you "snag" the films you like and set up a little theater of your own at your MySpace page or Web site. ●



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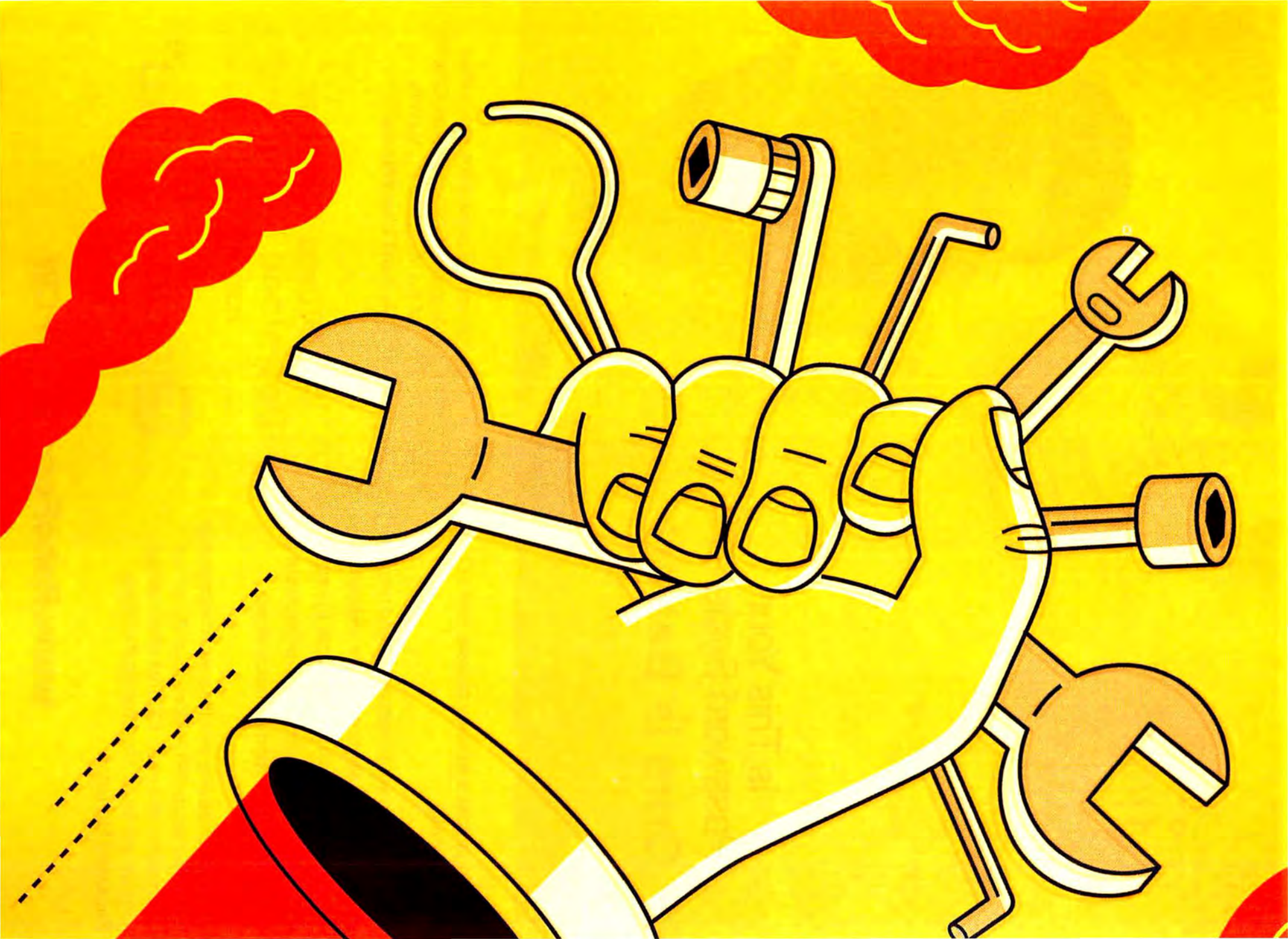
We've been saving you time and making your life easier since 1999. More than 26 million downloads, and **over 100 five star ratings** later we are by far the World's #1 Rated Password Manager.

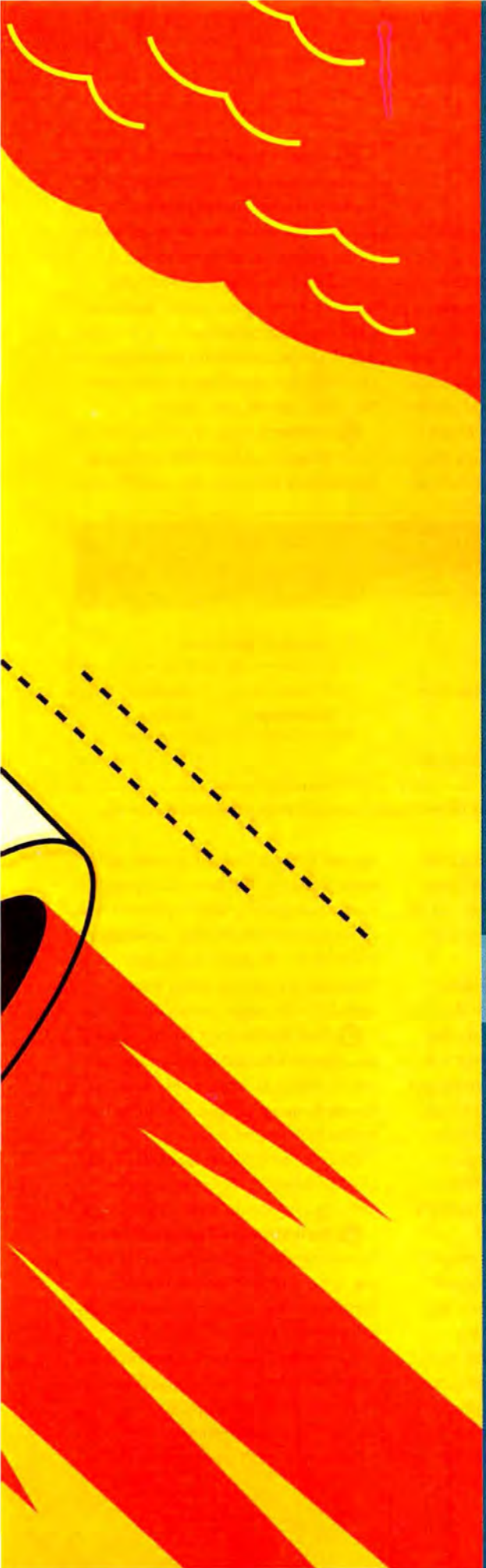
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50 Tools to SPEED UP Your PC

BY PRESTON GRALLA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY CAMPBELL

Get Windows humming again, supercharge your browser, and clear out the crud with these (mostly) free downloads. You're just minutes away from a faster, smoother system. »

Special **LIST** Issue

MOST OF THESE downloads are free to use forever; some are free initially, but require that you pay for them after a trial period (we've labeled each one accordingly). And you won't have to look high and low on the Internet to find them—they're all available from the PC World Downloads library. Just browse to find.pcworld.com/61726.

Tune-Up Tools

All-in-one tune-up applications offer a slew of utilities, ranging from file cleanup to Registry cleaners and beyond.

Advanced WindowsCare V2 Personal (Free) This multipurpose tool straightens out your Registry, handles Windows startup apps, erases browsing history, removes spyware, and gives your PC an all-around optimization. Be sure to tell the program to create a restore point before it goes to work.

TuneUp Utilities (Trial, $50) This all-around degunker and system cleaner will sweep away unneeded files, control which apps run on startup, undelete, and even completely destroy unwanted files to protect your privacy.

WinSettings Pro (Shareware, $50) This tool kills junk files, duplicate files, and Internet tracks. It also includes a good cookie cleaner that lists their contents and then lets you eliminate the ones you don't want. Features beyond system cleaning include Registry tools that claim to speed up Internet access.

Super Utilities (Trial, $60) In this package you get 27 tools for cleaning and optimizing your PC. It has a startup organizer, antispyware features, a Registry cleaner, defragmenters, and more.

Glary Utilities (Free) This excellent no-cost tool promises one-click cleanup and optimization, and it delivers. It scans your system for problems with the Registry, shortcuts, startup programs, and spyware, and then gives you the option of which to clean up. It also deletes traces of your Internet surfing and erases temporary files. Optimization doesn't get simpler than this.

Application Optimization

System sluggishness is often the result of problems with the apps you run. Are they outdated and in need of patching? Do too many run in the background? These utilities help resolve such issues.

Secunia PSI (Free) If you make sure that all of your applications are patched and up-to-date, they'll run faster and be more secure—and so will your PC on the whole. Unfortunately, visiting the Web site for each of your programs can be so time-consuming that you'll never get around to doing it. Grab this freebie instead. It scans your PC, lists all of your applications, and then regularly checks for security patches.

PC Decrapifier (Free) One likely reason your system is sluggish is that it's bedeviled by "craplets"—software that your PC maker installed because it was paid to. This free tool zaps programs put on new PCs, such as QuickBooks Trial, Wild Tangent Games, Dell URL Assistant, and others. (For a full list, go to www.pcdecrapifier.com/removes.) Before use, create a restore point in case it kills something you wanted to keep.

Autoruns (Free) Unnecessary programs and services that run whenever you start or log in to your PC are a big cause of system slowdowns, and it's tough to identify every item. That's what this tool does for you. It displays every running app and service with a great deal of detail, such as their name, associated .dll files, and location on your PC.

Security Task Manager (Trial, $29) Similar to Autoruns, this excellent tool shows you every running program and process. The utility also indicates whether the program is likely malicious, its type, how it launched (for example, upon startup or from within Windows Explorer), and the file name. It lets you delete any process with a single click. It also rates files according to how harmless or dangerous they may be.

WinPatrol (Free) This very good all-around optimizer frees your system of unnecessary programs that run on startup, and keeps it clean of spyware and other malware. Whenever an app tries to start automatically, WinPatrol sends you an alert so you can block it. In addition, it shows details about the program, including the creator, when it was added, the file name, and so on.



Glary Utilities helps to clean up and optimize your computer, without your paying a penny.

Foxit Reader (Free) Strictly speaking, this isn't an optimization tool, but it does eliminate a cause of system slowdowns for many people: the bloated Adobe PDF Reader software.

The free Foxit Reader is smaller, loads quickly, doesn't take up unnecessary memory, and has no instability issues.

Norton Removal Tool (Free) Some Norton products are notorious for taking up far too many system resources. Removing them completely can be difficult, but this tool does the trick.

McAfee Consumer Products Removal Tool (Free) Like Norton products, some McAfee utilities can consume serious amounts of system resources. To remove them from your PC, use this utility.

Hard-Disk Housekeeping

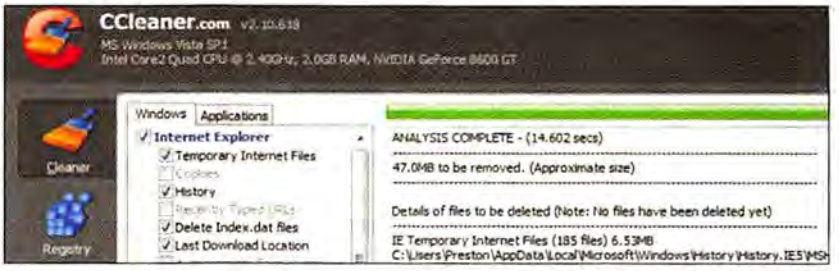
Unneeded files occupy precious space and could possibly slow your system. Get rid of them with these cleaning and optimization tools, which also include a very good backup program.

CCleaner (Free) This is probably the best tool you can find for cleaning your system and thereby optimizing your PC. It scrubs temporary Internet files, history lists, cookies, autocomplete entries, the thumbnail cache, unneeded file fragments, temporary files—the list goes on. It also has a Registry optimizer and uninstall tools, and it removes traces that apps leave behind.

Duplicate Music Files (Free) If you have a big MP3 or media files collection, you may have many duplicates hogging hard-disk space. This freebie searches for more than file names—it compares file sizes, does error checks, and examines ID3 tags to find and delete duplicates.

Easy Duplicate File Finder (Free) This tool scans for duplicates, and lets you clean either in bulk or just selected files. It also protects system files so that you don't accidentally delete any important ones that your PC needs to operate.

NovaBackup Professional (Trial, $50) Backup software may be the most overlooked optimization tool of all. When something goes wrong with your system, you'll want a way to recover files and restore your machine to a working state. NovaBackup Professional does a great job, and can restore individual files, folders, or a whole disk. (For reviews and downloads of more backup software, visit find.pcworld.com/61716.)



CCleaner searches through various program installations and removes unneeded files.

Internet and Network Tune-Up

These tools will speed up downloads, help you find fast Wi-Fi, peer into your home network, and more.

Spiceworks IT Desktop (Free) This software scans your network, identifies every device on it, and displays detailed information on what it finds. It lists all applications and operating systems, and sends you a variety of warnings, such as when antivirus definitions are out-of-date or new software is installed. Although this program is free, it displays ads. To get rid of the promos, you'll have to pay $20 per month.

Xirrus Wi-Fi Monitor (Free) This Vista gadget runs in the sidebar and displays information about your current Wi-Fi connection, as well as nearby hotspots. You'll be able to see how strong or weak your connection is compared with others, and find information such as your IP address and MAC address.



If you use Vista, Xirrus Wi-Fi Monitor is one of the most useful Vista gadgets you can download.

Expired Cookies Cleaner (Free) Your PC has dozens and dozens of cookies that Web sites use for things such as automatically logging you in or remembering how you've customized the way they work. Cookies typically have timeout dates, but afterward they stay on your PC, clogging it up. This free little utility finds expired cookies and deletes them. No fuss, no muss—they're gone.

HackCleaner (Free) This excellent tool cleans many different types of Internet junk, including cookies, temporary files, and Browser Helper Objects. The program also includes a security feature that will block Browser Helper Objects from being installed on your PC.

Download Accelerator Plus (Free) People who live to download will want this no-cost program, which optimizes every aspect of the downloading process. It splits individual downloads into pieces and downloads them all simultaneously from the fastest servers it can find. It's extremely easy to use and integrates with your browser, so when you initiate a file download, it automatically launches. You can also manually add downloads to the program.

The utility restarts interrupted downloads, and pauses and resumes. Its history manager shows all the files you've ever downloaded, plus their size and where they downloaded on your PC.

