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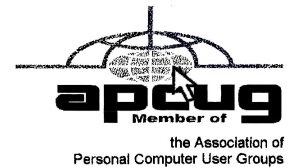
Next Meeting
Tuesday, March 8

Facebook Demystified

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<http://www.rcsi.org>



The Running of the Nerds

by Lou Torraca

President The TUG MOAA Computer UG, Hawaii

No, I wasn't in Spain at the Running of the Bulls ... I was in Las Vegas to attend the annual Consumer Electronics Show and yes, I was one of the thundering herd going from press event to press event, starting on Tuesday, January 4. Those of you who remember my last years review will recall that there are a number of events designed to get the media (and now, also, bloggers) together with selected vendors as well as individual press conferences by vendors, some of which began on Tuesday. The big day for press conferences is Wednesday, beginning at 7 am and continuing all day for 45 minutes each, allowing the running to commence before each new conference. The somewhat smaller, but not much, are the Tuesday afternoon, CES Unveiled, Wednesday evening Digital Experience, Thursday and Friday Lunch at Pieros and Thursday evening Showstoppers. The lunches at Pieros are

probably the most productive as the number of invitees and vendors is more practical allowing time to find out more from the vendors. This years CES reportedly attracted 140,000 people to browse 2,700 or so booths. BTW, if you are a tablet fan or an iPod owner you had 85 clones to view and evaluate. And if you wanted anything to use with your iPad, there were iPad cases, iPad holders, iPad keyboards, iPad chargers, iPad alarm clocks, and who knows, what all, but of course, no iPad!

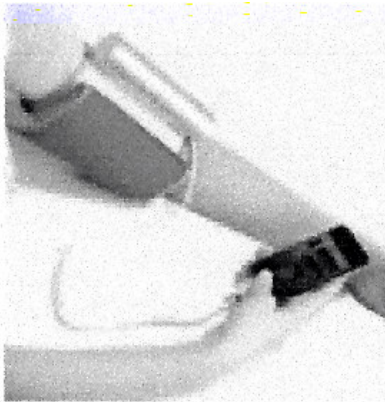
Two things that were widely hyped were 3D TV and linking everything! I'm honestly not much of a fan of 3D TV ... who wants to buy a box full of glasses so you can invite your 20 buddies to watch the Super Bowl? And no glasses 3D is a loser ... you have to sit perfectly in the middle of the screen for it to work. I also don't care for using a 75" screen to do computer stuff ... but maybe that's just me. ;) Just to put some of this in perspective, there was a press conference by a company that makes high-end 3D glasses that do all sorts of things (and cost \$1 K or more!)

I attended all of the above, so I'll give you a quick list of some interesting things I saw and continue with more, the next couple times.

First is in the health category, a big one this year concentrating on linking to many different media and allowing a lot of freedom for those who are getting on and live alone.

Withings is back with another health tracking product. This time, instead of tracking your weight and body fat, it tracks your blood pressure. They call it the Smart Blood Pressure Monitor.

Instant Measurement



Simply connect the Withings monitor to your IOS Device. The Withings application runs automatically and makes the measurement available with a single action.

Clear results

Detailed results are displayed, and the application will indicate the recommended values, using all the display qualities of the IOS Device.

Automatic Saving

All results are saved for a precise monitoring of your health. There's no need to note down results, calculate averages and transmit them. The Withings monitor does all this for you.

Health Monitored from Your Pocket

Automatically traced curves facilitate the detection of trends in the blink of an eye. Morning/evening values and subsequent average values are clearly displayed for effective monitoring.

Lenovo

was showing off a full range of notebooks but the most impressive was the Lenovo U1 notebook/tablet hybrid. Presented was an i5 laptop running Windows 7 with a screen/tablet running Android. The tablet could be removed and replaced in under 5 seconds and without powering off. Currently available overseas, the U1 should be coming to the USA in the coming months.



