



BITS AND BYTES

The Newsletter of the Midland Computer Club

December 2009

GENERAL CLUB MEETING 7:00 P.M.

Meets 4th Wednesday of the month at the
Midland Community Center

2001 George St., Midland, MI

<http://mcc.apcug.org/>

This month's date: December 16th

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: Annual Holiday Party & Joe Lykowski will give a short presentation on where technology is pushing us in the future.

PROGRAM COORDINATORS

Contact : Co-Chairpersons

Larry Piper larryP56@chartermi.net

Joe Lykowski joseph@lykowski.com

President's Corner

Since this is the last President's Corner that I will be writing, I thought I'd take a couple lines to talk about how the club has done over the years. If I recall correctly, the club had approximately 60 members when I joined in 1993. (The club was formed in 1982.) Over the next several years there was a fairly rapid attrition of members, dropping to less than 40 members when I became president in 1997. Within a couple of years, our membership had dropped to 30 members and the board was discussing when we should fold the club. We stabilized at about 25 members and now have started to see a resurgence of interest with a number of visitors in the past couple of years. This resurgence is primarily due to you, the membership, who are telling your friends about the club and Kathy Bohl putting information on the monthly meeting in the *Midland Daily News* every month. For all of your assistance in keeping the club viable, the board would like to thank you. Hopefully we will continue to see an interest and we can continue to grow.



In closing I would like to thank Jan Ensing for her years as Newsletter Editor. The quality of the newsletter has significantly improved during her tenure. We have moved from a purely print/mailed newsletter to a newsletter distributed via electronic means. This has significantly reduced our costs, which has allowed us to hold our dues steady at the \$20/year rate. We welcome Carol Picard as the new Newsletter Editor and look forward to her contributions to the board and the club.

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What you missed!

Bill Tower gave a presentation in **November** of various options available to back up all that data, pictures, etc. that you have entered into your computer. He talked about the pros and cons of online vs. offline backups and along with various software options available. You are backing up on a regular basis, aren't you?

Upcoming Activities

December will feature our annual Holiday Party on the 3rd Wednesday of December (December 16). As usual, the club will provide pizza and soft drinks and you should bring a dish to share. Once we have had our fill of food, Joe Lykowski will give a short presentation on where technology is pushing us in the future. Hopefully this will give you some insight on what is coming during future years. If you have any new toys, bring them along and show them off!

In **January**, Howard Lewis will give a presentation on Windows 7. He will talk about his experience with installation and use of the new operating System.

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I would also like to thank Larry Piper for being willing to take over as President and look forward to the time of his leadership. I hope that you will continue to support the club and Larry by continuing to invite your friends to check out the club. I'm hoping we can continue to grow.

And last, but not least, I would like to thank all of you for the support you have given me over the past years.

— Howard Lewis

(The above comments are the opinion of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Midland Computer Club.)

From the Editor:

Yes, this is my last issue as editor. For the most part, I have enjoyed producing this newsletter for the last 8+ years.

(The frustrations were my own, mainly due to lack of computer and/or program knowledge.)

Most of what I've learned since taking on this position, I learned by attending our monthly club meetings. Even though I did not think the club would be beneficial to me, I began attending with my husband, to better understand what he was talking about (geek-speak to me!). Much to my surprise, the topics were often something I could relate to. Now, I can somewhat understand computer terms and how some of the programs work. I have learned how to e-mail, search topics online and shop!

Thank you for the opportunity to learn and for your forgiveness when I've made mistakes :)

I am looking forward to receiving the next newsletter, from our new editor, Carol Picard. Let's all support her as you have so graciously supported me.

-Jan Ensing

Board Meeting

The next board meeting will be 7

p.m., January 12th, 2009, @

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church,

5501 Jefferson Ave., Midland.

Membership Enrollment form

NAME _____ PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____ CITY _____

ZIP _____ EMAIL ADDRESS _____

Membership dues FAMILY (\$20) STUDENT (\$15) NEW Member ____ renewal ____

Please fill out the above form and mail it along with payment of check or money order to :

MIDLAND COMPUTER CLUB Attn: membership chairman
 P.O. box 132
 Midland, MI 48640-0132

you may also pay for membership at a regular club meeting

<http://www.slacker.com/>

Slacker provides free Internet radio with millions of songs. Select the category (or specific song) and listen. You do have to listen to periodic ads, but the music will be free.