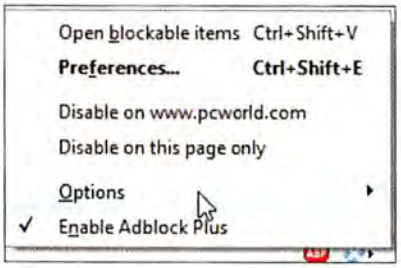
FlashGet (Free) FlashGet speeds up downloads and helps organize them while keeping you safe. The program searches for downloads via numerous protocols, including HTTP, FTP, and eMule. It's good for managing downloads, too, allowing you to delete files from within the program.

Browser Optimization

Want to make your browser run better and give it new capabilities, including improving the way you browse the Web? Check out these browser utilities. »

Adblock Pro (Shareware, $20) Here's a great way to optimize your use of Internet Explorer. (Be aware that this tool works only with IE.) It blocks ads of all kinds, including banner, Flash-based, and embedded. You have plenty of configuration options, too, such as the ability to have it display ads only from specific domains or pages. If you turn on the Flash blocker, you won't be able to view YouTube videos, so you may want to instruct the program to display Flash only from specific domains.

Adblock Plus (Free) This Firefox add-in claims to block 99 percent of ads on the Web, and based on our experience with it, that may well be true. You can selectively block ads or choose a filter that blocks them all. With a bit of work, you can even allow certain ads through while blocking the rest.



Adblock Plus automatically stops pesky online advertisements in Firefox.

Foxmarks Bookmark Synchronizer (Free) This tool automatically syncs all Firefox bookmarks on multiple PCs, and backs up your bookmarks to a server so they'll never be lost. And if you're on a PC that isn't yours, you can pull up your bookmarks from the server.

Greasemonkey (Free) If you're willing to get your hands dirty by digging under Firefox's hood, this may be the best Firefox optimizer around. Through JavaScript, it allows you to customize how Web pages look and act so you can change them, add extra features to them, and so on. Actually, you don't even need to tinker much yourself, because plenty of people have written useful scripts that you can simply plug into Greasemonkey.

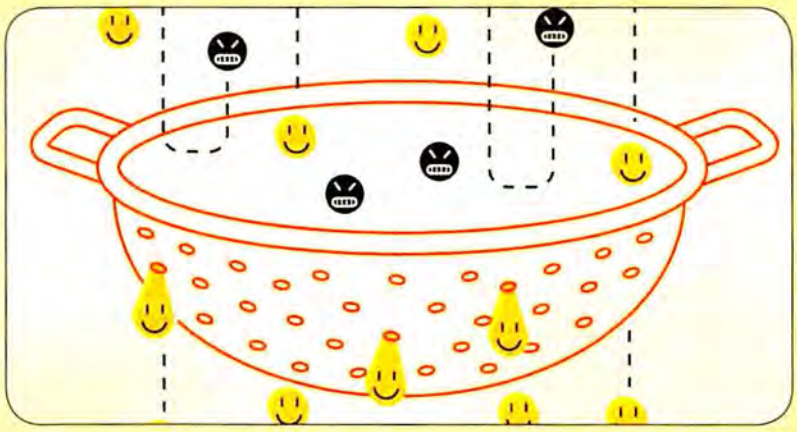
IE7 Pro (Free) Optimize Internet Explorer with the help of this no-cost utility. It juices up the browser's tab handling, restores all tabs in the event of a crash, lets you use "mouse gestures" for controlling IE, blocks ads, checks spelling, and much more. The program also has a scripting feature similar to Greasemonkey for Firefox.

Registry Cleanup

Badly written programs don't bother to clean the Registry when you uninstall them. Though the benefits of using a Registry cleaner are often debated, these utilities might be worth a try.

Wise Registry Cleaner (Free) This utility scans the Registry, flags orphaned or bad entries, and identifies entries that are either dangerous or safe to delete. Like most Registry cleaners, the tool will back up your Registry so that you can restore it if need be.

Glary Registry Repair (Free) Here's another solid Registry cleaner. It lets you choose which changes to accept or ignore, and it creates an Undo file so you can revert to the previous version of the Registry if problems occur. »



Download Danger Signs

MOST OF THE files you download—and all the ones here—are perfectly safe and won't harm your PC or alter its operations. You *will* encounter shady ones on occasion. If you download trialware or shareware files regularly, you should remember how to protect yourself and how to spot the warning signs of undesirable software downloads.

First, be careful when going through a program's installation screen. Some will ask to install a toolbar or other extra software, or will offer to change your browser's home page. Unless you are familiar with the toolbar or software, decline. It could be an attempt to install spyware or adware on your system.

Of course, badly behaved software won't always ask before doing something like that. So before installing any program, scan it with your antivirus and antispyware utilities. Some antivirus tools integrate directly with your browser; find out whether yours does.

For almost absolute security, you can upload the file to www.virustotal.com, which uses several dozen different pieces of antivirus software to scan whatever you submit.

It's also a good idea to create a system restore point, so you can bring your PC back to the state it was in before you installed the software, if something goes wrong.

After you install the software, you should scan your PC again to make sure it's safe.

Finally, watch for symptoms of a malware infection. If your system suddenly slows down for no reason, if your home page has changed, if you suddenly get pop-up ads, or if you notice a new browser toolbar that you didn't install, you may have malware. Use your antimalware utility and uninstall the downloaded program.



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Registry First Aid (Trial, $28) If you're willing to pay for a Registry cleaner, this is a great choice. Longtime *PC World* contributor Steve Bass rates it as the best Registry cleaner, with good reason: It does an excellent, thorough job. It also searches the Internet for details about Registry keys, so you can have some background before deciding whether to delete or change them.

Auslogics Registry Defrag (Free) Cleaning your Registry may help keep your system in tip-top shape, but you can do something else for it as well: Defragment it. This program shows how fragmented your Registry is, defragments it, and restarts your PC.

Security Optimization

Use these programs to kill infections and prevent them from attacking your machine in the first place.

Comodo Firewall Pro (Free) This excellent firewall has been rated as one of the top tools of its kind by the independent testing site Matousec, which found that Comodo has the highest level of "antileak" protection (in essence, a measure of a firewall's effectiveness). It offers two-way protection, and a great view into your system and your Internet connection as well.

Avast (Free) A lightweight antivirus utility, Avast won't weigh down your system by consuming too many system resources—yet it does a great job of scanning for viruses and killing them. The program also scans e-mail (including Web-based e-mail) for viruses, and offers protection against instant-messaging viruses, peer-to-peer dangers, and other threats.

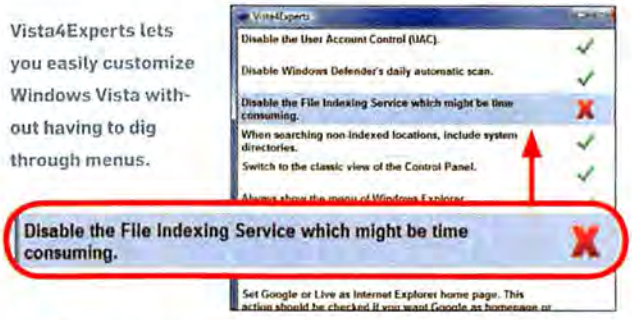
AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition (Free) AVG's excellent antivirus software is similarly prudent with PC resources, simple to use, and easily configurable.

SpywareBlaster (Free) Keep your system in top running form by stopping the installation of ActiveX-based malware and other types of spyware.

Spybot Search & Destroy (Free) A longtime favorite, Spybot offers live protection against spyware installations, and it scans your system for preexisting spyware and squashes it.

Ad-Aware 2008 (Free) Some people like to use more than one scanner. Ad-Aware does a great job of scanning, and it lets you put potentially damaging software in a quarantine area, where you can later restore the item if it isn't dangerous.

Trend Micro HijackThis (Free) If you think your PC is infected with spyware, but your spyware killer can't track it down, try this freebie. After HijackThis analyzes your Registry and file settings, it creates a log file, which you can upload to one of several HijackThis Web forums for the community to analyze.



Vista4Experts lets you easily customize Windows Vista without having to dig through menus.

Interface Tune-Up

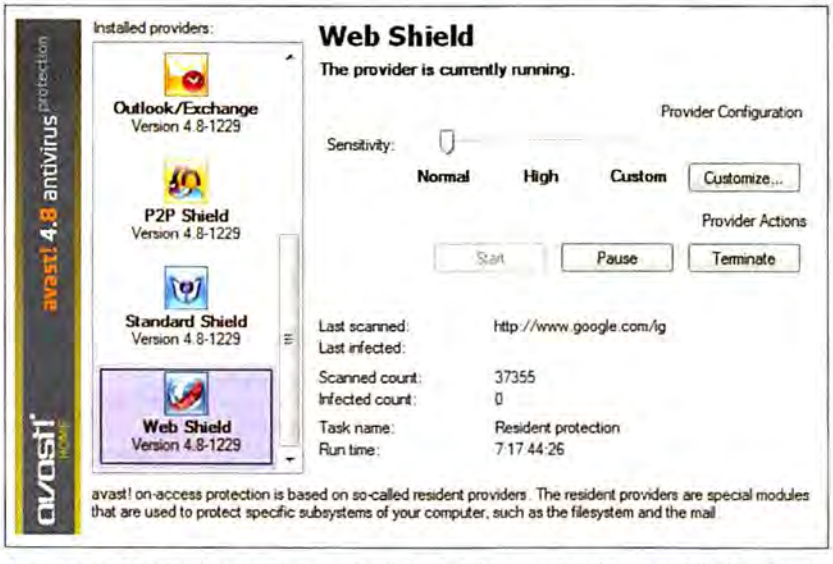
Another way to optimize your PC is to tweak Windows' interface and behavior.

Vista4Experts (Free) Turn off Windows Vista's dreaded User Account Control, customize the power button, disable or enable the Aero environment, change update behavior, and more.

MagicTweak (Shareware, $40) This program can change the icons for various system features, create a custom desktop-shortcut arrow, change how Windows Explorer looks and works, tweak your network connection, hide menus, customize the Start menu, and adjust Windows security settings.

RocketDock (Free) Give your PC a Mac OS X–like dock, a customized bar of icons that puts frequently used programs at your fingertips.

Vista Manager (Shareware, $40) Want to juice up your Vista PC's performance or looks? This app helps you optimize your RAM, cache, and hard disk. The utility also manages startup and shutdown, cleans your system, improves your security, and customizes how your network functions. »



Avast is one of the few free antivirus applications that do as good a job as any of the big players.



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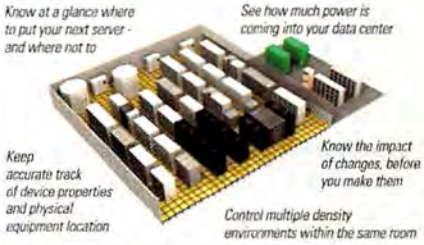
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Auslogics Visual Styler (Trial, $25) Gain access to hidden Windows customization features such as icon resolution, size, spacing, and shortcut arrows.

Miscellaneous Optimization

The following are some great all-around optimizers that give details on your system configuration, manage power use, and check your RAM's health.

Belarc Advisor (Free) This utility helps you to determine a PC's installed CPU details, motherboard and hard-disk type and manufacturer, PC service tag, multimedia devices, and much more. The program also provides information about your Windows installation, including user accounts, security patches, and a list of all installed software.

Driver Sweeper (Free) Keeping drivers up-to-date helps a computer stay in top condition, but if you don't remove old versions, you can experience system instability, slowdowns, and crashes. Driver Sweeper finds old drivers and deletes them. It also backs them up in case you need to restore them.



Edison makes it easy to tweak your power settings to save money.

Performance Monitor (Free) This nifty little utility tracks RAM, CPU, Internet, and hard-disk use, and shows everything on your desktop in four small colored boxes. You'll see statistics such as the percentage of your CPU currently being employed, and even the usage of individual cores on multicore PCs.

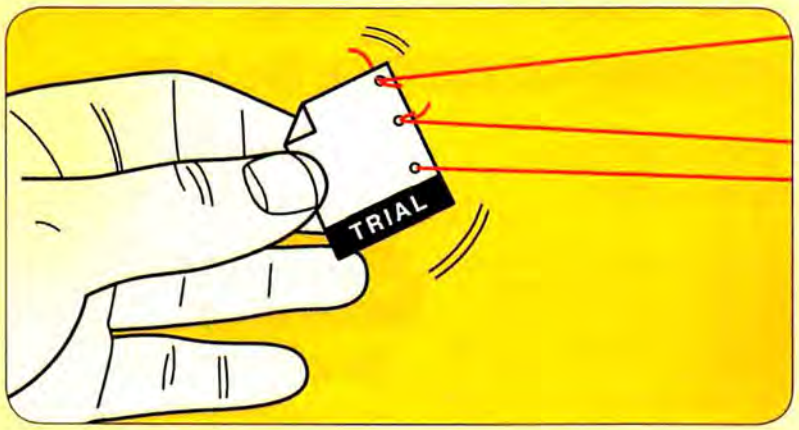
Edison (Free) If you don't use your PC's power settings, you're spewing hundreds of pounds of unnecessary carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year, a result of the electricity you waste.

But, you may say, Windows' power-setting controls are as confusing as the tax code. We agree—and we also have a solution for you. The free, easy-to-use Edison helps change and manage your power settings. Just move a slider or two, click a few buttons, and you're set.

How much might you save? If you believe Edison, after we used its default power settings on a laptop, we would save 359.63 kilowatt hours of electricity in a year (which adds up to $32) and 490.17 pounds of carbon dioxide.

LocalCooling (Free) Like Edison, LocalCooling helps you cut your PC's electricity consumption. You can easily edit settings such as when your PC automatically turns off or goes into hibernation, and when your hard disks spin down. The program also displays the amount of energy, trees, gallons of oil, or kilowatt hours you've saved.

Windows Memory Diagnostic (Free) Frequent PC crashes can stem from bad RAM. This free tool from Microsoft tests whether the RAM or the memory system on your motherboard is faulty. It's built into Vista, too: Click *Start*, type **memory** in the search field, and then click *Memory Diagnostics Tool*. ●



'Free' Doesn't Always Mean Free

JUST ABOUT ANY software you download claims to be free. But "free" isn't always so.

Downloads tend to be one of four types: trialware, shareware, a demo, or truly free.