Kingston Digital

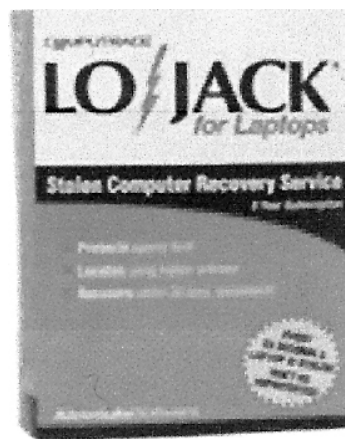


Inc., the Flash memory affiliate of Kingston Technology Company, Inc., the independent world leader in memory products, announced the SDHC UHS-I UltimateXX memory cards. The highest speed class available today, the UltimateXX meets standards set by the Secure Digital Association for next level performance in SO card technology.

Shipping later this month, Kingston's UltimateXX memory cards are ideal for the serious photographer or videographer. Photographers will appreciate the ability to easily capture sequential shots that were once a challenge due to the speed limitations of memory. The UltimateXX also makes it easy to capture HD video. The performance of SDHC UHS-I memory card is optimized when paired with a UHS-I device, although the card is backwards compatible with Class 4, 6 and 10 equipment. "Kingston is pleased to be one of the first manufacturers to offer SDHC UHS-I memory cards to our customers," said Mike Kuppinger, Flash card product manager, Kingston®. "Being a member of the SD Association enhances our ability to bring new technology to market. As the devices that support SDHC UHS-I become prevalent, our UtilimateXX cards are at the ready." Kingston's UltimateXX line meets the SD Association standards for the UHS-1 speed class with speeds up to 60MB/sec, read and 35MB/sec. Write. At this performance level, the write speed of SDHC UHS-I memory cards is more than three times as fast as SDHC Class 10 cards. The UltimateXX product line will offer capabilities of GB, 16GB and 32GB.

Now here is one you weren't expecting. Laundry pre-treaters will collect dust thanks to the new Maytag® Maxima™ washer. Its Power Wash™ System takes out tough stains and provides better overall cleaning performance while using less detergent. The system's features include Optimal Dispense which injects detergent intermittently throughout the washer's fill time and industry-first, Power-Spray, to provide enhanced cleaning by spraying the detergent solution evenly on the washer's contents.

I have LoJack on my laptop, but since I use the netbook on all my trips, it seemed the smart thing to do to add it to the netbook as well, after my talk with the Absolute Software folks at Lunch at Pieros.



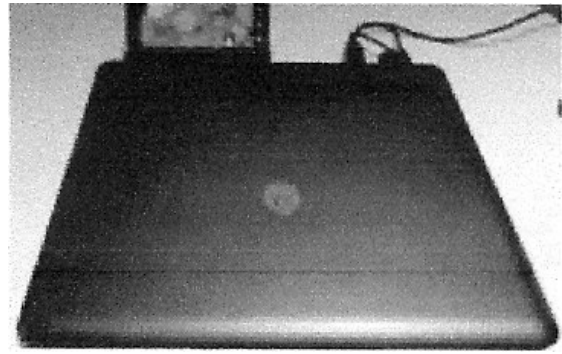
What's Your Digital Net Worth?

Think about it. How many songs have you downloaded onto your laptop? How many movies? Combined with the initial cost of your computer, most people have a digital net worth that could easily run into thousands of dollars. Not to mention the priceless value of photos, personal information, correspondence, course-work and other irreplaceable items. So what are you doing to protect your investment?

When your laptop is stolen, you can feel powerless. But you don't have to. LoJack® for Laptops by Absolute Software is a computer theft recovery service with remote device and data security features. If your laptop is stolen or missing, you've got the power to remotely block access to it and the personal data it contains, while their dedicated Theft Recovery Team works to recover it for you.

Now for You 4g Fans

Motorola has a really neat combo. The Atrix ... a phone and a laptop, except it's not really a laptop. You have to snap the phone into this really good looking, sleek, thin, and light (2.4 lb) laptop/dock. The phone provides the processor, memory, Internet connection, and all your photos, videos, music, and files. Whatever was on the phone's screen is now on the laptop, plus you gain a trackpad and full keyboard. No synch is necessary, it's all on the phone.



So there you have a few things to ponder ... stay tuned for more in my next volume. Be safe out there in the www and remember to be careful.

Aloha.