<http://www.virustotal.com/>

If you have a file that you think is infected with some malware, upload it to VirusTotal and they will scan the file with over 40 different virus applications for you for free. They will scan the file for viruses, worms, trojans, and all kinds of malware.

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

This site will tell you how pervasive the Internet has become world-wide. It shows the penetration by geographic region and from this you can drill down into the various regions and find information by country.

<http://preview.tinyurl.com/yejp9ak>

Newsweek has a rather interesting video on how the use of cell phones has grown over the years.

<http://preview.tinyurl.com/n29n9d>

Do you think cars have improved over the last 50 years? Watch this Youtube video which shows a head-on collision between a 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air and a 2009 Chevrolet Malibu and see what difference 50 years has made!

Tips, Tricks & Techniques

Change The Appearance Of Sticky Notes In Windows 7

Sticky Notes, one of the new features in Windows 7, allows you to create sticky notes on your desktop for tracking ideas, reminders, etc. When they are created they resemble the standard yellow paper sticky notes that you buy in the store. However, you can easily change the color of a sticky note using the following steps:

- Click the *Start* menu and click *Sticky Notes*. A yellow sticky note will be created on your desktop.
- *Right click* the sticky note and select one of the following colors: **blue, green, pink, purple, white or yellow**.

The sticky note will now appear in the color you selected. This is handy to make a particular sticky note stand out from the others on your desktop.

Entering Dates In Outlook

When creating a new task in Outlook or a new entry in your Outlook calendar, you don't have to type in the entire start and end dates. If a date is in the current month, just type in the day and press Enter. Outlook will create the rest of the date for you in that month.

If the date isn't in the current month, you can just enter the month and day and Outlook will complete the date based on the following rules:

- If the month and day have not already occurred in the current year, Outlook assumes the current year.
- If the month and day have already passed, Outlook uses the next calendar year.

Turn Off the Delete File Confirmation Dialog Box

Every time you delete a file, Windows will prompt you for confirmation. If you do not want to receive this confirmation, you can change the settings of the Recycle Bin to eliminate this confirmation. To turn off the confirmation dialog box when deleting items, follow these steps:

- *Right-click* the **Recycle Bin** and select *Properties*.
- Click the *General* tab and clear the *Display delete confirmation dialog*.
- Click OK.

Now you will not be asked to confirm your action when you delete a file.

Use Caution When Upgrading to Windows 7

By Ira Wilsker, APCUG Director; APCUG Representative,
Golden Triangle PC Club; Columnist, The Examiner, Beaumont, Texas; Radio Show Host (Mondays, 6-7pm Central Time, klvi.com)
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WEBSITES:

<http://social.answers.microsoft.com/Forums/en-US/category/windows7>
<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-7/get/upgrade-advisor.aspx>
<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/compatibility/windows-7/en-us/default.aspx>

A few weeks ago I wrote a column about how to determine if your computer could be satisfactorily upgraded to Windows 7. I mentioned Microsoft's Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor, and Windows 7 Compatibility Center, which should be run prior to any installation in order to determine hardware and software compatibility with Windows 7. I ran both of those utilities on my three month old Vista Home Premium 64 machine, and found that my hardware was compatible with Windows 7, and that some of my software needed to be updated, which I did. Rerunning both Microsoft utilities after making the recommended changes indicated that my computer hardware and software should run on Windows 7, and that no listed incompatibilities remained. With peace of mind that I should have no problems upgrading to Windows 7, I eagerly awaited the free upgrade discs that I had ordered under Microsoft's and my manufacturer's "Free Upgrade to Windows 7" offer for eligible computers.

A few days after Microsoft's much promoted rollout of Windows 7, my upgrade discs arrived in the mail. The envelope actually contained two DVDs, one the manufacturer's "Upgrade Advisor", the other Microsoft's "Windows 7 Home Premium Upgrade" complete with hologram and product key. Also in the envelope was a poster sized, multi-lingual, instruction sheet with detailed upgrade instructions. Knowing from past experience on my older computers (XP to Vista), it may take several hours to complete the upgrade I waited until the weekend when I might have the time to dedicate to the upgrade.