Truly free software is exactly what it sounds like—software that you never have to pay for. In some cases the free software is a less-powerful version of for-pay software, and the developer hopes that the free version will convince you to buy the paid one. In other instances the software is free only if it's for personal use, not commercial or professional use. And in many other instances, the software is free with no restrictions at all.

Trialware is software that you can play with for a limited amount of time or a limited number of uses, or that may have some of its functionality disabled. For example, you may be able to use trialware for 30 days, or it may run only 25 times. After the trial period is up, if you want to continue using it, you'll have to pay for it.

Shareware, like trialware, is free to use for a certain amount of time. Unlike trialware, it will continue to be fully functional even after the tryout period. It works on the honor system: After a certain amount of time, you're expected to pay for it, but it won't stop working.

Finally, a demo is either a nonfunctional demonstration of a program's features or a version that is so limited in working features that it's not really usable. Its sole purpose is to show off a program in an attempt to get you to buy the full software.



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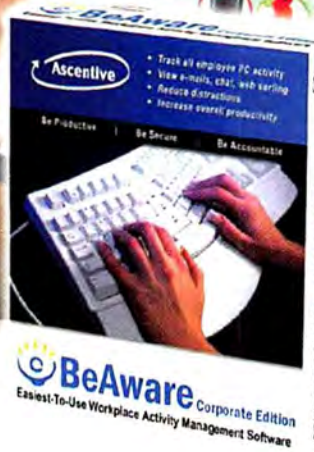
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BeAware helps identify problem areas, offenders and frequency so you can coach employees, reduce company risk and help teams reclaim lost productivity.



BeAware allows you to view activity by user, department or enterprise.

How Does It Work?

BeAware tracks all employee PC activity through live, real-time monitoring of E-mails, Web-surfing, Chats and program usage (recording screen shots, time accessed, and content).

"BeAware showed me exactly what my team was doing so I could coach & motivate them toward our goals."

BeAware can be remotely deployed on any networked company PC (local or remote) to monitor specific individuals, departments or an enterprise up to 10,000 employees.

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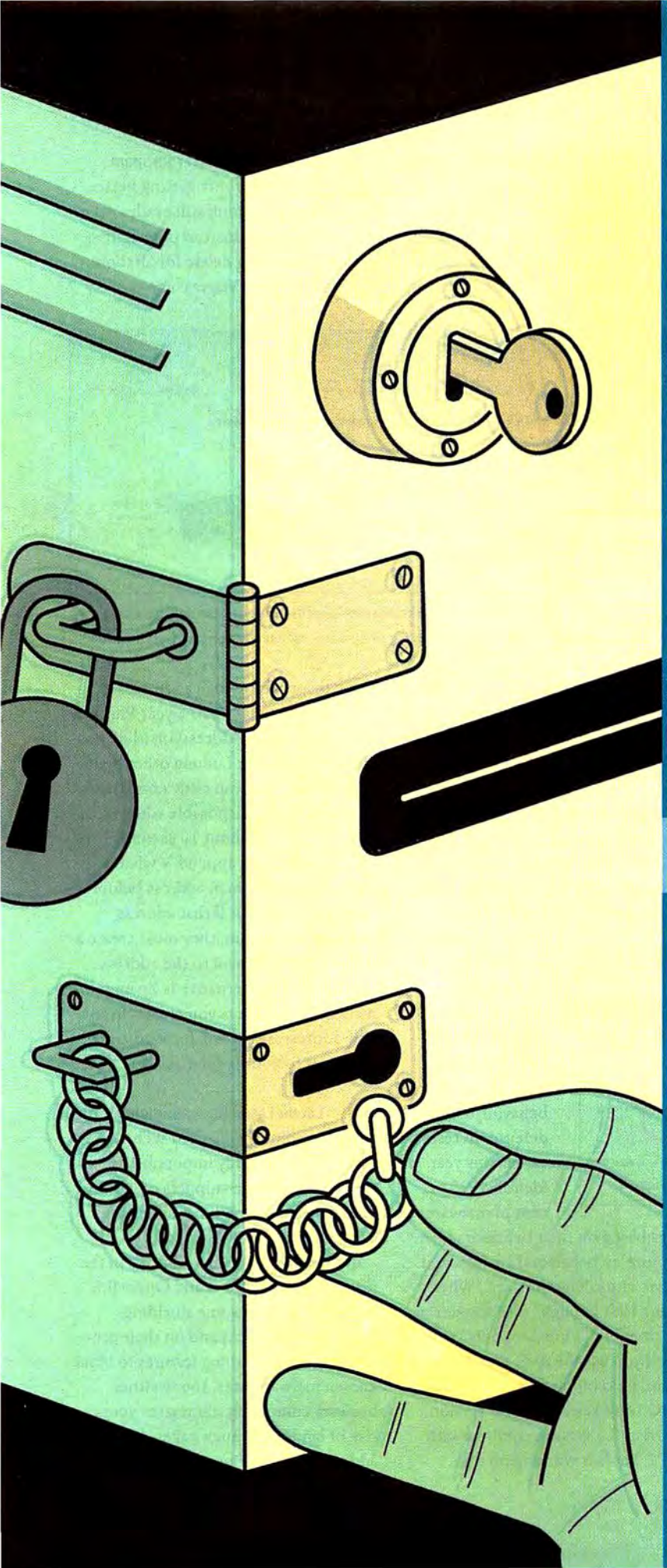
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10 QUICK Fixes for SECURITY Nightmares

BY ERIK LARKIN
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL

Most online attacks target a few weak points on your PC that aren't hard to protect. Follow these simple tips, and suddenly you'll be a whole lot safer. »

Special LIST Issue

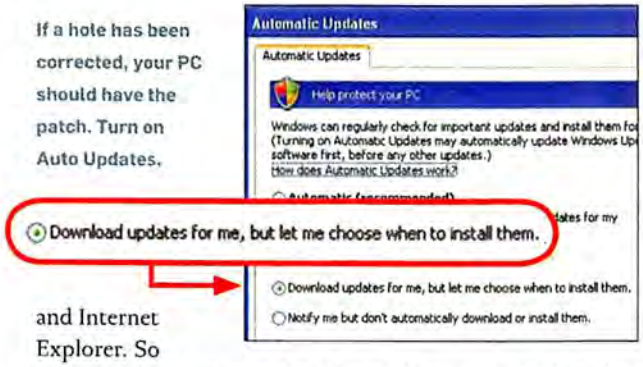
HACKERS, SPAMMERS, and phishers may be evil, but most of them aren't geniuses. They merely exploit known security holes that users haven't patched, or they rely on victims to do things they have been warned repeatedly not to do.

The silver lining is that you don't have to be a genius to foil these common attacks. Introduce a few simple fixes, and you'll avoid most of the bad stuff.

1 Patch Over the Software Bull's-Eye

Have you turned off automatic updates for Windows and other programs because "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"? Bad news: Your programs may be broken without your knowing it. A hijacked Web page—the modern digital crook's attack vehicle of choice—will launch a bevy of probes against your PC; and if it uncovers even one unpatched, exploitable vulnerability, only your less-than-perfect antivirus program stands between you and an infected system.

But you can block most Web-based exploits by keeping all of your programs up-to-date. Attack sites ferret out holes in innocuous applications like QuickTime and WinZip as well as in Windows and Internet Explorer. So turn on the automatic update feature for any software that offers the service; it's the fastest and easiest way to get patches.



If a hole has been corrected, your PC should have the patch. Turn on Auto Updates.

2 Find the Other Holes

If every program used easy automatic updates, the thriving malware business would take a serious hit. Until then, a simple, free security app from Secunia can help save the day.

Secunia's Personal Software Inspector (find.pcworld.com/61727) scans your installed software to let you know which out-of-date programs might be making your PC unsafe. For each old program it finds, PSI offers quick and convenient action buttons such as the one labeled 'Download Solution', which retrieves the latest patch for the software without your having to open a browser.



Secunia's inspection tool identifies out-of-date software that may be endangering your system—and it can retrieve patches, too.

3 Outmaneuver Fast-Moving Malware

Traditional signature-based antivirus programs are in danger of getting snowed under by today's blizzard of malware, and your defenses may need some outside help. ThreatFire (find.pcworld.com/61696), a free download from PC Tools, adds a layer of behavior-based defense. In tests earlier this year, it identified 90 percent of malware samples based on their behavior alone.

For more on behavioral analysis and proactive virus detection, see "When a Signature Isn't Enough" (find.pcworld.com/61697), from our "Virus Stoppers" story.

Note: If you use the AVG Free antivirus program, hold off on trying ThreatFire until PC Tools releases a new version. The current 3.5 version conflicts with AVG; PC Tools is working on a fix.

4 Rescue Your Inbox From Spam

Spam filters are getting better, but some junk still evades even the best of them. Instead of resigning yourself to hitting delete for all those hot-stock tips and Viagra come-ons, try using disposable e-mail addresses.

Yahoo Web mail's $20-a-year Plus service includes the AddressGuard disposable e-mail service (among other benefits). With it, you can click a bookmark to create a new, disposable address for any given site in about 10 seconds.

Gmail users can append '+ whatever' to their regular e-mail address before handing it out. But if that address starts to draw spam, they must create a filter to block all mail to the address.

Another free alternative is Spamgourmet.com, which lets you create disposable addresses that will forward e-mail messages to your regular address.

5 Let the Latest Browsers Fight for You

Insidiously hijacked Web pages are practically impossible to spot. And invisible snippets of harmful code planted on legitimate Web sites can launch devastating attacks.

But new site-blocking features in the just-released Firefox 3 and Opera 9.5 browsers provide some shielding.

Both browsers expand on their predecessors' antiphishing features to block known malware sites, too. Neither browser completely eliminates your risk of landing on such pages, but every additional layer of protection helps.



Firefox (like Internet Explorer and Opera) warns you before you enter a bad guy's site.

Microsoft plans to add a similar feature to Internet Explorer 8, but that version isn't yet final. For more on improved browser security, see "New Browsers Fight the Malware Scourge" (find.pcworld.com/61692).

6 Sidestep Social Engineering

The most dangerous criminals use clever marketing methods to get you to infect your own PC. These social-engineering attacks try to draw you in with intriguing or alarming messages. A well-crafted attack may lure you into opening a poisonous e-mail attachment or downloaded file.

To fight back, turn to a simple but powerful tool: VirusTotal.com. You can easily upload any file (up to 10MB), and VirusTotal's 35 antivirus engines—which include ones from Kaspersky, McAfee, and Symantec—will scan it. VirusTotal will then issue a report telling you what each engine thought about your file.

An all-clear from VirusTotal doesn't guarantee that a file is safe, but it does improve the odds significantly.

If using VirusTotal becomes a habit (not a bad idea), you can simplify the task by downloading the free VirusTotal Uploader. After installing the utility, just right-click a file, and immediately you'll see an option (under 'Send To') to upload it to the VirusTotal site.

7 Develop Antiphishing Habits

The dastardly practice of phishing for personal information is still alive and well, but following a few simple practices can ensure you'll never be snagged by a phishing hook.

The best approach is to refrain from clicking a link in any e-mail message to access your financial accounts. Instead, always type the URL or use a bookmark.

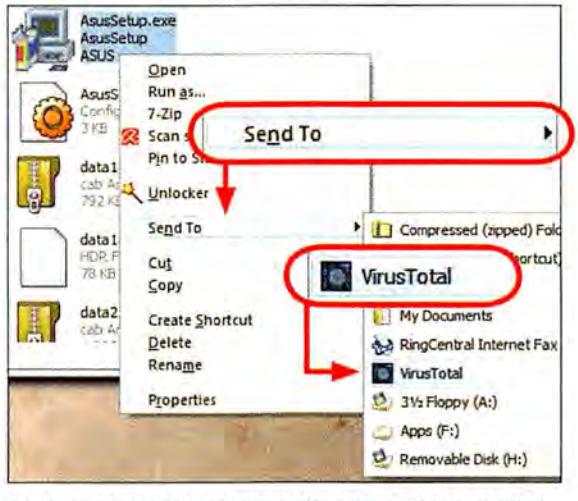
At a minimum, use the latest version of Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Opera to browse the Web; all three have built-in features to block known phishing sites. Don't rely on Safari, which lacks any built-in antiphishing protection.

8 Keep Your Own Site Safe

It's a dangerous time to run a Web site. The Web may look friendly and inviting, but it's a war zone—with guns trained on your site.

These quick, free scans will ferret out obvious problems with your site and servers. First, go to Qualys.com to request a free scan of one IP address.

Then download the also-free Scrawlr tool from HP (find.pcworld.com/61732). After a quick installation routine, use Scrawlr to scan your site for SQL injection vulnerabilities (a type of hole targeted in a recent Sony site hack).



Make regular use of VirusTotal easier by installing its Uploader.

A clean bill of health from both scans will not guarantee that your site is safe, but they're a step in the right direction.

9 Make Your Passwords Secure, Yet Easy to Remember

Experts say that we should use strong, unique passwords for all of our accounts. But they don't tell us how we're supposed to remember them—and in the real world, most of us end up using the same, not-so-safe password for all of our accounts.

This easy fix allows you to remember just one password, while still maintaining a strong, unique password for each site you use. The Password Hash (or PwdHash) add-on for Firefox and IE (find.pcworld.com/61698) takes the simple password you type and runs it through an algorithm that employs the site's domain name as part of the calculation. The utility swaps in the resulting strong password before you send it to the site. All you have to do (after installing Password Hash) is to press the <F2> key in a password box before you type.

10 Get Extra Cleaning Help for Stubborn Infections

If you suspect a virus or Trojan horse got past your defenses, it's time to bring in extra help.

Many antivirus makers offer free and easy online scans through your Web browser. Following is a quick list of five of the most popular options.

