

# BITS AND BYTES

The Newsletter of the Midland Computer Club

February 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: February 25th**

**THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: How to connect  
to a computer remotely via the internet,  
presented by Joe Lykowski**

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## The President's Corner

I'm sure that most of us were probably not surprised by the newspaper article in Friday's *Midland Daily News* telling of Charter Communication's filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Although I haven't had many problems, I do know of people who have had quite a few problems with Charter service and support.



To support those people who have had problems, it was interesting to read the February issue of *Consumer Reports* and their survey of subscribers on their satisfaction with the various bundled providers who provide Internet, phone, and TV services. If you haven't read their report, Charter came in last in the survey and were ranked worse than average in billing, support, and added fees. What did surprise me was that although AT&T didn't rank very high with their DSL package, their new fiber U-verse system (which is now available in certain parts of Midland) was ranked second, only behind Verizon FIOS. Although the U-verse service is too new to have reader satisfaction in the area of billing, support, and added fees, current users appear to be quite happy with their service. I know of one member in the club who has switched to U-verse and appears to be quite pleased at this time.

Out of curiosity — and hoping that competition will drive down some of the costs — I did check out AT&T U-verse. But I'm sorry to say U-verse is not significantly less than what I currently pay to Charter. So at this time, I haven't changed my provider, but I continue to review my options on a regular basis. I hope you do too.

— Howard Lewis

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

## What you missed!

The **January** meeting had Howard Lewis giving a presentation on Social Engineering and Online Banking. The thrust of the meeting was to explain some of the various methods used by the unscrupulous to try to extract our personal information from us. Howard discussed various ways that people use to convince us to voluntarily give up the necessary information to allow them to access various accounts that we access online. The key point was that **we need to remain vigilant at all times!** The second part of the presentation dealt with how we do some our online banking and the various security features that we need to observe to protect the information that others are trying to steal.

## Upcoming Activities

In **February**, Joe Lykowski will demonstrate how to connect to your home computer remotely when you are visiting

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other people. This can not only be handy for connecting to your own home machine, but also to provide assistance to someone else located someplace else in the world from the comfort of your own home.

As we start to look towards Windows 7, Howard Lewis will be up again in **March** with a presentation on his experiences with the first Beta (unless Beta 2 is out by then) of Windows 7.

#### Useful, useless and strange (in no particular order) Web Sites:

<http://earth911.com/>

If you want to live "greener," visit this website. You can find the location of various disposal sites for all sorts of hazardous materials, how to do composting, and various other "green" topics.

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

I suspect that most of us remember the jukeboxes which seemed to be everywhere so many years ago. Now turn your PC into a jukebox and listen to the top tunes from years gone by.

<http://tinyurl.com/569egm>

Here's a cute YouTube video with a floppy disk drive playing the theme to Star Wars

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

Would you like an approximation of the number of people in the U.S. have your name? Enter your first and last name here and find o<http://tinyurl.com/3apc6c>

If you're too lazy to get up to go to the refrigerator to get a beer, get a beer launching refrigerator. It'll deliver it to your chair!

### Board Meeting

The next board meeting will be 7 p.m., March 10, 2009, at 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

## Tips, Tricks & Techniques

### Add System Icons to the Vista Desktop

When you first install Vista, the only desktop icon that will appear is the **Recycle Bin**. To make your desktop look more like the Windows XP desktop, you may want to restore some of the standard system icons. These icons are **Computer**, **user files** (based on your username), **Network**, and **Control Panel**. (Note that the “My” has been dropped from My Computer and My Network and the user files have replaced My Documents.)

To add these icons to your desktop:

1. Right click a blank area of your desktop and select Personalize.
2. From the list of tasks on the top-left side of the window, click Change desktop icons.
3. Check each icon you want displayed on the desktop and click OK
4. Close the Personalization window.

Now you will have the additional icons on your desktop for handy reference.

### Search All Folders in an Outlook Mailbox

When looking through your e-mail looking for something specific, you can set Microsoft Outlook to search across all your folders at once. To accomplish this:

1. Open **Outlook** and click Tools
2. Select *Options*
3. Next on the Preferences tab, click on Search Options
4. In the **Search Options** dialog box, at the bottom in the **Instant Search Pane** section, click *All folders*.
5. Click OK to close the **Search Options** window and click OK again to close the **Options** window.

Now you can search all of your e-mail folders instead of just the selected one.

### Add A Line Break To A Cell In Microsoft Excel

When you are typing long text into a Microsoft Excel cell, you may be surprised that you don't get a new line within the field when you press Enter. Instead your cursor jumps to the next cell below the one in which you were working. To add a line break within a cell, simply press Alt + Enter, instead of just Enter. This will force a line break within a cell.

## How To Send An Email Message To Any Cell Phone

Written by Ken Peters, Product Review / Special Interests, Hilton Head Island Computer Club, SC  
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Impress your kids, grandkids and friends with your ability to text. Send a text message to their cell phone by email from your computer.