One of my most frequently used computing expressions is "Backup! Backup!, and Backup!". Prior to installing Windows 7, I made a set of Vista recovery DVDs, and a redundant backup of all of my critical data files. I can not understate the critical importance of this backup process, and that it is absolutely imperative to have a good current backup. If you have the software and media to make an image backup, which is a digital image of your entire hard drive that can be restored in the event of catastrophic failure, do it. This could be very useful, as it can restore the operating system, data, and all programs if necessary. The fact that I do have good backups may be my savior. I was heartened by the fact that the computer magazines and blogs were heavy with stories of successful upgrades and the high level of preliminary satisfaction that users had with their new Windows 7 upgrades.

After ensuring that I had good backups, I then proceeded to follow the upgrade instructions provided with my discs, and first ran the manufacturer's "Upgrade Advisor". It also ran the Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor (no problems found), and installed some updated Windows 7 drivers for the factory hardware. When completed, I was instructed to insert the Windows 7 Upgrade DVD.

The Windows 7 Upgrade DVD ran for a while and detected some factory installed software, mostly games and a few obsolete Microsoft utilities, that I was instructed to uninstall. The computer then rebooted back to my Vista Home Premium 64, and the list of items to uninstall appeared in a file on my desktop. I used my Revo Uninstaller, and uninstalled those items being sure to do a complete uninstall including any fragments and leftover registry entries.

I then restarted the computer and re-ran the Windows 7 Upgrade setup, as directed.

The computer ran for several hours, as I occasionally monitored its progress. There were no difficulties or anomalies so far, and as things were now running smoothly, I felt assured that I would shortly have the new Windows 7 Home Premium 64 installed on my computer. After running for nearly six hours, and completing an indicated 72% of the upgrade process, a window popped up which said that the install could not continue as my hard drive was full. That struck me as very odd, and a sense of disbelief came over me, as I knew that I had well over 500 gigs of available hard drive space prior to the upgrade! I was instructed by the upgrade software to restart my computer, and that my Vista would then be restored. Other than the annoyance of wasting six hours of my life on a failed upgrade, along with a modicum of disgust, I removed the Windows 7 DVD from the drive, and rebooted the computer. This is when thing went terribly wrong.

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During the reboot process, I was greeted with a black window with white print that offered two options; repair Windows 7, or restore my Vista. I selected the restore option, and the computer booted into Windows 7 (not Vista), and as it was loading a popup appeared that said, "The computer restarted unexpectedly or encountered an unexpected error", and instructed me to reboot. I rebooted, selected the restore function, and the same popup error appeared. I rebooted again, but this time selected the "Repair Windows 7" option, and the system loaded identically as before. I selected a variety of the Windows 7 repair options, ran them, rebooted, and the same error appeared. I put the Windows 7 Upgrade DVD in the drive, and ran the setup again, only to be greeted with the same error at the same place in the process. I tried over a dozen permutations of rebooting and selecting options, including a variety of repair options off of the Windows 7 repair menu, but always had the same error when rebooting. This became an infinite loop. Despite Microsoft's claims that Vista would be restored if the upgrade failed, the system would not restore my Vista, and the Windows 7 failed to install. Now I was left with a useless computer that would not load anything. I did finally boot off of a Linux CD, and saw that my files all appeared to be intact. With some difficulty, I was able to then boot off of my Spinrite CD, and did a thorough hard drive check; my hard drive was intact and undamaged.

Next, with growing frustration approaching anger, I went online with my trusty old XP computer (the same one that I am using to type this). I went to the Microsoft Windows 7 support forums, and found that I was far from alone. The Windows 7 forum "Install, Upgrade, Activate" had over 6,000 threads, and almost 25,000 messages. One forum, "Windows 7 - Upgrade Unsuccessful -Reboot Loop" had a post from Michael, a Microsoft support engineer. It says, "Hello,