- BitDefender Online Scanner: Detects and removes malware; requires Internet Explorer.
- ESET Online Scanner: Detects and removes malware; requires Internet Explorer.
- F-Secure Online Virus Scanner: Detects and removes malware; requires Internet Explorer.
- Kaspersky Online Scanner: Detects malware but doesn't remove it; works with either Internet Explorer or Firefox.
- Trend Micro HouseCall: Detects and removes malware; works with either IE or Firefox. ●

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

November 2, 2006
Spy Sweeper 5.2 with Antivirus

vb 100 VIRUS virusbtn.com

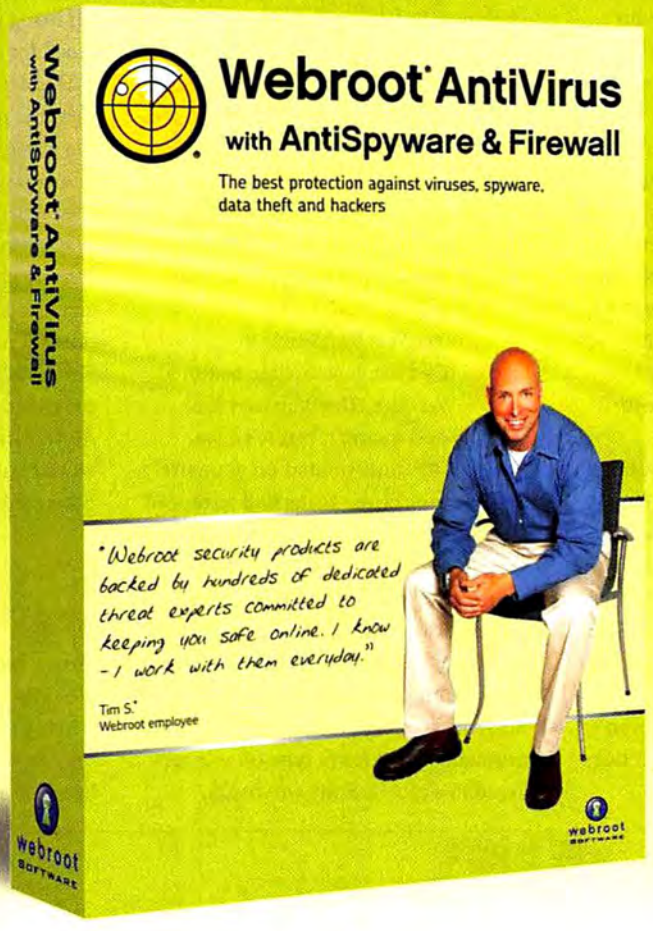
westcoast labs Checkmark www.check-mark.com

SC MAGAZINE AWARDS 2007 WINNER Honored in the U.S.

PC WORLD Best BUY

Spy Sweeper 5.0
October 2006

ICSA labs CERTIFIED www.ICSALabs.com Antivirus



Clearly, experts like our technology.

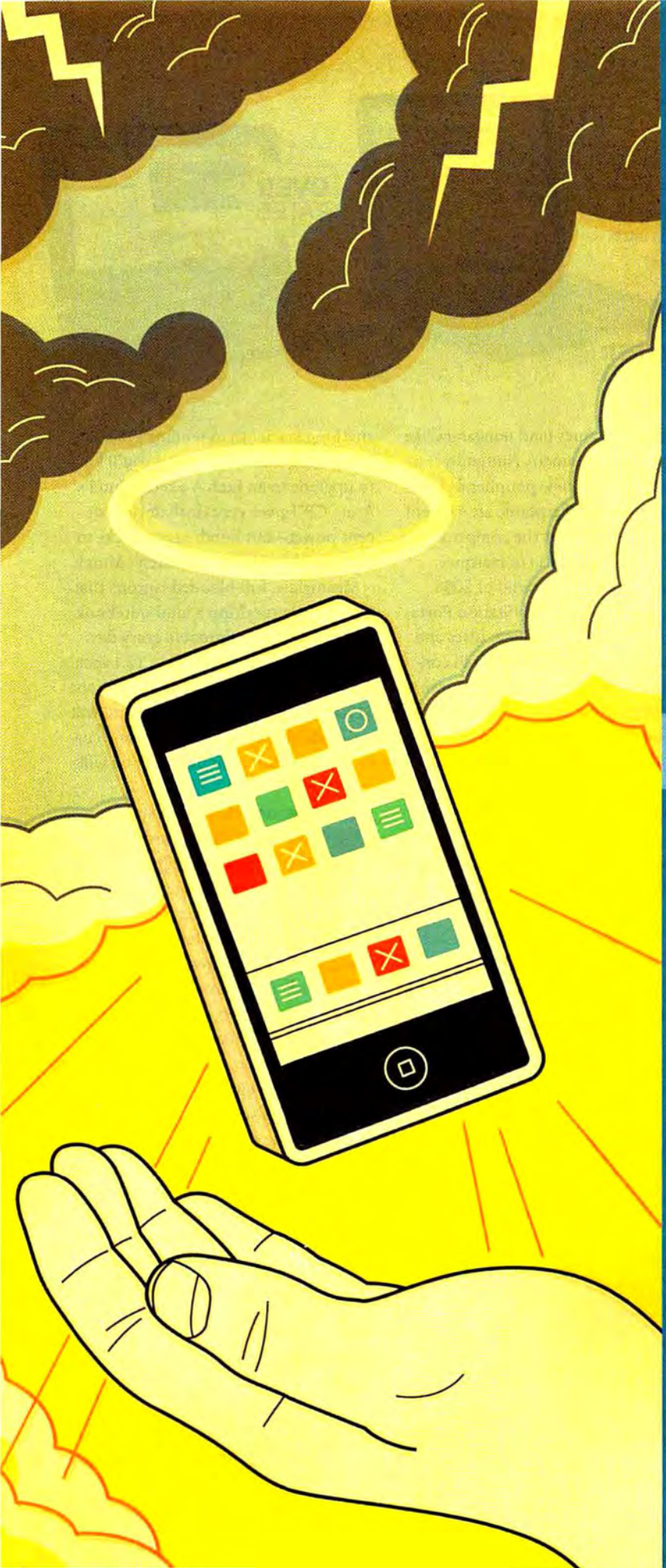
We designed Webroot AntiVirus with AntiSpyware & Firewall with what our customers want — nothing but award-winning technology. So each piece is designed to protect you from intruders, without getting in the way. And it all works together to deliver better security and better protection.

To top it off, you get free US-based telephone support, just in case you need it. So, if you want **better security, better support, and better peace of mind**, call Webroot at 1.866.865.3302 or visit **www.webroot.com/wav** today. Webroot security products are also available at leading retailers nationwide.

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10 Totally OVERRATED Products

BY DARREN GLADSTONE
ILLUSTRATION BY HARRY CAMPBELL

'Revolutionary!' 'Elegant!' 'Superior!' Lots of technologies, products, and services don't merit the praise heaped on them. Here are 10 tech items that don't live up to their hype—and 10 that deserve respect they don't receive. »

Special LIST Issue

Special LIST Issue

10 Overrated Products

HYPE SPRINGS eternal. You hear promises of perfect wonder-products all the time, but no device is perfect and many are overrated. We came up with a list of 20 products and services—10 of them overrated and 10 underrated—worth our jeers and cheers. Buckle up, and we'll tell you how we really feel.



Should you buy an underpowered mini-notebook or an aging ultraportable?

1 **Overrated:** Touch interface (Apple iPhone 3G)
Underrated: A good keyboard (T-Mobile Sidekick 2008)

Apple's touch-screen interface makes navigation easy, but who wants to type even a haiku on that screen?

Instead of endlessly stabbing at a soft keypad, give the Sidekick 2008 a try. T-Mobile's QWERTY keyboard remains the best one we've seen on any cell phone—spacious and easily stowable. If only more smart-phone makers would follow and improve on Danger's design. Or maybe Danger could make an updated Sidekick with a deeper OS and less emphasis on the teen scene.

2 **Overrated:** Nintendo Wii
Underrated: Sony PlayStation Portable

More than two years after their debut, Wiis are still tough to find in stores. In that time, Nintendo has released just enough great games (and nongames like Wii Fit) to tease gamers. Nintendo continues to develop new peripherals like the WiiSpeak speakerphone attachment (coming this fall), but the company says that only a handful of marquee titles will appear by the end of 2008.

In contrast, Sony's PlayStation Portable continues to gain unique titles and cool features—if you have a Wi-Fi connection (having a PlayStation 3 doesn't hurt either). Now in its second generation, the PSP offers Skype, Internet radio, the ability to upload movies from a PS3 directly to your handheld, and downloadable translation travel packs. Plus, you can play games remotely and view content stored on your PlayStation 3 over a Wi-Fi network.

3 **Overrated:** Mini-notebooks
Underrated: Ultraportable laptops

A serviceable, compact notebook for around $500? It sounds tempting if you're on a tight budget and have modest processing needs. Mini-notebooks are small and easy to love. But try doing anything fancier than sending e-mail or composing a document, and you'll long to upgrade to an Etch A Sketch. Intel's Atom CPU gives very small devices decent power—but hundreds of bucks to do a handful of tasks adequately? Mmph.

Meanwhile, full-blooded laptops that can easily outperform a mini-notebook are getting more affordable every day. For example, Lenovo's X61, a 12.1-inch, 3.6-pound ultraportable, sells for about $1000. It offers more flexibility and will resist obsolescence better than any current or near-future mini-notebook will.



The iPhone has a slick look, but try typing a long e-mail message on it sometime.

4 **Overrated:** iTunes downloads
Underrated: Pandora and Slacker

After ripping through your stack of old CDs, you're grabbing songs from the iTunes Store. In other words, you are paying for the privilege of buying music that's locked down in DRM hell.

We'd rather start from scratch with a music streaming service like Pandora or Slacker. Enter the name of a band you like, and the site compiles sets of tunes you'll probably enjoy as well—many of them by artists you may not know. Both of these music streamers offer free flavors of the service. Love a song? Buy it online. Slacker also has a premium service with a $10 monthly fee that gives you more control of the music you get. And you can upload your playlists to the second-generation Slacker player.

5 **Overrated:** Facebook
Underrated: Multiply

Everyone seems to be on Facebook at this point. But to what end? Countless free applications of dubious value, plus scores of plug-ins and games

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT CARDIN

that draw you deeper into the Facebook rabbit hole until you're spending hours a day befriending complete strangers with whom you have nothing in common beyond a shared love of Raisin Bran.

Ready for a little quality control? Try Multiply.com, a social networking site that's less a landing page (à la Facebook) than a series of feeds. Share various aspects of yourself with people in different spheres of your life: Have a drinking-buddy list for happy-hour updates and a family group for Aunt Helen sightings.

6 **Overrated:** Apple iPod Touch
Underrated: Microsoft Zune

The iPod has established itself as the Kleenex of the MP3 category, but other players offer stronger features to the discerning few. Most annoyingly, Apple charges a premium for less. News flash: A built-in accelerometer on the latest models lets you shake your iPod like a maraca to change tunes. Yay!

As a Microsoft product, the Zune is bound to earn insta-hate in some quarters. But it lets you sync your device wirelessly—no cradles or cables needed. Though the iPod Touch has Wi-Fi too, we want more than Web browsing from our wireless connection. A recent Zune update allows users to tag music heard on the built-in FM tuner and order it when they next hook up on Wi-Fi. The Zune also lets you stream music to other Zune owners—if you can find 'em.

7 **Overrated:** Google Apps
Underrated: OpenOffice 3.0

Google's productivity Web apps are great for teams working online that want to share calendars and documents. But Google Apps is online only and ultimately is just a couple of applications.

What we need is a full-fledged productivity suite that's completely compatible with Microsoft Office files, can work across multiple OSs, and is free. Oh, wait—that suite already exists. If you haven't taken the time to check out OpenOffice in the past, you owe it to yourself to do so now. You'll find the latest beta, OO 3.0, at OpenOffice.org.

8 **Overrated:** Adobe Photoshop CS3
Underrated: Paint.Net

Photoshop has been the gold-standard image editor for ages. It is continually upgraded with new features, and it remains one of the few image editors that supports four-color (CMYK) mode—essential for print work. But people who work online in three colors (RGB) don't need CMYK mode.

All image editors—including Photoshop Elements, which costs a small fraction of what Photoshop CS3 costs—can handle RGB. But why pay at all? Paint.Net, a favorite at *PC World*, is free. This small, unassuming program performs many basic image editing tasks, works quickly, and mimics the tools and functions that are found in other image editors (so it should be easy to learn).

9 **Overrated:** Windows XP
Underrated: Windows Vista

"Save Windows XP!" is the rallying cry of Windows users dismayed by the needless bloat of Vista. But didn't everyone have the same critique of Windows XP when it first galumphed into public view like an unsteady rubber monster?

What did Vista get right? For starters, though the User Account Control feature is like an annoying little sister who constantly pokes you, it makes Vista more secure than XP. Vista also trounces XP in handling mobile devices, networking, multimedia files, and photos. On top of that, it has a cleaner, more navigable interface—one eerily reminiscent of a certain Mac operating system.

10 **Overrated:** Streaming video
Underrated: Blu-ray Disc

Streaming video gets all the buzz: Netflix via Roku or Vudu! Hulu, YouTube, and the Beijing Olympics via PC! But we haven't seen streaming video images as impressive as those on Blu-ray Disc (and Blu-ray audio rocks, too).

The detail, clarity, and depth of Blu-ray trump the lower-bit-rate product that streaming video offers every time. That's not to say that streaming isn't convenient: You just click and go, with no packaging to fuss with and no disc to load. But with Blu-ray (the successor to the DVD), you don't have to worry about broadband-network data caps or hiccups in the service. ●



Everyone loves the Wii, but what about the PSP? It's not your average handheld.



10 Ways to WASTE TIME ON the Web

BY YARDENA ARAR

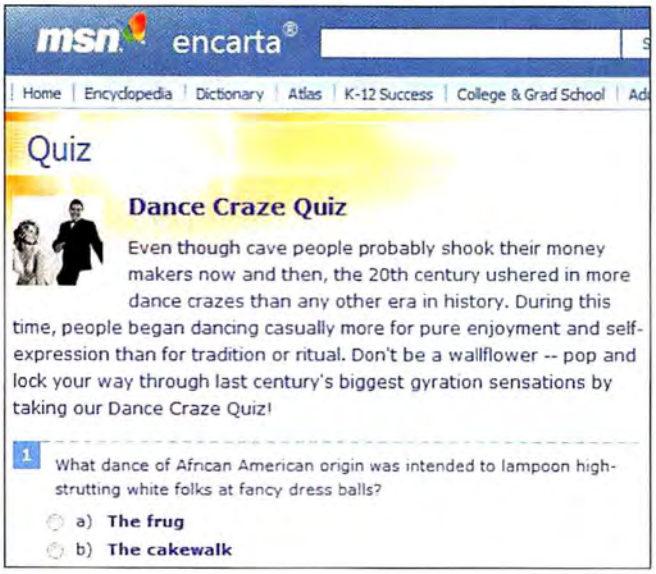
Want to idle away a few minutes—or hours? These sites will help you name that tune, test your knowledge of hurricanes, launch a hedgehog, or write a haiku. You'll wonder where the time went.