Most cell phones have the ability to send and receive short text messages. This is called short message service (SMS) or text paging. This service can take emails sent over the internet and deliver them to a cell phone as a text message. Each carrier has its own email address extension i.e. @tmomail.net for T Mobile carrier.

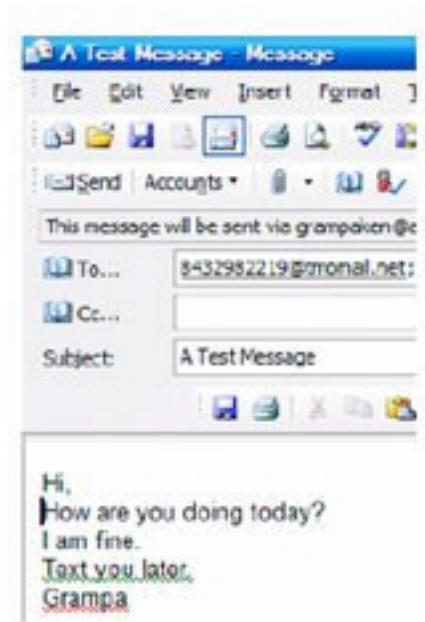
The two things you need to know to send a message are the person's cell phone number and their carrier's email extension. So to send to a T Mobile phone, enter the phone number and add the extension -

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[8433216549@tmomail.net](mailto:8433216549@tmomail.net)

The message will look similar to this.



The email message



Appears on cell phone

Some of the common cell phone emails are:

**Alltel AT&T** (formerly Cingular)  
10-digit phone number@message.alltel.com  
10-digit phone number@txt.att.net

Example:  
2125551212@message.alltel.com  
Example: [2125551212@txt.att.net](mailto:2125551212@txt.att.net)

**Boost Mobile Nextel** (now part of Sprint Nextel)  
10-digit phone number@myboostmobile.com  
10-digit telephone number@messag  
Example:

2125551212@myboostmobile.com  
ing.nextel.com  
Example: 7035551234@messaging.  
nextel.com

#### **T-Mobile Verizon**

10-digit phone number@tmomail.net  
10-digit phone number@vtext.com  
Example: 4251234567@tmomail.net  
Example: 5552223333@vtext.com

#### **Virgin Mobile USA US Cellular**

10-digit phone number@vmobl.com  
10digitphonenumber@email.uscc.net  
Example: 2622341256r@vmobl.com  
Example: 2125551212@ email.uscc.net

#### **Sprint PCS** (now Sprint Nextel)

10-digit phone number@messaging.sprintpcs.com  
Example: 2125551234@messaging.sprintpcs.com

**If you can't find the email address for the carrier, check the carrier's website (Links above) or call their customer service.**

The one receiving the message may be charged 10 to 15 cents per message unless they have a plan that includes text messaging. Your kids and grandkids most probably do have a text plan. There is a 160 character limit per message including the email address and the subject line. Some carriers will split the message into two messages if it is longer.

The person receiving the email text message can reply to you from their phone and sometime later you'll receive their reply in your email inbox. If you don't like texting from a cell phone or hate trying to type a message with those small phone keys, give this a try. It's fun.

## Improving Vista Performance

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Microsoft has added security features in Vista which didn't exist in XP. There are new functions and while the graphics are really neat, they can give your system a big performance hit if you don't have enough memory. Thanks to up-to-the-minute technology, and great manufacturing improvements, RAM is cheap. There is no good excuse for not loading up with as much memory as possible.

Vista is the most RAM hungry modern operating system in existence. One gig is about the lowest amount of memory you can have without feeling that you're slogging through a lake of molasses. Two gigs should give you acceptable response time, and four gigs will put wings on your PC with some afterburner boost thrown in. Don't be a cheapskate. It's false economy to starve your system of RAM.

If you are already loaded with Ram, you can use Vista's built-in ReadyBoost feature in conjunction with a flash memory card or USB key to give an added kick to system memory. You need a high performance flash card or USB drive. Insert the device and Vista will politely ask you if you wish to use the device to speed up system performance. Answer yes, and then tell Vista exactly how much of the device to devote to speeding up the system. ReadyBoost will be active as long as the device is plugged into the system.

Once you have enough memory, examine your video card. If you want to experience the full graphic capabilities that Vista offers, buy a video card that's Vista Premium Certified.

To see how your video card checks out, open up Control Panel, switch to Classic View, and then activate the Performance Information and Tools utility. Look at your base score. This number represents the overall graphic capability of your system. Notice that your base score is not some combination of all the sub-scores. Your base score is the lowest performing member of all your subscores. That doesn't seem fair, but that's reality. You can try updating your score, but it probably won't change.

If you get between 1 and 3, general operations which include word processing and spreadsheet tasks will work fine. Email and web browsing should be OK, but web sites with large amounts of embedded graphics will take a long time to load. Video applications will be problematical.

A base score between 3 and 4 can run Aero and the majority of the new Vista features, but Vista's more advanced capabilities may bog down your system. For example, your monitor will be satisfactory even at its highest resolution, but multiple monitors may slow down your system severely. You will be able to watch most TV shows, but a high definition broadcast could be a slow motion disaster.