For those who have attempted to perform an upgrade to Windows 7 and encounter a reboot loop, Microsoft is aware of this issue and is currently being investigated." It then provided a link to another forum, but at least I had some assurance that Microsoft was aware of the problem with the "Microsoft is aware of this issue" statement. That forum then linked to another forum, with the same title "Windows 7 - Upgrade Unsuccessful -Reboot Loop". That forum, which Microsoft "locked" (closed to new posts) has dozens of posts similar to mine, where users are complaining about the infinite loop reboot problem, and the failure to restore Vista. It appears that there may be two distinct and different issues involving the loop problem. Several dozen of the posts all indicated that their computer locked up at 62% of the install process, and many of them had purchased the student upgrade to Windows 7, and downloaded the upgrade. For these unhappy users, Microsoft has offered an updated download file for them to use to reinstall Windows 7. Many other users, me included, had an authentic Microsoft Upgrade DVD which we used for the install, and all of us encountered the same problem. Microsoft posted a few suggestions on possible fixes, but from the user responses, these have not been successful. It was immaterial if the user was updating a desktop computer like mine, or a laptop, the failure was the same. Some of the users were so frustrated that they chose to do a full install, rather than an upgrade, which did indeed work, but it wiped out all of their programs and data files which would have been preserved had the upgrade install worked as promised. It is of little solace to me and thousands of other users with crippled computers that the vast majority of those performing upgrades completed them successfully. I guess that we were just the unlucky few.

It is not just the Vista Home Premium users that have encountered this problem, but users of other editions as well. In the Microsoft forums "Vista x64 Ultimate to Windows 7 Ultimate upgrade failing" an IT professional who was upgrading several computers encountered a similar problem with the Ultimate upgrade.

Several of the computer magazines and independent support forums have had readers complain with the identical issues, and inquiries to Microsoft have resulted in a "we are aware of the problem and we are working to find a solution". Some of the independent support boards also have members trying to find a solution, but so far none have been found that can either restore our computers to the way they were prior to the upgrade (Vista), or allow the Windows 7 upgrade to complete.

The one saving grace is that I do have a Vista backup so I can be up and running again on my newer computer, but according to the Microsoft forums, many users did not create a backup prior to installing the Windows 7 Upgrade. Unless Microsoft comes up with a fix, these users will likely lose all of their programs and files, and unsatisfactory outcome. Once again, this demonstrates that it is absolutely imperative to have and maintain a contemporary backup of all critical data files, and preferably an image backup which can restore the computer to an earlier state complete with all programs and files.

Most users who have installed the upgrade editions of Windows 7 to compatible computers had great success, but for the few, maybe thousands, of us who had a catastrophic failure during the upgrade process, we are not happy campers. Can I recommend the Windows 7 Upgrade to users with compatible computers? Generally yes, as the benefits of Windows 7 appear to outweigh the foibles of Vista, but I will only make that recommendation with one proviso; be absolutely certain to have a good backup before attempting the upgrade. I am thankful that I have a good backup. If

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someone wants to do a clean install, meaning that they are installing Windows 7 to an empty or reformatted hard drive that is fine, as there have been very few problems with a clean install reported in the forums.

I will continue to monitor the Microsoft support forums hoping for a satisfactory resolution of this problem. In the meantime, remember, "Backup! Backup!, Backup!"

Cryptography - a big word that helps keep the internet secure.

By Phil Sorrentino, President, Sarasota PCUG, Florida

July 2009 Monitor

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You may have asked yourself some of the following questions. How secure is the internet? What has been done to make the Internet secure? How safe is my private information during an internet transaction? If so, read on; if you are a very trusting individual and figure that "they" will keep the internet secure, jump to the next article. During this time when the Internet provides essential communication between tens of millions of people and is being increasingly used as a tool for commerce, security has become a very important issue. And when it comes to computers, "security" is of concern on many different levels. There is physical security that keeps your computer hardware from being stolen. There is software security that keeps people out of our private files. There is "malware" security, that keeps your computer software from being infected with viruses, spyware, worms and the like. And finally there is "network" security that keeps private data protected as it goes from one computer (or client) on the internet to another computer (or server) on the internet. This article deals with network security, which is ensured by applying cryptography to messages that are transmitted on the Internet.