Special LIST Issue

1 Adtunes.com: A great place to hang out if you want to identify songs that you've heard on *House*, in the latest Target ad, or pretty much anyplace else in the television universe. I found it particularly useful for figuring out NBC's musical choices in its coverage of the recent Beijing Olympics.



2 MSN Encarta Quiz: Have you secretly dreamed of winning big on *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?* or on *Jeopardy*? Introduce your inner quiz-show contestant to this Microsoft site, which provides dozens of self-scoring quizzes on topics of geography, biology, popular culture, and everything in between. find.pcworld.com/61710



3 Fail Blog: What if you proposed to your sweetie on live TV—and you got turned down? The perfect antidote to cuteness overload features tons of stills and videos of oops moments, such as this ticket on a cop car. failblog.org





4 **Kongregate:** Home of DesktopTower Defense, GemCraft, Sonny, and other free games—and the site has good community features, too. If you're willing to pay, visit **Big Fish Games**, one of the largest of the casual game sites on the Web. You can spend hours there just checking out the vast array of 60-minute free demos. www.kongregate.com, www.bigfishgames.com



5 **StumbleUpon:** This fascinating time sink invites you to bump into unexpected treasures as you wander through scads of random sites that other Internet visitors have recommended, in whatever category you choose, simply by clicking a button. www.stumbleupon.com

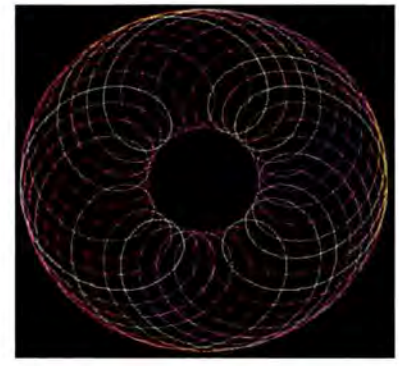
6 **Scrabble on Pogo.com:** Forget Scrabulous and the other non-Hasbro wannabes. Pogo has the real thing—if you're willing to put up with the Subway marketing.



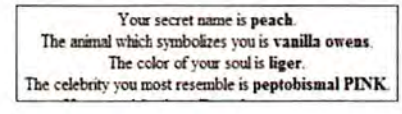


7 **Homestar Runner:** Can you say "cult favorite"? Not only do the weird and wacky animated inhabitants of this site appear in a slew of exceedingly retro-style games (we're talking blocky graphics and text), but they also take on a life of their own in toons, podcasts, downloads, and even their own video bios. It's the sort of bizarre creativity that could thrive only online. www.homestarrunner.com

8 **Spirograph:** Manipulate the math and colors to generate kaleidoscope-like patterns, ad nauseam. find.pcworld.com/61648



9 **Smalltime Industries:** The sophisticated pastimes housed here include a Dada server (submit personal info and receive a gibberish description), Haiku-O-Matic, and an app that guesses what sitcom character or dictator you're thinking of based on your answers to questions. www.smalltime.com



10 **Cartoonbank.com:** A paradise for *New Yorker* fans, with a multitude of ways to search for present and past cartoons. Also check out those that were deemed too tasteless for publication. ●



Here's How

12 Vista Features You Can Disable Right Now

BY LINCOLN SPECTOR

Useless interface options, pointless online tools, and little-used communications extras are slowing down your PC. Here's how to dump the unnecessary items and speed up your system.

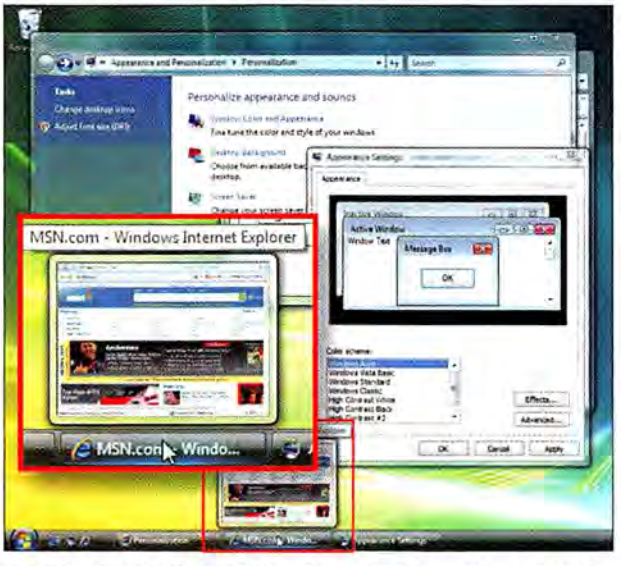
Special LIST Issue

VISTA, THY NAME is bloat! The latest Windows packs a lot of code—more than any version of Windows ever—and some of it is just plain unnecessary. All that excess code has a way of slowing down an operating system. You can regain some PC performance by deactivating unneeded capabilities.

I've identified a dozen Vista features that you can turn off right now. Some are shiny baubles that slow your graphics performance, while others are optional utilities that hog memory when they shouldn't. A few can in fact be quite useful, even though they play a major role in bogging down your PC.

Should you really kill all of the following features right this minute? That depends on your computer, your work habits, and your tastes. (I've put only seven and a half of them out of action on my PC, because while none of these elements are required for Vista to function, some are still kind of nice and my computer, fortunately, is fast enough to handle them.)

Just to be on the safe side, make sure to create a restore point before you turn any of these items off. That way you can quickly return your machine to its present state should you decide that you don't like the change. To make a restore point, click *Start*, type **sysdm.cpl** in the Search field, and press **<Enter>**. Choose *System Protection•Create*, and follow the prompts. Windows will take care of the rest.



THE TRANSPARENT WINDOWS and thumbnail icons of Aero graphics are neat, but unnecessary. Turn them off to speed up a slow PC.

Sidebar

You pay a heavy price in performance for the joy of looking at the analog clock, the thumbnail slide-show viewer, and the Microsoft-centric RSS news feed that all dock in the Windows Sidebar. But switching the whole Sidebar off can give your machine a significant speed boost, especially at startup.

To remove the Sidebar from view, simply right-click anywhere on it and select *Close Sidebar*. Uncheck *Start Sidebar when Windows starts*, and then click *OK*.

Aero

Microsoft put many of Vista's visual enhancements under one technological and marketing umbrella: Aero. Among those features are the thumbnails of your windows that appear when you hover the mouse pointer over the taskbar, as well as the Flip 3D view you get by pressing **<Windows>-<Tab>**. Aero adds a little practicality and a lot of panache to the Vista user interface, and personally, I like it.

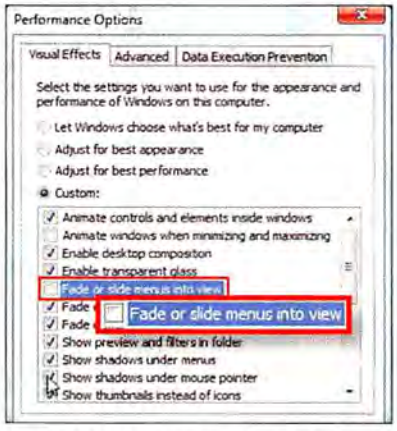
If your PC is underpowered or overloaded, however, Aero may be more trouble than it's worth. To shut it off, right-click the Windows desktop and select *Personalize•Window Color and Appearance*. In the resulting 'Window Color and Appearance' dialog box, click *Open classic appearance properties for more color options* (if you don't see the option, that means Aero is already turned off). Then select *Windows Vista Basic* and click *OK*.

Assorted Interface Beautification Options

You can save more clock cycles by retiring other interface elements that prettify Vista, not all of which are directly connected to Aero.

To see the options, click *Start*, right-click *Computer*, and select *Properties*. Click the *Advanced System Settings* link, the *Advanced* tab, and then the *Settings* button inside the Performance box.

You can uncheck all of the listed items by selecting *Adjust for best performance*, or you can simply uncheck just



YOU CAN TURN off many of Vista's wasteful interface enhancements by deselecting them individually.

the ones that you don't care for. I unchecked *Fade or slide menus into view*, *Fade or slide ToolTips into view*, *Show shadows under menus*, and *Slide open combo boxes*. The remaining options I left on.

Remote Assistance

If you run Vista Business or Ultimate, you can use Remote Assistance to control one PC from another—a useful tool if you regularly provide tech support for, say, a distant relative.

But if you are not providing long-distance support, or if you prefer a third-party remote-control app, Remote Assistance is just a waste of resources. To get rid of it, click *Start*, right-click *Computer*, and select *Properties*. Click *Remote Settings*. Uncheck *Allow Remote Assistance connections to this computer*.

Internet Printing Client

Do you ever print out documents over the Internet? Neither do I. So chances are good that you won't miss out on anything by disabling Vista's Internet Printing Client.

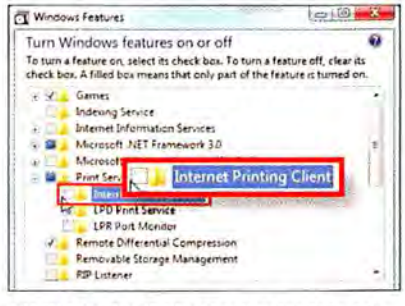
Open the 'Programs and Features' control panel and click the *Turn Windows features on or off* link on the left; you'll get the Windows Features dialog box. Expand the *Print Services* section and uncheck *Internet Printing Client*.

Click *OK* at this point, and then wait several more minutes for the system to ask to reboot. Or you can read the next three items in this article, which also use this dialog box.

Windows Meeting Space

I like Windows' built-in peer-to-peer collaboration program, Meeting Space, which lets you share files across a network while editing them with a remote colleague. But I don't have any use for it in my daily life, and neither do most of the people I know.

So I shut Windows Meeting Space off. You can, too. Simply uncheck *Windows Meeting Space* while you're in the Windows Features dialog box. If you're not already in this particular dialog box, see the previous tip for instructions on getting to it.



TURN OFF INTERNET Printing by deselecting it in the Windows Features dialog box.

Windows Ultimate Extras

One of the best things you can do exclusively in Vista Ultimate Edition is turn off the really pointless features that are found exclusively in Vista Ultimate Edition. I refer, of course, to Ultimate Extras, downloadable add-ons available only to Ultimate users. If you didn't pay for the priciest version of Vista, these useless add-ons aren't a concern.

If you do own Ultimate, go to Windows Update (*Start•All Programs•Windows Update*), click *View available updates*, and check out all the worthless stuff Microsoft offers exclusively to people who paid for the most bloated version of Vista.

At this writing, the extras include a poker game, some BitLocker and Encrypted File System enhancements that hardly anyone uses, several audio schemes, and an odd tool called Windows DreamScene that lets you waste your precious system resources by using video as your wallpaper. If *PC World* ever asks me to write an article on pointless ways to slow down Vista, I'll start with DreamScene.

You can kill Windows Ultimate Extras in the Windows Features control panel by clicking *Turn Windows features on or off* to open the »

ANNOYANCE BUSTER

UAC: Boon or Bloat?

ONE OF WINDOWS Vista's most controversial features is its User Account Control (UAC), which attempts to protect your PC from malware by forcing you to authorize certain system-altering actions by clicking through a dialog box from time to time. To some people, the UAC prompts are an unwanted annoyance that must be eliminated. Other users appreciate the added security. While I wouldn't go so far as to lump UAC in with the other wasteful features in this article, I can certainly understand why some folks would like to turn it off—or at least minimize its intrusive behavior. For tips on taming UAC, see Scott Dunn's excellent article "Annoyance Buster: Make Vista's User Account Control Work for You" (find.pcworld.com/60397).



IF USER ACCOUNT Control proves truly irritating, you can always turn it off completely in the User Account control panel.

Windows Features dialog box, and then unchecking *Windows Ultimate Extras*.

Tablet PC Stuff

I own a tablet PC, and I love Vista's tablet features, especially the Input Panel for writing with the stylus. But if you don't have a tablet, these elements are useless.

Switching Vista's tablet PC features off is a two-step process: First open the 'Programs and Features' control panel and click the *Turn Windows features on or off* link on the left; you'll get the Windows Features dialog box. Once there, uncheck *Tablet PC Optional Components*.

You complete the job in the Services window, which you open by clicking *Start*, typing **services**, and pressing **<Enter>**. Find and double-click *Tablet PC Input Services*. In the 'Startup type' drop-down menu, select *Disabled*, and then click *OK*.

ReadyBoost

If you are not employing this much-hyped Vista feature—which supposedly speeds up Vista by caching memory to a flash drive—it is slowing your system down, albeit just a tiny bit. (And if you *are* using ReadyBoost, it's probably still a drag on your PC. For an explanation, read "ReadyBoost Flash Drives Lack Significant Boost" at find.pcworld.com/61677.)

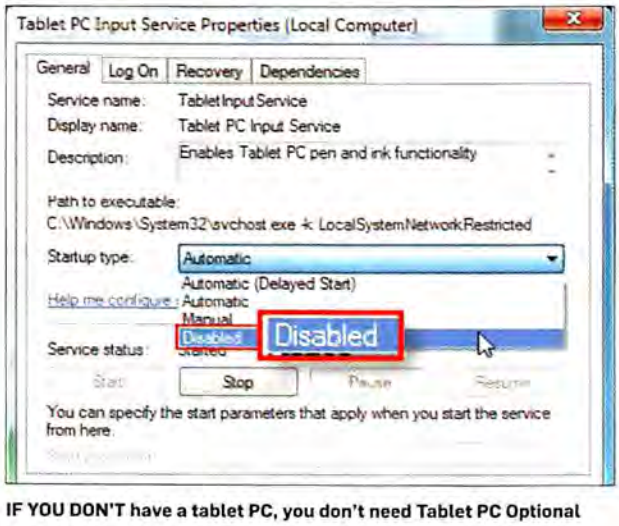
You turn off ReadyBoost in Services. If you aren't already there, click *Start*, type **services**, and press **<Enter>**. Find and double-click *ReadyBoost*. In the 'Startup type' drop-down menu, select *Disabled*, and then click *OK*.