Free Cheat Sheets for Software and Hardware

by Ira Wilsker

Recently, I was asked to teach an eight hour non-credit class on Excel to the employees of a local company. I know by experience that handouts are a popular adjunct for any class, so I had to find some useful handouts for this Excel class; so called cheat sheets are as good as any other handout, so I proceeded to print a set of Excel cheat sheets for Excel versions 2003, 2007, and 2010. The information on those cheat sheets alone was more than adequate for a one-day class, and could have also been used for a longer class.

In this context, a cheat sheet is not a device used by a college student in an act of academic dishonesty, but a digital or printed copy of instructions for a software product that clearly explains and shows how to use the features and functions of that product. In addition to the various versions of Microsoft Office, free cheat sheets are available for many other PC, MAC, LINUX, and other computer related software and hardware products. While most of the free cheat sheets are for software products, some cheat sheets, called by their publisher Make Use of Guides (www.makeuseof.com/pages) are for hardware and services. Some of the nearly three dozen available include: How To Easily Build Your Own Cheap Computer, The Awesome Automation Guide for Mac Users, The (Very) Unofficial Facebook Privacy Guide, The Office Worker's 101 Guide to a USB Thumb Drive, The Windows 7 Guide: From Newbies To Pros, The Ultimate Guide To Gmail, Your Guide To Create Professional Documents on Word, The Internet Music Guide For The Audiophile, The Essential Guide To Digital Photography, A Newbie's Getting Started Guide to Linux, The Mac Manual, The Underground iPhone Guide, The Big Book Of iTunes, and about 25 other such titles.

One of the best sources of free software cheat sheets is Custom Guide's Quick References available online at www.customguide.com/computer-training/quick-references. On this Quick Reference page are free PDF format cheat sheets for Office 2010, Excel 2010, Outlook 2010, PowerPoint 2010, and Word 2010. With free registration, the user can also access the full collection of Custom Guide's Quick References, including the 2007 and 2003 versions of the Office products, as well as Microsoft's OneNote, Project (2007 and 2003), Publisher, SharePoint, and Visio. There are also Quick References for Windows 7, Vista, and XP. Apple users may also find these Quick Reference Guides useful, as there are guides for Appleworks, MAC OS, Microsoft Entourage, and the Apple versions of Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Some of the guides for Adobe products are available for both the PC and MAC versions, and include Acrobat, Dreamweaver, Fireworks, Flash, and Photoshop.

Almost all of the Custom Guide's Quick References are of a similar design and format as downloadable PDF files. The guides are in full color, and typically two pages in length. They all display the opening screen of the product with all of the features labeled with a clear and concise explanation of each item. If there is a ribbon or menu bar in the software, the guide labels each function on the image of the item, and presents a summary of the functions in a table adjacent to the image. Most of the products covered by the guides also have a selection of keyboard shortcuts displayed that can be used to increase the speed and efficiency of the user by using these shortcuts rather than clicking on menu items. Commonly done tasks like copying something can be accomplished by utilizing the common Windows shortcut CTRL-C, and then pasting the item with CTRL-V; this is much quicker than clicking on the menu and then scrolling to COPY, and repeating the menu process and clicking on PASTE. In many Office products (including competitors to Microsoft Office), formatting can also be done with intuitive shortcuts, such as CTRL-B for bold, CTRL-U for underline, CTRL-I for italics, and several other similar shortcuts; these shortcuts are among the dozens displayed in the Quick Reference guides. The guides also include information (as appropriate) for formatting, graphics, editing, styles, animations, special effects, tables, and other functions of the software. There is a lot of very useful information crammed into these two-page guides, and they would be ideal for all users of these products, regardless of experience level. These are precisely the handouts that I use in my non-credit software classes.