Remember the "s" in "https://" and the little lock icon on the browser when you went to a "secure" website? Well, cryptography is behind all that security. Cryptography is used to secure Internet and even telephone communications. Cryptography is nearly as old as written language itself. It was invented to address the age-old question: How can I communicate with my friend, so that no one else will know what was communicated? Cryptography becomes necessary whenever one is attempting to communicate private information over an "un-trusted" medium, such as the Internet. Typically, you can be sure that the message you send over the internet will get to its destination, but you cannot guarantee that intermediaries (computers along the way) will not be able to see and read your message, unless it is protected. With a collection of not-so-expensive equipment and a good deal of knowledge, a message on the internet can be intercepted (sniffed), and if it is "plain text", it can be read. For mundane e-mail messages, this is not much of a concern, but for messages that contain private information, such as passwords or bank account or social security numbers, this could be an invitation for Identity Theft.

Cryptography to the rescue. Cryptography (from the Greek for "hidden writing") is the ancient science of encoding messages so that only the sender and receiver can understand them. Cryptography can be defined as the conversion of data (plain-text) into a scrambled code (cipher-text) that can be sent across a network, and deciphered by the rightful receiver at the other end. There are two main techniques used to encrypt data, Symmetric and Asymmetric. Symmetric encryption uses the same key for encryption as it does for decryption. Symmetric encryption is also called Secret-key encryption because the key is kept a secret between the two cooperating parties. Asymmetric uses separate keys for encryption and decryption. Asymmetric encryption is also called Public-key encryption because one of the keys is allowed to circulate in the public (and one is kept private). Cryptography is now available to everyone thanks to the development of modern computers, which can perform more mathematical operations in a second than a human being could do in a lifetime. An ordinary PC, with the proper software, can produce codes of such complexity that the most powerful supercomputer using the best available software could not break them in thousands of years. Before modern times and the personal computer, cryptography was concerned solely with message confidentiality. Message confidentiality is conversion (encryption), of messages from a "plain-text" form into an incomprehensible one (cipher-text) for transmission and then back again to the original form, at the other end (decryption). This keeps the message unreadable by interceptors or eavesdroppers who do not have knowledge of the "key" needed for decryption of that message. (With the advent of the personal computer and the proliferation of digital information, the field of digital message protection has expanded beyond only confidentiality concerns to include techniques for message integrity checking, identity authentication, digital signatures, and password protection all of which we will leave for future discussions.)

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As stated above, Secret key cryptography refers to encryption methods in which both the sender and receiver share the same key. Secret key cryptography is ideally suited to encrypting long messages, providing privacy and confidentiality for messages typically used in computer to computer transactions. Public Key Cryptography refers to methods in which two keys are owned by each participant, one for encryption (public key) and one for decryption (private key). Public Key cryptography is suited to short messages and is typically used to exchange "secret keys" between two computers. Public Key cryptography could, theoretically, also be used to encrypt messages but this is rarely done because Secret-key cryptography is about 1000 times faster than Public-key cryptography.

So, just how do these schemes work in our typical computer to computer (network) communications? Secret-key and Public-key cryptography are used to setup and maintain a secure data path from a client (your computer browser) to a server (information or data storage system). Because Secret-key cryptography is best used for long messages, a secret key will be used to encode all messages during the transaction. But how do we get a secret key to be used by both computers for the transaction. In comes Public-Key cryptography. Public-key cryptography, which is best suited for short messages, is used to send the secret key (which is short) from one computer to the other, so that both will have the secret key for encoding the messages that follow. The server has a public key for the client (your computer) and it encodes a "secret key" with that public key. It then sends the encoded message to the client and the client can then decode the message with its private key. The private key is used to decode the "secret key message" so that the client knows what to use as the secret key for subsequent message encoding (i.e., the decoded secret key). This all sounds very complicated, and it is, but all of this is controlled by the "secure software protocols" and you, the user, don't have to get involved at all. (I've actually simplified the operation a bit, but the essence of how cryptography is used is still pretty accurate.) So, with the use of Public-Key, and Secret-Key cryptography, you can rest assured that the messages you are sending over the Internet will not be of any value to anyone attempting to intercept such information. What more could you ask for - through the use of cryptography, the un-trusted Internet can now be used to send private messages, therefore providing secure communications, over the Internet, for everyone.