Search Indexing

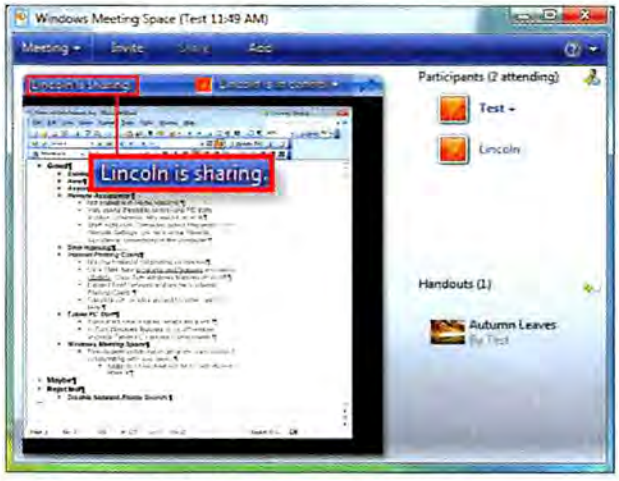
This one is a real trade-off. Deactivating Vista's indexing will slow searches to a crawl—I'm talking about minutes, not just seconds. But ditching this convenient feature could very likely speed up your general PC use significantly.

In other words, turning off indexing will help your PC's performance only if you seldom search by file content, or if you use a third-party search tool such as Copernic Desktop or Google Desktop (in which case you probably have two indexing routines running at the same time, which is an even bigger waste of resources).

If you match either of those descriptions, spike Vista's indexing by clicking *Start*, typing **services**, and pressing **<Enter>**. Find and double-click *Windows Search*. In the 'Startup type' drop-down menu, select *Disabled*, and then click *OK*.



IF YOU DON'T have a tablet PC, you don't need Tablet PC Optional Components running all the time. Disable them.



WINDOWS MEETING SPACE lets users share documents remotely. It's a neat little feature, but hardly anyone actually uses it.

Offline Files

If you work on files stored on a server somewhere, and you can't depend on that server always being available, Vista Business and Ultimate Editions' Offline Files feature makes your life easier by copying the remote files to your hard drive and keeping them synced.

Of course, that sort of thing isn't for everybody, which is probably why Microsoft didn't include Offline Files in the Home editions of Vista. But if you have Business or Ultimate and still don't need Offline Files, turn it off by clicking *Start*, typing **services**, and pressing **<Enter>**. Find and double-click *Offline Files*. In the 'Startup type' drop-down menu, select *Disabled*, and then click *OK*.

Windows Error Reporting Service

Every time Windows experiences an error—either with one of its own processes or with a third-party program—it offers to report the problem to Microsoft for you. In theory, doing so can help the company locate troubles with its OS (and heaven knows that would be a good thing). But more than likely, your report will either go unresolved or end up in a big ol' pile of other people's reports on the same problem. Either way, you're wasting your system's precious resources on a feature that isn't doing you any good.

To disable this unhelpful service, open the Services window: Click *Start*, type **services**, and press **<Enter>**. Find and double-click *Windows Error Reporting Service*. In the 'Startup type' drop-down menu, select *Disabled*, and—finally—click *OK*.

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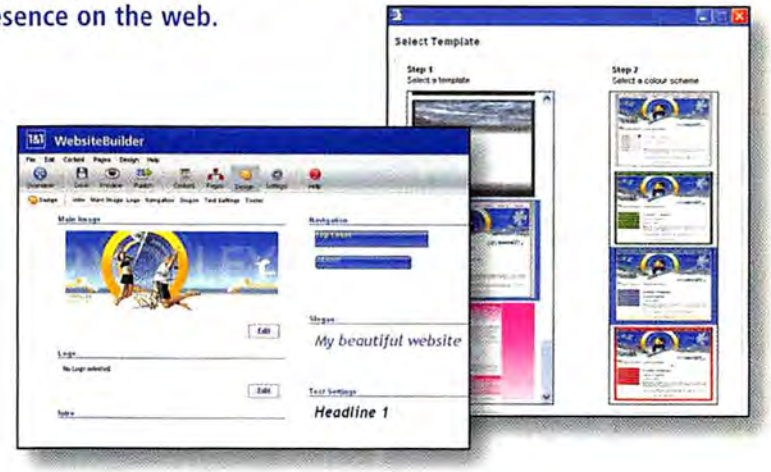
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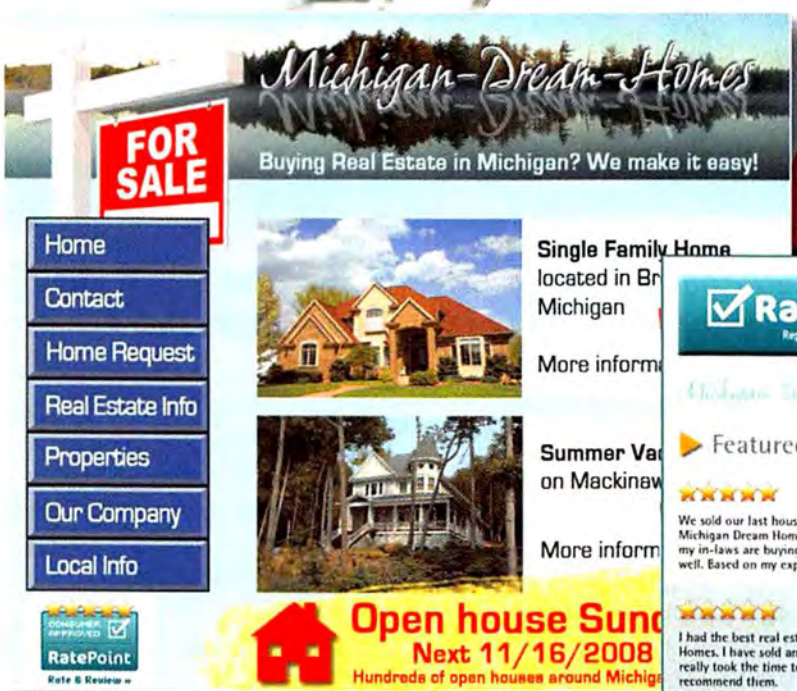
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Web Space	250 GB	300 GB	150 GB
Monthly Transfer Volume	2,500 GB	3,000 GB	Unlimited
Mailbox Size	2,000 MB	1,000 MB	75 MB
Website Builder	18 Pages	Additional $8.99/month	✓
Marketing Center	✓	✓	–
Spreadshirt Merchandising	✓	–	–
NEW eZShop	✓	–	–
Graphic Archive	✓	✓	✓
E-mail Marketing Tool	✓	–	–
RatePoint Tools	✓	–	–
Premium Software Suite	✓	–	–
Search Engine Submission	✓	Extra Charge Applies	–
90-Day Money Back Guarantee	✓	–	–
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RAM	2 GB	1 GB included, add $25/mo for 2 GB	1 GB included, add $15/mo for 2 GB
Useable Disk Space	250 GB	250 GB	250 GB
RAID	RAID 1 Included (2 X 250 GB HD)	Add $20/mo for second 250 GB HD	Add $25/mo for second 250 GB HD
BackUp	100 GB Backup Included	Add $40/mo for 80 GB Backup	Add $100/mo for 100 GB Backup
Monthly Traffic (GB/month)	2000 GB/month	1500 GB included, add $125 for 2000 GB	2000 GB/month
Total Monthly Fee as Configured	**$99.99**	**$369**	**$279**

	ENTERPRISE I	Dual Xeon 5130 - SATA	Core 2 Quad Q6600
Base Price/Month	**$299.99**	**$259**	**$199**
CPU	Quad Core AMD Opteron 1352 - 2.1 GHz	2 X Intel Xeon 5130 2.0 GHz Dual Core Processors	Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600
RAM	4 GB	2 GB included, add $50 for 4 GB	2 GB included, add $30/mo for 4 GB
Useable Disk Space	750 GB	250 GB included, add $50/mo for 750 GB	250 GB included, add $30/mo for 750 GB
RAID	RAID 1 Included (2 X 750 GB HD)	Add $40/mo for RAID 1 + $30/mo for second 750 GB HD	Add $25/mo for RAID 1 + $55/mo for second 750 GB HD
BackUp	300 GB Backup Included	Add $100/mo for 200 GB Backup	Add $300/mo for 300 GB Backup
Monthly Traffic (GB/month)	4000 GB/month	2000 GB included, add $175/mo for 3000 GB	2000 GB included, add $80/mo for 3300 GB
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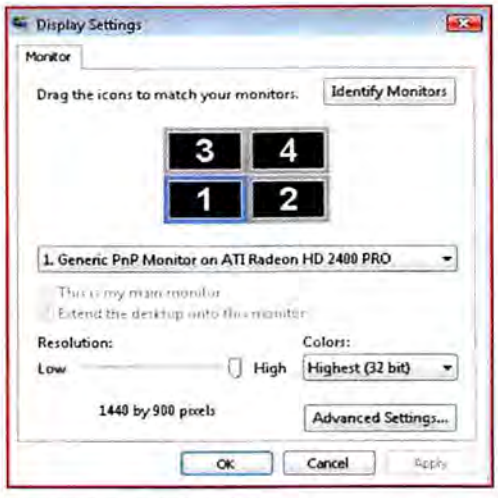
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Unfortunately, such big screens frequently cost more than $2400. For about half that cost, however, you can assemble an eye-popping four-head display system with higher resolution and a larger viewing area.



WINDOWS DISPLAY MANAGER lets you arrange your four monitors by dragging numbered boxes around.

What You Need

Assuming that you already have one monitor, you need three more. I recommend buying four displays of the same make and model, which eliminates annoying differences in color balance or brightness. At the very least, they should all be of the same size and resolution.

You'll also need to buy a stand for the monitors. I prefer a two-by-two matrix, so I don't have to turn my head as much to look at any part of the display. For my setup, I chose the $329 Ergotron DS100 (ergotron.com), which lets you easily angle the monitors inward for better ergonomics.

One important point: Ensure that your monitors match the mounting holes for the stand. Most stands follow the VESA standard mount patterns, but be sure to read the specs of displays and stands carefully before you purchase anything.

Many graphics boards come with two DVI display connectors. If you have one of these boards, you'll need to buy just one more dual-headed card to support four monitors in all. If your card has only one display connector, you'll have to pull out that board and install two dual-head boards. Make sure that you have a slot available in your PC, and that you buy a board that fits it.

Set It Up

Mount the monitors to your stand by removing the stock desktop stand from the back of each LCD panel, and then attach the new stand's mount. Be careful to orient your display panels in the correct direction.

Attach both the power cable and the signal cable to each monitor before you mount them. Use the retaining screws on the cable connectors to keep the cable firmly attached to the display's panel.

After you have connected the monitors, install the second graphics board in your computer. Follow your graphics card's instructions, but first be sure to turn off your computer and unplug the power cord.

The next step is to connect the monitors to the PC. Attach the lower-left monitor to the primary connector on your first graphics card, and the lower-right one to the secondary connector. Link the upper-left monitor to the primary connector on the second graphics board, and the upper-right screen to the remaining connector. This arrangement will make it easier to configure the screens in Windows.



SPREAD YOUR DESKTOP across four wide displays.

Boot up your computer. In Vista, right-click the Desktop, choose *Personalize*, and then select *Display Settings*; this will open the Display Settings window.

Click the *Identify Monitors* button in the upper-right corner. Large numbers will appear on each display. In the window, click on the numbered icon that appears at the lower left; in most cases, this will be Monitor 1.

A pair of items—'This is my main monitor' and 'Extend the desktop onto this monitor'—should be grayed out with check marks for this monitor. If not, check both boxes. Set the Resolution slider to the panel's native resolution; consult the monitor documentation to verify the native resolution, if needed. Click *Apply*.

Next, select each of the remaining monitors in turn. Set them to their native resolution using the Resolution slider, and then check *Extend the desktop to this monitor*. Click *Apply* after adjusting the settings for each monitor. Finally, drag the icons of the monitors around so that each corresponds to its monitor's physical location on the monitor stand. Click the *OK* button to close the window.

—Alfred Poor

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Five Essential Tips for Editing the Registry

Special LIST Issue

EDITING THE WINDOWS Registry has the potential to improve your system's performance, but making a mistake can destroy Windows and cause you great distress. Here are five tips for keeping yourself anxiety-free—and for keeping your PC alive.

The best protection from Registry hassles is to have a current full-system backup. You ought to create one right now, even if you're not planning to mess with your Registry anytime soon. For a tutorial, read "How to Prevent a Data Disaster" (find.pcworld.com/61670).

Before you open the Registry cleaner, use ERUNT (Emergency Recovery Utility NT; find.pcworld.com/61672) to back up the Registry. I know, it's redundant, since the Registry cleaner will back up any changes it makes, and since you (should) already have a full system backup. But having a separate Registry backup will make it easier to restore your system quickly if something goes wrong.

Prior to scanning with your Registry cleaner, close all other applications; if possible, unload any tools running in your system tray, too. Open apps constantly make Registry changes, and you want the Registry cleaner to do its work with no interference along the way.

When using a Registry cleaner, stay alert and read whatever the cleaning tool's wizard has to say. With most other programs that employ wizards, it's no big deal if you pay scant attention and just keep clicking the *Next* button. But that isn't the case with Registry cleaners.

After the scan, the program will let you remove (or in some cases, repair) the Registry errors. If you are given the option, set the Registry cleaner to remove errors only at the safest and least-intrusive level. (You can scan again with more-aggressive settings later on.) Even at that, you might see 1000 or even 2000 "safe" entries that need cleaning. For instance, Registry First Aid found 2161 problems on my PC, of which it deemed about 1900 safe to alter.

Whatever you do, never choose an autocleaning option. Instead, be sure to approve each change manually, which keeps you in control.

For a complete set of Registry editing tips and a look at some leading Registry cleaners, see my tutorial at find.pcworld.com/61673.

—Steve Bass



SEE THAT AUTO Clean button? Don't even think about clicking it.

READER-TO-READER FORUMS.PCWORLD.COM

Restore Missing System Tray Icons in Vista

FROM THE PCW FORUMS

ONE OF VISTA'S many annoyances is a little bug that makes the volume control, network connections, and other icons disappear from the notification area of your taskbar. This month, PCW forums member SolaiH offers an easy fix that will put those missing icons back where they belong.

Join our online community at forums.pcworld.com. If we print one of your forum contributions in the magazine, we'll send you a free *PC World* T-shirt.

SolaiH Says:

If you're comfortable using the Windows Registry Editor, these steps will give you back your lost notification icons. I strongly recommend that you back up the Registry before you start.

Click on *Start*, and then type **regedit** and press **<Enter>** to open the Registry Editor.

Next, navigate to *HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Classes\Local Settings\Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\TrayNotify*.