The MakeUseOf Guides available free from www.makeuseof.com/pages are also downloadable in PDF format. While these guides are free, a one-time registration is necessary to download them. In addition to the MakeUseOf Guides, there are also dozens of other free guides available for download (free registration required) at www.makeuseof.com/pages/downloads. Some guides that I have used to learn shortcuts include guides for Firefox, Gmail, Linux, and Internet Explorer. MAC users may find useful the shortcut guides for OS X, and the MAC versions of Firefox. Since its release, I have been using Windows 7 as my primary home computer, and have found "The Ultimate Windows 7 Guide: From Newbies To Pros" a very helpful document. This free 50 page guide (PDF) to Windows 7 is written in an easy to read and understand format, and contains useful information and tips for Windows 7 users of all levels. I have used The Essential Guide To Digital Photography to help me with my digital camera, and since it seems that almost everyone today has a digital camera, this guide may be invaluable. I know a lot of people who use Google's Gmail service as their email provider, and The Ultimate Guide To Gmail is 35 pages full of Gmail hints, tips, and ideas. The Incredible Free Manual For Every Mac User is a 69 page ebook (PDF) with a treasure trove of information for MAC users. In all, there are 32 such ebooks available.

With all of this free information available for computer users, there should be several titles that would be of interest to just about everyone. I use some of these cheat sheets in the classes that I teach, and recommend them as needed to my students and coworkers. You too may find them very useful.

Websites:

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/14-great-cheat-sheets-posters-to-make-you-a-software-wizard/>

<http://www.customguide.com/computer-training/quick-references>

<http://learn.customguide.com/index.php?module=QR&action=Index>

(free registration required)

<http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/>

<http://www.makeuseof.com/pages/downloads>

<http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/7-essential-cheat-sheets>



Review Windows Updates

Q. I've installed a number of Windows updates, but I can't remember which ones I have installed. Is there somewhere I can check to determine which updates have been installed?

A. If you're using Windows XP, go to your Control Panel and click Add/Remove Programs. Place a check mark in the box labeled "Show Updates." Any installed updates, and their respective date(s) of installation, will be displayed for your review. If you're using Vista, go to Control Panel > Programs & Features. Under "Tasks" on the left, select "View Installed Updates." Windows 7 users, click Start and in the Search field, type "View installed updates" to navigate to that area.

Q. I am trying to retrieve some information from a Web site and have been informed that in order to do this, my browser (Firefox) must have pop-up blocking enabled. I don't know how to do this. Can you help, Mr. M?

A. The message you received probably asks you to disable (not enable) pop-up blocking in order to allow a pop-up required by the site in question. Either way, click Tools > Options > Content tab.

Rather than remove the check mark beside "Block pop-up windows" which would then allow pop-ups to appear on any and all Web sites, click the Exceptions button and add an exception by typing in the Web site address of the site (or sites) from which you do want to permit pop-ups.

Q. When I receive photos by email, they are very large. Too large. Is there a way that the photos can be made smaller? Thanks in advance for your help, Mr. M.

A. The problem with super-large photos usually lies with the senders of those photos. It's best to take low-resolution photos if you're planning to send them by email. Most digital cameras have a setting for that, but instead, many people send higher resolution photos that are great for making prints, but often result in huge files or displayed photos.

You can resize the photos yourself, though you might want to politely suggest that the sender actually open the manual that came with his or her camera and learn how to take low-resolution photos, or determine what settings might exist for that specific purpose. Some cameras have an "Email" setting which produces low-resolution photos, perfect for mailing.

If you are the recipient of a super-large photo, Shrink Pictures (www.shrinkpictures.com) is a Web-based service that enables you to reduce the size of digital photos. No software is required and the service is free. As an alternative, Resize2mail.com (www.resize2mail.com) is also free. Senders of photos would be well advised to use either of these sites before sending photos.

My suggestion for anybody who wants to share photos with others is to simply use one of the free, online photo albums such as Snapfish (www.snapfish.com), Shutterfly (www.shutterfly.com), PhotoBucket (www.photobucket.com), or Picasa (<http://picasa.google.com>). Once uploaded, you can simply send the Web address to others, who can then view your photos online, rather than having to fuss with downloading and resizing. Photos can also be posted on one's Facebook page or other similar "social media" site.

Q. How can I convert ALL CAPS to an Initial Cap and the rest of the letters in lower case

when working on a Word document?

A. In Word, SHIFT + F3 is the case toggle, so just select (highlight) the words you want to change and press SHIFT + F3 to switch between ALL UPPER, all lower, or Initial Capitalization, also known in the biz as “nish caps.”