Moving From XP to Windows 7

By Vinny La Bash, Contributing Columnist, Sarasota PCUG, Florida
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Installing Windows 7 from XP is more complex than a straightforward upgrade from Vista. You need to perform a custom install, and you can do this with an Upgrade package of Windows 7. A normal upgrade won't work, but Microsoft describes the installation process as the option to "either completely replace your current operating system or install Windows on a specific drive or partition". Microsoft also allows a multi-boot system to be installed. In other words, you have the option of running both your current version of XP and Windows 7 if you want. Switching back and forth may not be the best choice as the interfaces are very different.

Completely replacing XP will not eliminate it from your system. The setup program creates a folder on your primary hard disk which it names Windows.old . The process then places all the major XP folders such as Windows, Documents and Settings, and Program file folders in the Windows.old folder. Nothing happens to your data files. You can still access them, but your applications will have to be reinstalled.

No matter which option you settle on, back up everything on your system first, especially your data files. Back up your data files at least twice and keep a copy in a separate physical location. Backing up more than one copy may seem like paranoia, but if anything goes wrong you'll be glad you did.

There are lots of ways to back up programs and data. If you use a third party program go to the manufacturer's web site and make sure the program will be modified to work with Windows 7. If you can't verify compatibility with Windows 7 or you don't use a third party backup utility, you will probably turn to XP's backup utility which Microsoft calls the Windows NT Backup-Restore Utility. Microsoft developed and released it specifically for restoring backups created in XP to

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restore in Windows Vista. It's pretty safe to believe that Microsoft will adapt it to work in Windows 7. If you can't verify that your third party backup utility will work in Windows 7 or you don't trust Microsoft that it will modify its special XP utility, make copies of all your important data files to CD or DVD.

Read the article called Step-by-Step: Windows 7 Upgrade and Migration on the Microsoft TechNet site. It provides some great information about a utility called Windows 7 Easy Transfer. This program lets you transfer all your data and settings from XP to Windows 7. The Windows 7 installation disks contain a copy of the program and during installation a copy will be installed on your computer. You can then use the program to copy all your data files and settings to Windows 7.

Microsoft has recognized the popularity of low cost net-books, and Windows 7 was designed to operate on systems that many people consider underpowered. You won't need terabyte sized hard disks or 6 gigabytes of RAM to run Windows 7. If your XP system was manufactured in the last four years there is a high probability that Windows 7 will run just fine. To be safe, run Microsoft's Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor on your old system before rushing out and buying Windows 7.

The Advisor does a complete check of your internal hardware, installed programs, and any externally connected devices. If there are any compatibility issues the Advisor will report it, and even make suggestions on how best to eliminate incompatibilities, and select upgrade options. Go to the Microsoft Download Center to download and install a copy of this utility to your system. It will make you much better prepared for the upgrade to Windows 7.

You won't be the only one changing to Windows 7. Don't be shy about asking questions, and please share any good information you get with other members of the PC community. A good place to start is the Getting Ready for Windows 7 section of the Microsoft Answers web site. Don't forget your local PC User Group. There is no better source for good, accurate information. Even Microsoft will acknowledge that.

The News this Month

By Greg Skalka, President, Under the Computer Hood User Group, California
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It is prime holiday shopping time, and the deals are out there, tempting us to stimulate the economy. Target advertised a \$200 Acer Netbook even before Black Friday. There will probably be lots of good deals all the way through New Year's Day, as the retailers are hurting and are looking for ways to get customers into their stores. This holiday season will probably see additional increases in online shopping, as shoppers try to save money, gas and time.

One way I've used to save money on purchases is to take advantage of manufacturer and store rebates. Over the years I've submitted hundreds of rebate forms and received thousands of dollars back. I'm currently waiting on eight rebates, for a savings of \$124. Normally I would expect a check in the mail for each, but six of them are for Visa prepaid cards.

The prepaid plastic card for rebate payment is the latest rebate trend. They force the consumer to purchase something to redeem them, rather than just deposit them into a savings account, so they provide additional economic stimulation. They also reduce costs for the issuing manufacturer or retailer. One article I read listed the manufacturer's cost for a rebate check as \$1.85, while a prepaid rebate card cost about 6 cents.