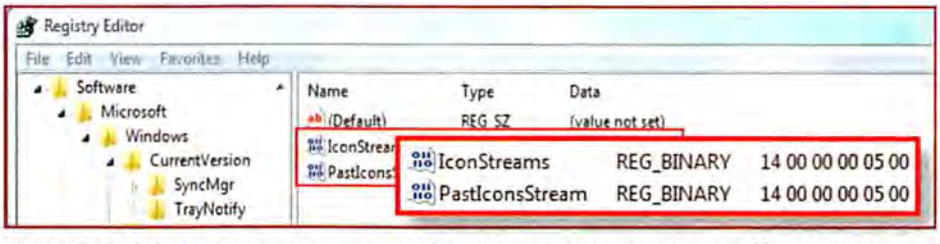
You will find three Registry keys: (Default), IconStreams, and PastIconStream. Delete the IconStreams and PastIconStream entries.

Now open the Task Manager by pressing **<Ctrl>-<Alt>-<Delete>**. Click on the *Processes* tab in Task Manager.

Select *explorer.exe* and then click *End Process* to quit Windows Explorer. This will make the taskbar disappear.

Click on the *File* menu, select *New Task*, type **explorer**, and press **<Enter>**.

The taskbar should appear again, and all of the notification icons should be in view.



TO RESTORE ANY icons that may have vanished from the notification area of your taskbar, delete the IconStreams and PastIconStream entries in the Registry Editor, and restart Windows Explorer.



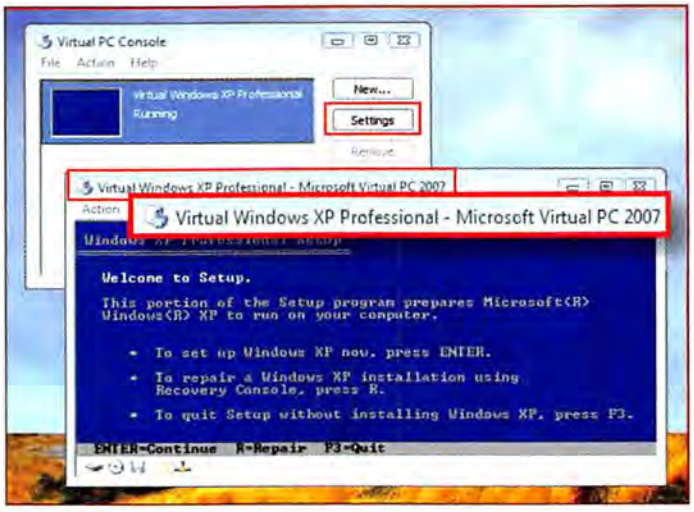
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Run Windows XP in Vista Using Virtual PC 2007

IF WINDOWS XP floats your boat but you've sailed onward to Vista, an occasion might arise when you need to reverse course and return to the earlier Windows version. Microsoft's Virtual PC 2007 (find.pcworld.com/61674) is a free program that lets you run almost any OS in a virtual-machine window, without affecting your primary operating system.



INSIDE YOUR VIRTUAL machine, you can install another version of Windows just as you would on a normal PC, making it easy to run older apps.

Download and install Virtual PC. Launch it, click *Next* to start the wizard, and click *Next* again to create a virtual machine. The wizard then asks you to confirm the amount of memory and disk space to dedicate to the virtual machine. If you have 2GB or more on your host PC, give 512MB to the virtual XP machine. Unless you plan to install lots of apps, the default hard-disk size is usually fine.

Click *Next* and then *Finish*, and your virtual machine will appear in the Virtual PC Console. Insert an XP installation CD, and then double-click the virtual-machine icon in the Virtual PC Console to start it up. Select the optical drive in the Virtual PC's CD menu, choose *Action*, and then click *Ctrl-Alt-Del* to boot the virtual machine from the CD. After that, the installation process should proceed just as it would on a nonvirtual PC.

To run your virtual XP machine, select it in the Virtual PC Console and click *Start*. To close it down, click *Close*, choose *Save state* from the list of options, and click *OK*. Clicking within the virtualized OS window once allows it to capture the mouse pointer.

In the Virtual PC menu, click *Action•Install or Update Virtual Machine Additions* to install several tools that will allow you to copy and paste text between the virtual machine and the host PC, as well as to send documents back and forth via a shared folder on the host system.

To get the mouse pointer to release back to the host OS, press the right-hand **<Alt>** key and drag the mouse out of the Virtual PC window.

—Scott Spanbauer

ANSWER LINE **ASK YOUR QUESTION AT FORUMS.PCWORLD.COM**

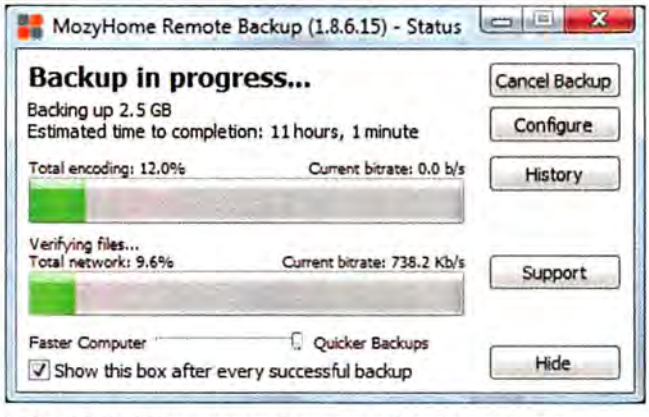
How can I back up my PC without a USB connection?

Edward Zolotarevsky

IN THE ERA before USB 2.0, I was tempted to start every backup article with the same dumb joke: "Backing up is hard to do."

Luckily, easy backups don't require USB these days. If you have broadband Internet access (DSL or cable), just back up over the Internet. I recommend the $5-per-month Mozy Home (mozy.com), which offers the best and easiest backup for the price.

If you obtain your access to the Internet through a dial-up connection, however, you will need to supplement your old hardware with some additional old hardware. Buy an internal or parallel-port-connected external backup drive with removable media such as tape or disk cartridges. Iomega's Zip drives, which use disk-based cartridges, were quite popular ten years ago (I recently found some of the disks while cleaning out my garage). Iomega still makes and sells Zip drives, though the modern external ones use USB. But as I write this, five used parallel-port Zip drives are currently on sale through Amazon.com.



BECAUSE IT USES your Internet connection to back up your data, Mozy Home can take hours—or even days—to create a single backup of all your precious files. But at least it's automated.

You might also consider a DVD±RW drive to replace what I'm going to guess is your CD-ROM drive. They're now reasonably inexpensive, and the discs are very cheap. *—Lincoln Spector*

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STEVE BASS'S HASSLE-FREE PC

Smart Fixes for Your Printing, E-Mail, and Audio Hassles

Save printer ink, handle leftover Registry junk, and defeat a common Outlook annoyance.

NOTHING IS MORE expensive than replacing inkjet printer cartridges. In this month's column, I'll talk about the tips and tools I use to save ink—and paper, too. Plus, I'll give you the lowdown on removing leftover Registry-clogging Class IDs, show you how to correct yet another irritating Outlook flaw, and offer two easy and quick ways to control your computer's volume.

Zap Ink-Slurping Web Pages

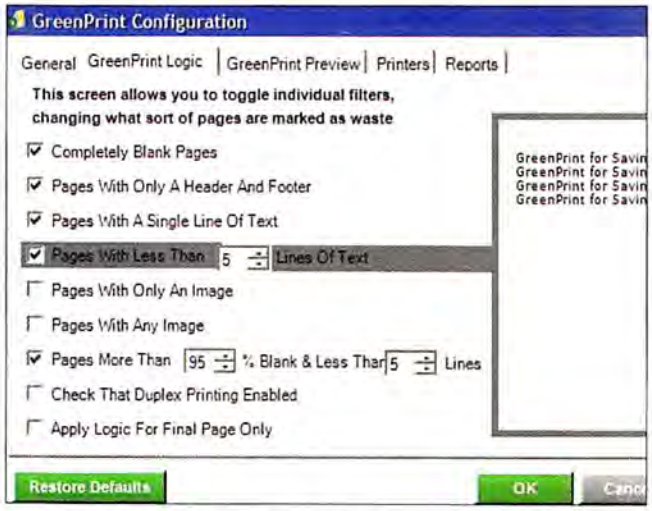
The Hassle: *I use up too many inkjet cartridges (and the prices are killing me), especially when I have to print full Web pages with big images and ads just to get a few lines of useful text.*

The Fix: On Web pages, you can use your browser's built-in selection printing option. First select and highlight the text you want to print; then choose *File•Print* and click *Selection* in the Print Range section of the Print dialog box.

Unfortunately, on occasion you'll still scrape stuff off the page that you don't need. So use the trick in combination with GreenPrint Home (find.pcworld.com/61666), a printing utility that automatically removes wasteful pages—say, those with only headers and footers or small amounts of text, or totally blank pages. The tool is free, and you can use it while printing from any application.

More interesting is HP Smart Web Printing (find.pcworld.com/61667), a freebie that gives you a way to grab selected text and graphics from Web pages, save them to a document, and then print your customized pages. Using it takes more work, but the end result is an almost perfect document.

Finally, you can use an ad blocker to banish big blocks of ink-guzzling ads. My favorite is Ad Muncher (find.pcworld.com/61668); you'll make up the software's $30 cost in ink savings alone.



THE FREE GREENPRINT Home utility cuts down on wasted ink and paper by letting you choose what does (and doesn't) print.

Clean Out CLSIDs

The Hassle: *My Registry cleaner is listing a stack of CLSIDs. What are they, and is it okay to delete them?*

The Fix: Class IDs (known as CLSIDs) hold information about certain program parts—namely Microsoft's COM objects and ActiveX components. If your Registry cleaner specifically refers to them as broken or invalid CLSIDs, it's safe to send them to their doom; programs with sloppy uninstall routines leave these CLSIDs behind. (Use Revo Uninstaller, which you can download at find.pcworld.com/60617, to remove applications—the utility scours the Registry for remnants of uninstalled programs.)

But here's the rub: Overly aggressive Registry cleaners might include a necessary CLSID in their list of problem entries, without labeling it as "broken" or "invalid." I'd leave those intact.

Outlook Icon Stuck in an Endless Loop

The Hassle: *Every time I launch Microsoft Outlook from a desktop icon, it sticks a new shortcut in my Quick Launch bar. I delete the thing, and Outlook puts it back again! This is driving me nuts.*

The Fix: If you're in an endless loop, deleting and redeleting the same shortcut, try this trick. Right-click the Outlook icon, choose *Properties*, and type **"C:\Program Files\Microsoft Office\Office11\Outlook.exe" /recycle** into the Target field (be sure to include the quotes and use **Office12** in place of **Office11** if you have Outlook 2007).

The "/recycle" switch essentially tells Outlook that an icon is already in the Quick Launch bar; it also forces Outlook to use an existing Outlook window, if one exists. ●

TOOLS OF THE MONTH

Control Your PC's Volume

YOU'RE ROCKING OUT to some newly ripped MP3s in your home office when the phone rings. It's your boss, and you need to lower the volume of your PC's sound—right away. Instead of fumbling with Windows Media Player's volume control, simply grab the mouse, hover over the taskbar, and lower the volume with the mouse wheel. I use Volumouse (find.pcworld.com/53252), a smart little freebie that lets me handle my two issues with volume: muting or unmuting and lowering or raising the volume. Because the tool appears in the taskbar, you can use it no matter what application you are currently working in. If you don't like the look and feel of Volumouse, try VolumeTouch (find.pcworld.com/61669), a similar product that employs either the mouse or keyboard combos to do the same thing.

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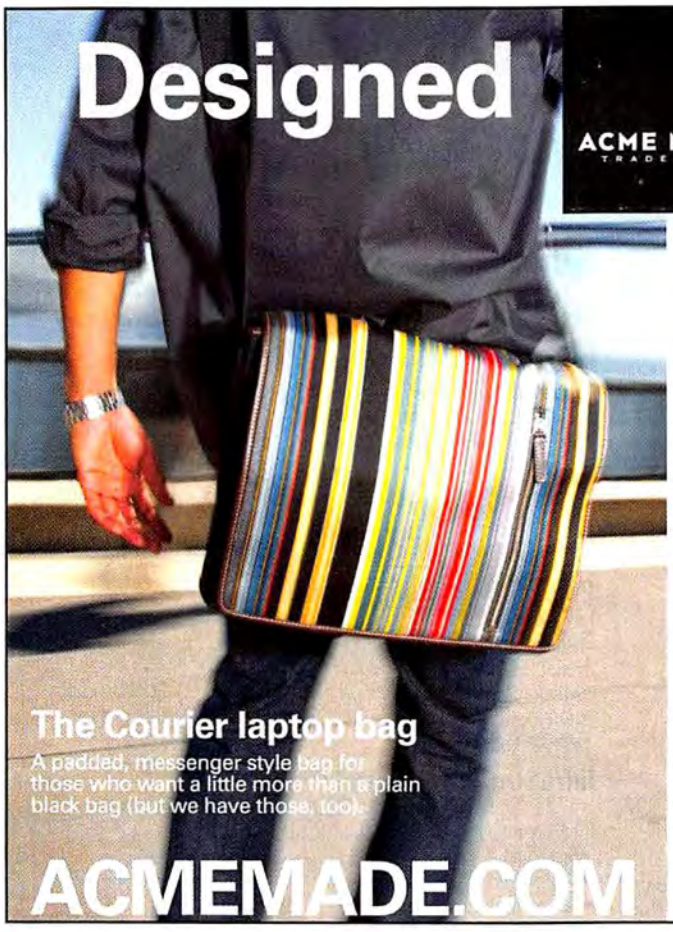
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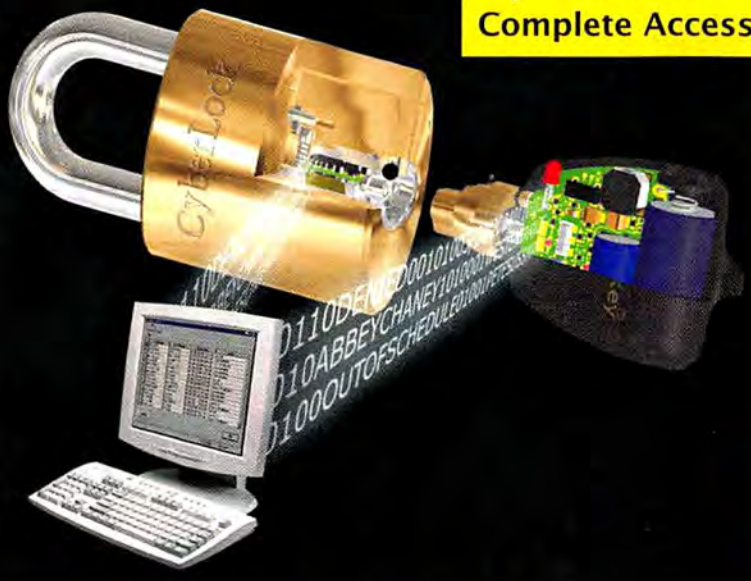
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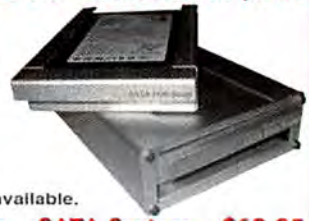
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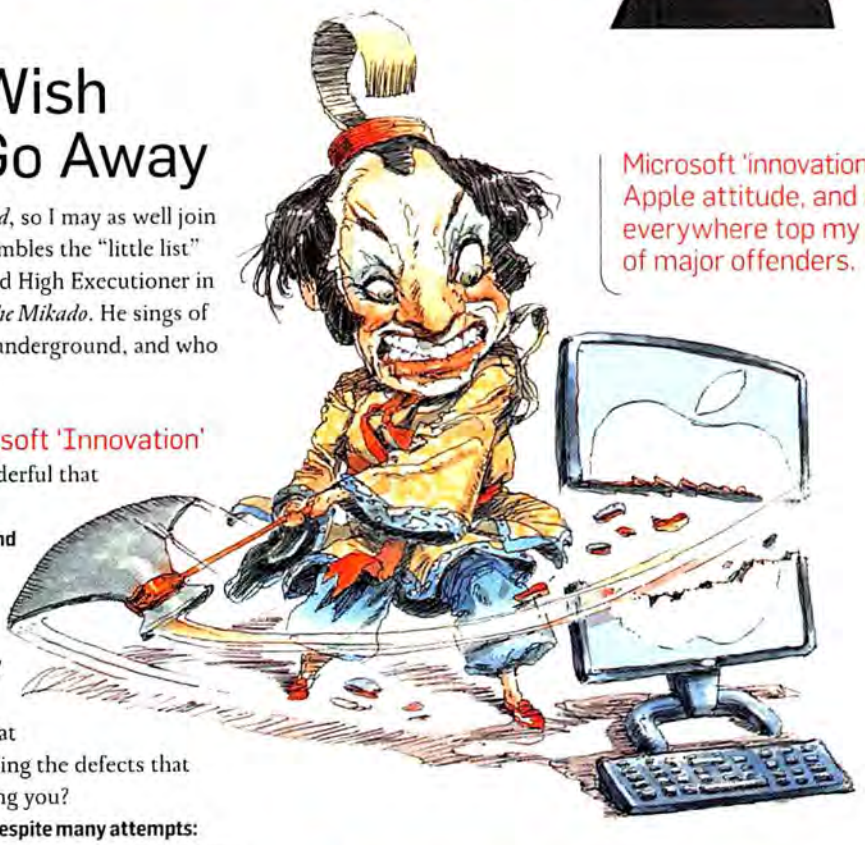
STEPHEN MANES