Mr. Modem's DME (Don't Miss 'Em) Sites of the Month

10MinuteMail.com

A disposable email address can help keep you off spammers' lists. By providing this type of address when shopping online, for example, you can still receive a purchase confirmation, but avoid subsequent spam or follow-up solicitations. 10MinuteMail, as its name suggests, exists for 10 minutes. It's free, so just go to the site and you will be assigned an email address. Any email sent to this address will appear on the 10MinuteMail Web page where you can read it, click on links, and even reply, but the email address will self-destruct after 10 minutes, vanishing without a trace. You can, however, click to obtain an additional 10 minutes, which is kind of like a snooze alarm, but without the annoyance. <http://10minutemail.com>

Paper-Cut Sculptures

It doesn't require a lot of expensive material to create great art, just an incredible amount of imagination and talent. Check out the work of sculptor Peter Callesen, who uses single sheets of paper to create astonishingly intricate “Paper-cut Sculptures.” (After years of intensive practice and significant blood loss, I am proud to say that I have mastered the “paper-cut” portion of his technique.)

http://oddee.com/item_89460.aspx

Gas Prices

Now that gasoline prices are on the way up again, there are a number of sites that can help you track down the lowest prices in your area or while on the road, if you're traveling. Several of the more popular gas-price monitoring sites include: GasBuddy.com, MapQuest Gas Prices (<http://gasprices.mapquest.com>), GasPriceWatch.com, and FuelEconomy.gov.

For plain-English answers to your questions by email, plus great computing tips, subscribe to Mr. Modem's award-winning WEEKLY newsletter. Subscribe using Promo Code 0847 and receive a free month (four weekly issues!) with your six-month subscription. To view a sample issue or subscribe, visit [www .MrModem.com](http://www.MrModem.com).

Software Review:

UbuntuOne

by Drew Kwashnak

Director, Danbury Area Computer Society, CT

Computers are great, aren't they? What else can help you lose so many files, pictures and home videos so easily? When you have more than one computer, then you have double the chance of losing anything (plus your sanity)!

That's where the Internet comes to help. The folks who bring you the Ubuntu Linux distribution have made a great product that helps organize and keep your files where you can find them. They call it ... Ubuntu one.

Despite the “One” in its name, UbuntuOne is two components; the installed application that comes installed on each Ubuntu Linux release since 8.04 LTS, and the site located on Canonical servers on the Internet. The real magic, though, is where these two components meet.

Typically, online file storage requires you to install their application and set a single directory to synchronize with your account. UbuntuOne, on the other hand, is already installed

on Ubuntu. Instead of selecting a single directory to synchronize with your online space, you can select a number of existing or new directories to synchronize. In this way, you can keep your documents in your Documents directory, pictures in your Pictures directory and anything you want in any directory. When a file is added, deleted or updated, the system automatically synchronizes the changes with your online location, depending on Internet access.

The beauty of this stands out when you have more than one Ubuntu system connected to your UbuntuOne account. First, when you point Ubuntu to your UbuntuOne account, whatever directories you had set to synchronize before will be automatically set to synchronize on your new system as well. No need to remember which directories are set and which ones are not.

Afterward, whichever system modifies a file in a flagged directory, that change will automatically be updated in all other systems connecting to your account. So you can make a slide show presentation on your desktop and have it automatically updated on the laptop the next time it logs in to UbuntuOne over the Internet, and vice versa. If you don't have Internet access then, then it will synchronize the next time it is able to connect.

All the while, you still have a web interface available that allows you to upload files, add directories and delete files from any computer with a browser, and have it automatically update your Ubuntu systems the next time they synchronize. You can even download or publish files from your UbuntuOne account through this interface. Published files are accessible to other people, without having to grant them access to all of your files.

This is where UbuntuOne pulls ahead of the other sites with features they just don't have. Ubuntu synchronizes more than just files.