Besides having to buy something else, there are a few additional consumer pitfalls with prepaid rebate cards. It is best to make a purchase that is greater than the card's value, as any amount remaining is not refunded, but stays on the card, and it is often impossible to check a card's balance. These cards do expire (as do rebate checks), so they should be used promptly. Some rebates provide a store-branded card that can be used only at that retailer.

Many people dislike the hassle of filing for rebates. It is estimated that up to 60% of eligible consumers never bother to file. I figure that I'm getting a savings on my products at the expense of those that are not willing or able to file and track their rebate submissions. The prepaid rebate card adds a little more inconvenience, but if it allows more rebates to be offered, I'll keep buying and applying.

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McAfee's 12 Scams of Christmas

Anti-virus software maker McAfee recently released its list of 12 popular online attacks for this holiday season as a warning to consumers:

1. Charity phishing scams - be careful who you give to
2. Fake invoices from delivery services to steal your money
3. Social networking scams - fake friend requests lead to malware
4. The dangers of holiday e-cards - clicking can lead to malware
5. Discount luxury gift sites that lead to malware
6. Shopping from open Wi-Fi networks can lead to identity theft
7. Risky holiday searches - fraudulent holiday web sites provide malware instead of Christmas carol lyrics
8. Fake job-related sites prey on unemployed
9. Too-good-to-be-true auction-site deals that never arrive
10. Password stealing scams - malware that contains keyloggers
11. E-mail banking scams
12. Your files for ransom - ransomware scams

I've heard of many of these scams, but some were new to me, or were things I didn't really consider. It is good to be charitable, especially during the holiday season, but it is good to be reminded that there are scammers out there ready to take advantage of your generous nature. Just as with banking scams, don't respond to e-mail donation solicitations directly.

It is unfortunate, but you really need to be suspicious about every e-mail you receive and every web site you go to. I've read about holiday e-cards that carry malware, so I typically don't send or open them. I didn't really consider before that cybercrooks might set up holiday sites, hoping to entice me to download wallpaper or screensavers laden with malware after finding their site in a search for holiday song lyrics. It also never occurred to me that crooks might succeed in taking over my PC, encrypt my computer's files, and then ask for payment of ransom to unencrypt them. I think I take enough precautions to make this unlikely.

I've wondered, though, about using public or open Wi-Fi connections for secure activities. All the advice I've seen, including McAfee's recommendations, say that online shopping and banking should not be done at a public Wi-Fi hotspot, but only through a secure Internet connection at your home or work. That makes sense, but where does that leave public Wi-Fi? Is it only useful for benign web surfing? How do you safely access you online bank account when traveling, and don't have a secure Internet connection?

I read one intriguing posting on CNET that accessing an online banking site from a public Wi-Fi connection is safe, as the bank employs SSL (secure socket layer) encryption of the data between your PC and their site. This also seems to make some sense. I know that VPN (virtual private network) software like StrongVPN (www.strongvpn.com) and others claim to secure Wi-Fi links. Services like GoToMyPC (www.gotomypc.com) also claim to allow remote connection to your home computer in a secure way. I'd like to find out more about SSL and VPN connections, so that it may be possible to use free Wi-Fi to bank and shop.

New Communications

I installed Skype (www.skype.com) on my laptop a few months ago so that I could use it to allow Gene Barlow to give our group the webinar presentation on Acronis True Image. I think Skype is great for audio and video communication over the Internet, though I've only found a few occasions to use it. I've done some test videoconferences with our editor, Art, and my wife has used it with our netbook computer to call me when she was away on business. The main downside to Skype is that it must be run on both ends for a free call. You can use it to make a call to any phone from your PC, but that incurs a charge. Unless the person on the other end of the connection is willing and able to use Skype, it does not help you much.

I've been making all of my recent long distance calls over MagicJack, and have had no problems with it. I look forward to taking it on a trip and being able to make calls for free over free Internet service in a hotel or hotspot. I even bought a compact corded phone on eBay to use with MagicJack. Its limitation is the U.S. call restriction; it may be able to call



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International, but I'm sure there would be additional fees involved. The company does advertise it as the perfect communication tool to take on a foreign trip to call back to the U.S. for free. I'm hoping for a chance to try that out one day.