23 Things I Wish Would Just Go Away

Special LIST Issue

IT'S LIST SEASON here at *PC World*, so I may as well join in—with something that resembles the "little list" made famous by Ko-Ko, Lord High Executioner in Gilbert and Sullivan's classic *The Mikado*. He sings of "offenders who might well be underground, and who never would be missed." Me, too.



Microsoft 'innovations,' Apple attitude, and ads everywhere top my list of major offenders.

Seven Wonders of Microsoft 'Innovation'

7. **Microsoft Live Search:** Isn't it wonderful that they have to pay you to use it?

5 (Tie). **Windows Genuine Advantage and Microsoft Product Activation:** Isn't it wonderful that Microsoft makes sure you have the quality that only its official products can bring?

3 (Tie). **Microsoft Service Packs and Patch Tuesday:** Isn't it wonderful that Microsoft is so assiduous about fixing the defects that its official products actually do bring you?

2. **Security updates that won't install despite many attempts:** Isn't it wonderful that Microsoft seems to possess such passion for my potential?

1. **Untimely abandonment of support for slightly aged products:** Isn't it wonderful that cars that can rust will last longer than Microsoft products that can't?

Five Insanely Great Things About Apple's Approach to 'Customer Service'

5. **PR people and tech support mailboxes whose cynical motto is "No comment" or "We'll get back to you":** We're still waiting. Kind of like early 3G iPhone customers with connection problems.

4. **Genius Bars with smug fanboys instead of geniuses:** Attitude? You got a problem with that?

3. **Steve Jobs's clever cultivation of sycophantic reporters:** Ever see a negative review of a new Apple product the day it comes out? Unfailing cheerleaders get the products first.

2. **Nonremovable batteries:** Why should you have to bother with the arduous task of replacing a battery when Apple employees are happy to do it for you for a sizable fee?

1. **"One more thing":** Nope, it's not just another overpriced, overhyped product. It's a way of life!

Five Things That Need Ad Blocking

5. **Cell phones:** Spam? Call it business-to-customer texting.

4. **ATMs:** Could I just have my money?

3. **Airplane entertainment:** I'm already flying your lousy airline!

2. **Public restrooms:** Go in peace...

1. **Junkware-laden PCs:** No, I don't need ten free subscriptions to cancel next month.

Three Products That Need New Interfaces

3. **GPS systems:** Who really believes that message telling you not to fiddle with the device while dri...[CRASH!]...ving...?

2. **Office 2007:** Menus! We need the steenking menus!

1. **Universal remote controls:** Just a couple more days, and I'll have this thing programmed exactly the way I want it.

Three Cloud-Computing Unmentionables

3. **Dear user:** We're sorry for the three-month service outage.

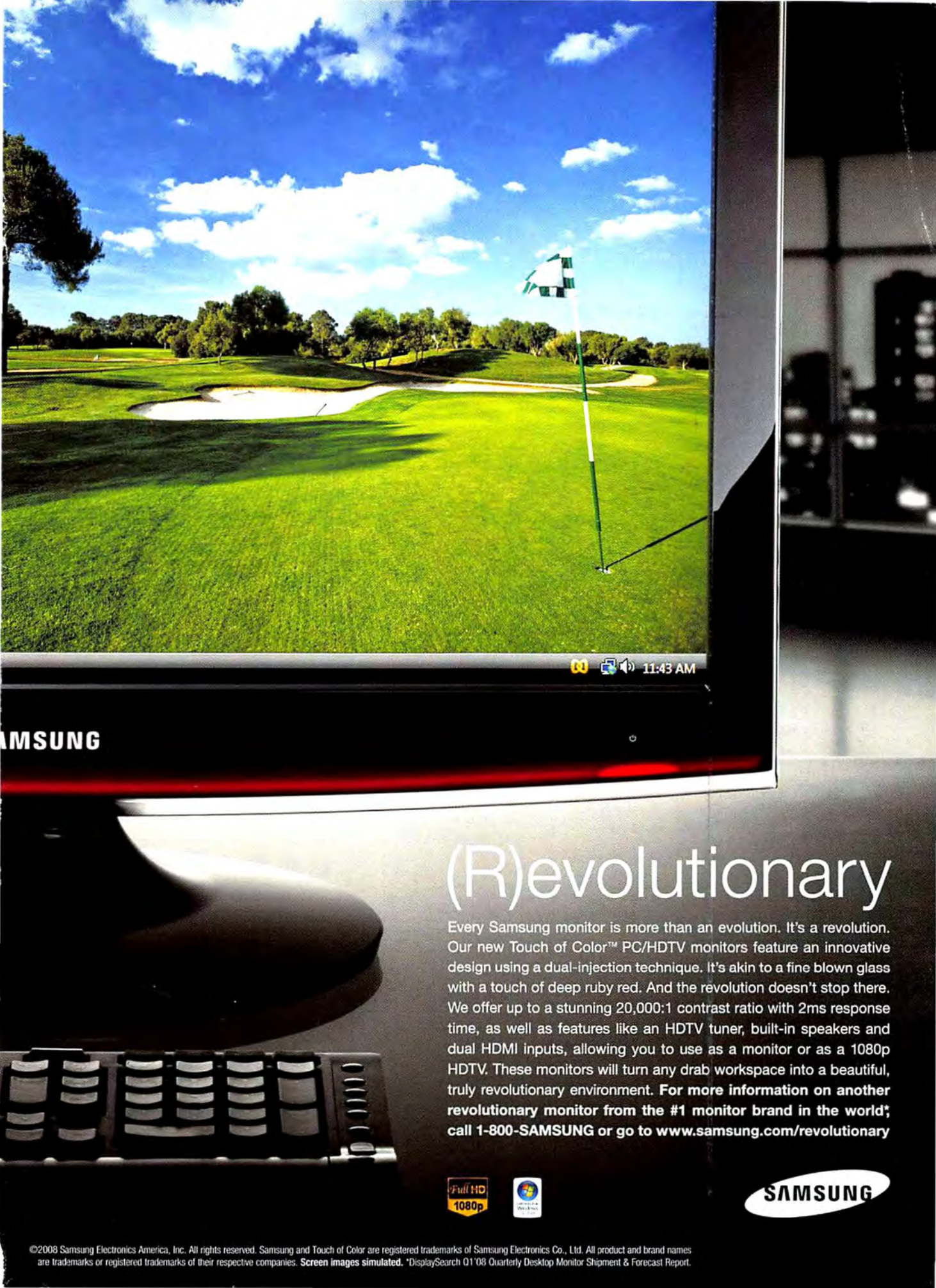
2. **Dear user:** We apologize if your confidential information was exposed during our 27-week maintenance period.

1. **Uh-oh**—the network's down again! ●

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Volume 26, number 11. *PC World*™ (ISSN 0737-8939) is published monthly at $24.95 for one year (12 issues), $49.90 for two years (24 issues), $74.85 for three years (36 issues) by PC World Communications, Inc., 501 Second Street #600, San Francisco, CA 94107. Foreign orders must be prepaid in U.S. funds with additional postage. Add $12 per year for Canada; add $30 per year for airmail for all other countries. Canadian GST Registration #R124669680. Periodicals Postage Paid at San Francisco, California, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: Bleuchip Intl., P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC World, Subscription Dept., P.O. Box 37571, Boone, IA 50037-0571. Editorial and business offices: 501 Second St. #600, San Francisco, CA 94107. 415/243-0500. Copyright © 2008 PC World Communications, Inc. All rights reserved. The trademark PC World is owned by International Data Group and used under license by PC World Communications, Inc. Technology Advice You Can Trust™, PC World Top 10™, Top 10™, PC World Top 100™, Top 100™, and Consumer Watch™ are trademarks of International Data Group Inc., and used under license by PC World Communications, Inc. Printed in the United States.



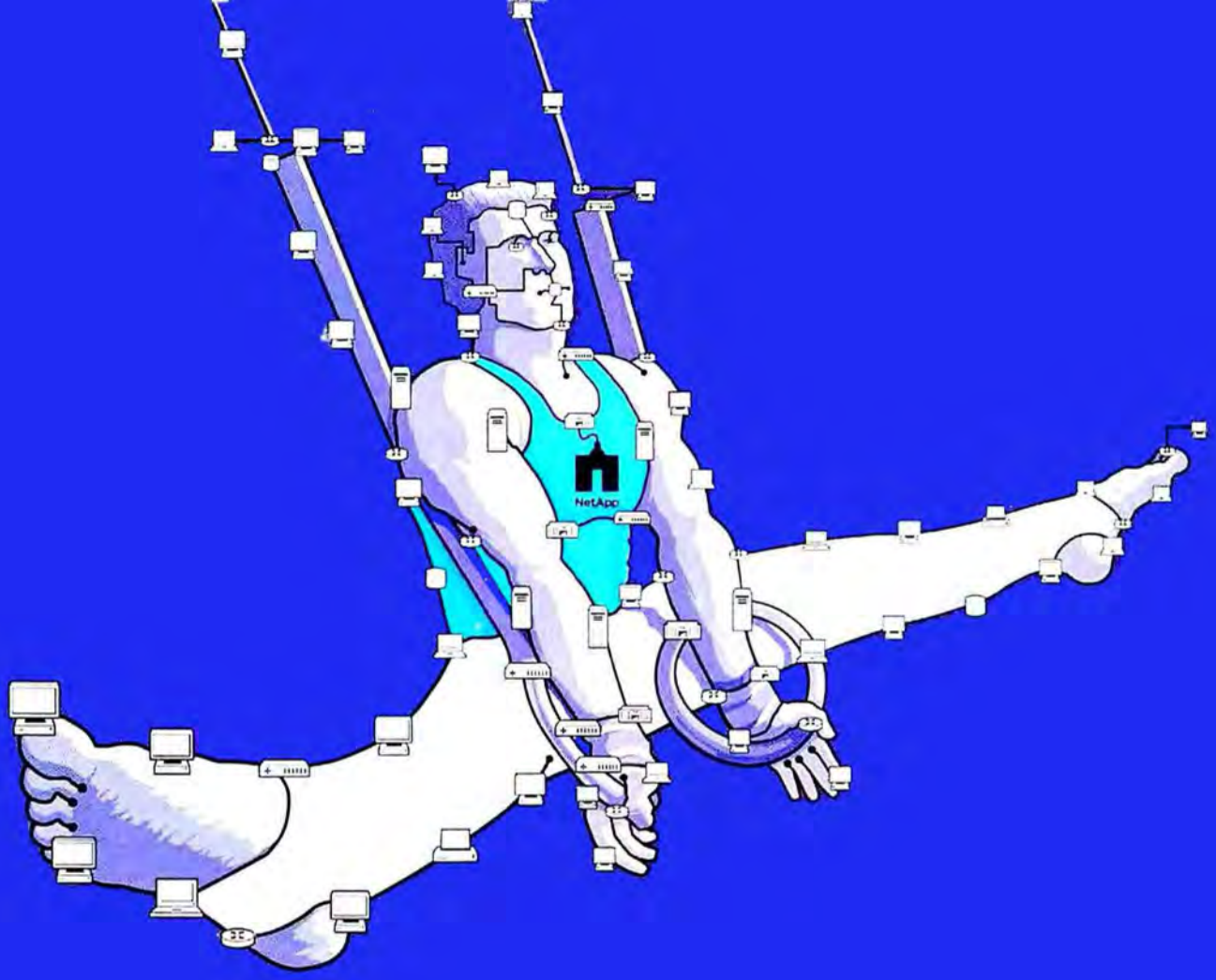
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