If your monitor is outlined by sticky notes like a lion's mane, you will be happy to learn that Ubuntu includes a note taking application, Tomboy. Tomboy notes, combined with UbuntuOne, synchronize just as easily as your files. For those times you are not in front of your Ubuntu Linux machines, you can use the web interface to add, update, and delete your notes, which will be updated on your systems the next time they are synchronized.

Have you ever wanted to send an email and find you have it on your other machine? Just as Notes can be synchronized with UbuntuOne and edited through a web browser, so are your contacts stored in Ubuntu's default email client, Evolution. Evolution is an email, calendar, task, and contacts application similar to Microsoft's Outlook, except the address book can be automatically synchronized with UbuntuOne.

Even better, UbuntuOne now offers UbuntuOne Mobile that allows you to synchronize your contacts with your iPhone, Android, Blackberry, or any of the 1,000 of phones supported. One address book to rule them all!

With a Firefox Add On called Bindwood, your bookmarks can be synchronized with your UbuntuOne account. So by signing into one simple account you can get your files, notes, contacts, and bookmarks automatically synchronized across multiple machines, or all of your information put back onto a fresh installation or upgrade. Yet Ubuntu One does more than just file storage and synchronization.

With version 10.04 LTS, Lucid Lynx, the people from UbuntuOne introduced the UbuntuOne Music Store. This combines the default music player Rhythmbox with an online music store so you can browse, buy and play your music, through the same application. Songs bought are high quality 256 kbps or higher DRM-free MP3s and are placed in your UbuntuOne account. It is then accessible and downloadable by all of your Ubuntu Linux systems. Don't worry about running out of space either, there is no storage limit to the music you purchase.

Not only can you buy, store and access your music from any of your Ubuntu Linux systems, UbuntuOne Mobile allows you to stream your own music from your account, uploaded and

purchased, to your iPhone or Android phone. So now your music can be stored in one location, and accessed by your computers and your phone.

Don't think they are done adding features, either. Currently the UbuntuOne team is working on a beta version that runs on Microsoft Windows as well as adding to UbuntuOne Mobile the ability to automatically synchronize pictures taken with your smart phone.

I know what you are thinking, how much does all of this cost? The free basic account gives you 2 GB of space free. This allows you to synchronize your files, contacts, bookmarks, and tasks between all of your Ubuntu Linux systems and to use the web interface. More space can be purchased as a 20-pack; 20 GB blocks of additional storage space for \$2.99 per month or \$29.99 per year. Purchased music synchronizes with all accounts, and if the combination of music and files puts you over your limit, it doesn't stop you from buying more music. You are not able to add any more files to your UbuntuOne account until either your combined files and music are removed to fit within your storage space, or your storage space is increased to more than the combined files. UbuntuOne Mobile includes the Contact synchronization as well as music streaming capabilities for \$3.99 per month or \$39.99 per year.

Support for Windows is still in the early stages of Beta, but if you are interested in getting involved, more information is available at <https://wiki.ubuntu.com/UbuntuOne/Windows>. It's very early, and only allows synchronizing the Ubuntu One folder manually unless you make it a scheduled task. The ability to synchronize other folders, contacts, bookmarks and notes are on the project's To Do list.

If nothing else, UbuntuOne makes it easy to backup and store files, music, and pictures while at the same time making it so simple to restore these to a replacement, new or updated system. On a personal note, I have been using UbuntuOne to keep files on my desktop and laptop in sync and it has been doing a wonderful job. This and other articles have been saved in a synchronized folder and I have had no problems accessing and updating the files from one system to the other. With the basic version and Ubuntu Linux free of charge, why not give it a spin and try it out for yourself?

Drew Kwashnak has been using Ubuntu off-and-on for over 5 years now, and with the way UbuntuOne is helping keep his files accessible and in check, it looks like he may be sticking with Ubuntu for a while now.

January 2011 issue, DACS.doc, a Computer and Technology Newsletter.

You've Got Them Why Not Use Them

by Vinny La Bash
Sarasota PCUG, FL

People configure their desktops in different ways for an all encompassing assortment of reasons. Most use the Windows defaults which are quite reasonable, but operate from a false assumption that "factory specifications" are enough. Windows has lots of useful features not included in the default settings which could have great benefits, but if one doesn't know the features are there, one can never enjoy these prospective benefits.