Another great communication tool that I've started using is drop.io (www.drop.io), which I learned about from our editor, Art. It provides a free "drop box" for transferring up to 100 MB of photos or any other files to anyone. You create a drop, upload the files and provide the drop name and password to the recipient, who then downloads the files from the drop.io site. I recently had to provide 300 MB of photos to someone, so rather than mail them a CD, I set up three drop.io drops and sent the access info through e-mail.

I've read about a new online service called Snailmailr (www.snailmailr.com) that may be of use to me one day. For \$0.99, it will print and mail up to two pages to anywhere in the world. That is not bad, considering the cost of postage and the hassle of getting it into the postal system. Since the letters are mailed from the U.S., it would be a great way to inexpensively and quickly send letters here from abroad.

Hints for the Wannabe Blogger

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Do I Need Or Want to Have a Blog? Now, for many, the first question is "what on earth is a blog?" and, "why would I want one?" The origin of the actual word 'blog' comes from the definition of what it really is – a **web log** – which then became shortened to 'blog'.

People are using blogs for many varied purposes. Some use them like a personal diary, as though the world is truly fascinated by the minutiae of their daily lives (though in the case of celebs, that may be the case). Others, for sharing their knowledge of a particular subject which doesn't necessarily lend itself to publishing a book; and still reporting on the constantly changing happenings in a specific area of interest. In many instances now, professional reporters, whether radio, TV or in print, are writing blogs as well as their regular reporting functions. Others, for reporting on the constantly changing happenings in a specific area of interest.

There are two advantages of using blogs over publishing in the more traditional ways – first, they can be interactive, allowing the readers to make comments, add to the information or contradict the writer; and, second, as mentioned, the ability to update immediately with new or additional information.

My purpose in starting a blog at the end of June was prompted by an article in the Family Chronicle which pointed out how, by publishing a family history book, relations that you'd never known or connected with would suddenly contact you.

This struck a chord with me as I was in the midst of planning a family history book and wanted to connect with others researching this same family. Obviously, publishing a book wasn't the answer for my particular situation.

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After some thought on this, I decided to investigate what was involved in creating a blog, thinking this might accomplish my purpose. Of course, one can use any of the social media sites such as MySpace, Facebook, etc. as a type of blog. However, I was looking for specific 'blog' sites. Well, typing 'free blog sites' into Google gave me far more results than I could have dreamed of! Fortunately, there were two with which I was somewhat familiar so I opted to check them out first.

I wanted simple and easy to use.....nothing fancy, just the ability to type whatever I wanted to post and have it work. Obviously I was asking a lot for anything connected with technology right? Actually, wrong. I was able to set up the blog, type out my first posting and have it online within an hour!

You want a site that gives clear, easy to understand directions and allows you to have some choices on the appearance or theme of your blog. Also, if you want some interaction with your readers, make it easy for them to add their comments. The site I chose definitely qualified under these points; much more so than the second site I checked out. I also checked out a few that I wasn't as familiar with and found that my first choice was still the best for my purpose. The two choices I initially checked out were Google's Blogspot and Wordpress. They can be found at www.blogspot.com and www.wordpress.com; however, be sure to check out some of the others as well.

Should you decide to start a blog, there is one caveat I'd both read about as well as heard about from others – don't start posting, and collecting followers of the site, only to lose interest, and just stop posting, or become very erratic in your postings. When first starting my blog, I hoped to post about three times a week, with no less than once a week. In the nine weeks since I started, I've made 18 posts so have averaged two per week, even though I had a couple of weeks when I didn't make any posts due to the death of my mother.

Now, was posting my blog successful in my original purpose? So far, yes. I've heard from a couple of researchers with whom I'd lost contact a number of years ago, plus another couple of whom I'd never heard, so I certainly accomplished that part of my goal. Another bonus is the information I'm gaining from those connections that I might not have otherwise found. Should you wish to take a look at my blog, here's the address: www.mcilmoylfamna.blogspot.com . If you decide that having a blog is something you'd like to do, I wish you well, and have fun with it! For tips on 'how to blog' just type 'blog tutorial' into a search engine and you'll find lots of choices.