Let's start by opening the Control Panel and clicking on Programs. In the Programs and Features section click the Turn Windows features on or off. A dialog box appears which will enable you to turn features on or off. There's probably much more here than you want, so let's examine several features that you are more likely to use rather than the ones which require professional technical knowledge to be useful.

The Indexing Service

got a bad reputation in Vista because it was annoyingly slow. There is no doubt that Vista was a resource hog so any service or utility that had additional requirements tended to bog down

the system even further. Microsoft resolved the problem in Windows 7 by turning the Indexing Service off by default. That's too bad because the utility can actually be very helpful in locating files and other content through flexible inquiries. Try it, you just may like it.

Internet Information Services (IIS) and Internet Information Services Hostable Web Core:

You will not be held accountable if you don't know what these tools do or if you choose to ignore them. IIS is mostly regarded as a major component of a server while the Hostable Web Core performs fewer functions and needs fewer resources. If you write web based applications or wish to experiment hosting a web site on your desktop, these tools may be essential.

Microsoft Message Queue Server:

This utility has been around for years and most application developers have come to ignore it because it's not new. If you send and receive messages on a regular basis with people who are in remote locations on the planet, and have "iffy" connections, you now have a tool to build a message queue, store a message within it, and send it when the connection to the recipient is up and running. You can also create a similar structure for receiving messages. Using this tool effectively requires basic programming skills.

Simple Network Management Protocol (SNMP):

Everyone who uses a computer on a regular basis should be concerned about unauthorized access to personal information or attempts to trick people into revealing information which should remain private. If you have a home network, wireless or not, SNMP gives you better control over devices on the network. You can configure hardware, troubleshoot more effectively, and in many cases even track down attempts to crack into your network. This tool requires a working knowledge of how a network operates.

Telnet Client:

This is a great diagnostic tool if your email client is acting strangely and normal diagnostics can not resolve the problem. Turn it on when you need it, and turn it off when you're not using it as there are security issues with it.

These tools are not for everyone, especially those with little computing experience, but your level of knowledge shouldn't remain at the novice stage. Challenge yourself and you won't be like the guy who thinks he has twenty years of experience when in reality all he has is one year of experience twenty times.

From the January 2010 issue, Sarasota PC Monitor.

ISP Negotiations- Speeds/Features /Software Myths vs. Realities

by Gabe Goldberg Slickdeals (at) gabegold.com

Trapped! It's easy to feel that way when the relationship with your ISP (Internet service provider) turns sour. Too often, people slavishly accept whatever service they get, meekly

pay bills, and don't comparison shop or even measure connection speeds. So they don't know whether they're getting what they're paying for, let alone whether they can talk their way into something better.

Utility bills are so nasty and convoluted that it's easy to ignore them – especially when they're auto-paid by credit card or bank draft. But that lets companies bury changes to rates and terms of service, hardly ever in consumers' favor, deep in the small print. So check bills and tiny-type messages every month and especially carefully after moving or changing services, since orders/options/fees are too-frequently botched!

If service or bundle bills creep upward as they often do, call a few times a year to ask about specials – sometimes they're not advertised. You may have to extend a contract to win a bargain, but if you'd have stayed anyway, it's a winning tradeoff.

Watch the market for changes in services, prices, and bundles. When you see new features such as FiOS enhancements offered, call and demand them. Emphasize that as a long-time customer you should get the same deal as new subscribers! When considering FiOS, remember that it depends on your electricity for operation. Battery backup will carry it for a few hours but that may not be adequate for telephone, alarm system, or health communication. FiOS is strongly marketed to include phone but it isn't needed; you can retain reliable copper phone service while using Internet and cable via FiOS.

Focus on what matters. For most people, after a certain point, increased Internet speed may not matter as much as other enhancements such as more premium TV channels, online backup storage, or a DVR. Aim requests to optimize YOUR total package, not simply get connection speed bragging rights.

Especially when establishing Internet service, but even after-the-fact, consider separating connectivity from email hosting to allow ISP (s)hopping without having to change email address. Fully sliced, Internet services may involve multiple fees: connectivity, email/Web hosting, and domain registration. But the total won't necessarily exceed that of a services bundle, and splitting enhances flexibility and negotiating clout, letting you tell your ISP that your email address doesn't tie you to them.

Even using your ISP's email service doesn't mean you're trapped by monthly bills. Though AOL has offered free email service for years, even allowing accessing it with standard email software and some free Web email services, many people still feel obligated to pay for it. That's like feeling stranded on a stalled escalator when you can just walk off.

Internet connection speeds are quoted in squishy terms, such as, "Up to xxx megabits/second up and down." Nobody complains when actual speeds exceed the promised "up to" rating (as mine routinely do!), but not enough people gripe when speeds are far below claimed service quality.

So test connection speed occasionally using websites like speedtest .net and dslreports.com, keep records (or let test sites do that), and politely ping your ISP if it falls short of what it advertises.

Check and cite reviews, BBB ratings, or blog posts indicating that the ISP isn't fulfilling promises. Compare notes with neighbors and other customers elsewhere; if there's a pattern of dissatisfaction, don't be snowed by customer support claiming that you're alone complaining. Investigate whether your city/county has an agency handling Internet complaints and mention that you'll consult it for advice and action.

You're a stronger negotiator if you know and cite available competitive ISPs. If you're a cable customer with FiGS available, tell your ISP that you're being courted by the other vendor and wonder why you should remain. And WiMAX offerings <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wimax>> are proliferating, often adding a third service choice competing with the traditional cozy ISP duopoly (cable and telco).

Keep detailed notes on interactions with your ISP, noting date/time and contact person. Always request ticket/incident numbers for follow-up and proof of patterns. Log problems, outages, and slowdowns for later reference even if you don't report them all.

If you're not getting satisfaction from first-level support, escalate firmly but politely, emphasizing that you simply want to resolve issues, but not taking problems personally or blaming anyone. On a more positive note, request personal contact info from helpful people. When available, it's pleasant being able to contact them directly rather than having to go

through usual screening or taking pot luck with random staffers.

If a conversation feels rigidly scripted, try asking questions “off the record” or “person-to-person” or “as one IT professional to another” to try to get off-script and have an actual human conversation. It won’t always work but when it does, results can improve.

Besides billing, speed, and reliability issues, technology itself is a fruitful haggling area. Cellular companies are introducing MiFi <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MiFi>>, a nifty gadget which uses cellular broad-band to create a small/local/personal wireless hotspot. These are often offered under special promotions but you don’t need these to play let’s-make-a-deal with a hungry ISP. A similar technology allows tethering a computer to a cell phone, using it as a modem. Some companies disable this or charge extra for it, but it’s worth asking (demanding?) for it as a service plan addition.

If you’ve had a connection for a while, you may not have the current generation of modem (and router, if it’s all one unit) Companies sometimes provide this gear at no cost, so it can’t hurt to ask for a free technology refresh—especially if speed or reliability aren’t what they should be. Separate from replacing hardware, occasionally ensure that you’re running current software versions in telecom equipment by noting model numbers and visiting manufacturer Web sites for upgrades.

Finally, for emergencies, unless you check—perhaps with a special high-gain antenna—you never know what public hotspots or open networks are within range.

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“Many of us might not notice if someone is using our Wifi without permission; learn how to check if someone is using your Wifi, and what steps you can take to stop it.”

<http://www.techsupportalert.com/content/stolen-wifi-how-check-and-what-do-if-your-wifi-being-pilfered.htm>

An Amazingly Smart Free Image Resize Tool

This freebie fixes one of the most annoying problems in digital photography. If you resize a large image to make it smaller the subject of the image usually ends up being too small. The alternative of cropping the image retains the subject size but you end up losing the background context. This utility uses some digital processing black magic to reduce the image size while retaining both the subject size and the background.

This is indeed a most extraordinary achievement, a revolution in resizing technology. Alas it is also far from perfect with great results on some images and weird distortions on others. That said it is a terrific free utility to have in your digital processing toolbox.

<http://www.techsupportalert.com/content/amazingly-smart-image-resize-tool-thats-free.htm>