A base score higher than 4 should handle anything that Vista throws at it, including HDTV and 3D gaming. If what you want or need from Vista requires a higher base score than your system can provide, you need to replace one or more of your components. Use the subscores to determine what stays or goes. A low score may require you to either turn off the Aero interface or upgrade your video card.

Go back to the Control Panel. From the Classic View activate the System icon and then select Advanced system settings. When the System Properties dialog box comes up, click the Settings button in the Performance section. You're about to make some tough choices.

If you can't make decisions, you can Let Windows choose the best settings for my computer and be done with it. Adjust for best performance disables all the great visual effects that make Vista a terrific graphical interface. Adjust for best appearance makes your system look spiffy, but you'll take a hit on speed.

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Choosing Custom allows you to make some reasonable compromises while keeping full control of your PC. Some features like sliding menus are pure eye candy and do nothing useful. Turning them off gives performance improvement with no loss of function.

There are options in the Advanced tab where you can control how the CPU processes work. What's more important to you, adjusting for visible performance or making sure that the housekeeping services Vista performs are performed efficiently? Make your choice and monitor your system. You can always change it back later.

Unless you know what you are doing, leave the Virtual memory section alone. Virtual memory is a portion of a disk drive that's configured to masquerade as memory. Because it's part of a disk and not physical memory, it can't work as fast as real memory. When the system runs out of physical RAM it can use a disk drive to keep going instead of stopping dead in its tracks.

You can change the location of the file to a different disk, resize it, or do both. Each choice has consequences of its own. Making the wrong choice won't destroy your system, but it could noticeably slow down performance. The default choice is to let Vista manage the file. That's the best choice for most people.

There are many other things that you can do to get the best possible performance from Vista such as modifying the Index Options, but that's a subject for another article.

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### **Moving on to Vista - Part 13**

**Written by Neil Stahfest, Librarian, Tacoma Area PC User Group, WA**

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The chances are the first peripheral device you purchased for your computer was a printer. You may have even received a "free" printer when you purchased your computer. Vista makes it easier than ever to connect a new printer to your computer than ever before. The Plug-and-Play feature really works (unless, like me, you have an old laser printer that Windows Vista does not support. :- ( ).

So you connect your printer, follow the Printer Wizard's directions, it works and you're happy. But wait. Have you examined your printer to discover all of its functions? Did you know that many modern printers, even the inexpensive models, can print on both sides of the paper, print sideways on the paper (called landscape mode), print in gray scale as well as in color and allows you to control print quality (to save ink when you don't need high quality print). Here's how to find out what you can do and manage it.

Create or open a document using your favorite word processing program or WordPad. At the top of your screen, click on "File" and then scroll down to "Printer Settings" and click again. When the "Printer Setup" window opens, click on the "Properties" button. At this point what you see depends largely on your individual printer.

In the case of my HP printer, I see a window with tab labeled "Paper/Quality", "Finishing", "Effects",

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“Basics”, “Color” and “Services”. Selecting the appropriate tab allows me to select print quality (Normal, Draft, Enhanced, etc.), Portrait or Landscape mode, page order, color, single or two sided paper printing and many other options. In the case of my HP printer, when I select two sided paper printer, the printer prints on one side of the paper and then an on-screen message shows me how to reinsert the printed sheet in the paper tray to print of the other side. These print options are actually determined by the printer, not Windows. Windows just provides the means to control the printers features.

Windows frequently provides more than one way to do the same thing. Desktop icons provide a shortcut to run programs listed in the Start Menu. You can easily create new desktop icons by opening the Programs section of the Start Menu, selecting a program, right clicking on it and drag it to a blank area on your desktop. When you release the right mouse button a short menu appears with the option to “Create Shortcuts Here”. Select it, and left-click once to create the icon. You can rename this icon to anything you wish.

If you right-click on a desktop icon, one of the menu option is “Properties”. Select Properties and left-click once. Under the “Shortcut” tab notice the entry line labeled “Shortcut key”. It probably contains the entry “None”. By selecting a suitable key (letter or number), you can create a key combination shortcut to your program. It's a convenient way to access frequently used programs, spreadsheets and documents.

Before we leave this menu, notice the button labeled “Change Icon”. When you left-click on this button you'll see an array of icons that you can use to substitute for your default icon. Pick an icon, click on the “Okay” button and then click on “Okay” again. Your new icon will appear on the desktop.

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### **Sandbox Computing**

Written by Brian K. Lewis, Ph.D., a Member of the Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc., FL  
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I spend a lot of my time surfing the web looking for research material; computer tech sources, genealogy data, vocal music and other information. This means that I am downloading many web pages, clicking on many links and generally opening up my computer to all types of malware. I always have to be aware that there are many traps on web pages that are just waiting for the unwary surfer. It used to be that having an up-to-date virus checker, a working firewall and parasite scanners, you could adequately protect your computer. That changed to some degree when the "drive by" downloads appeared. Now with the constant appearance of "holes" in the Windows operating system (XP & Vista) and the various web browsers, it is less obvious that you can protect your computer from unwanted visitors. Microsoft recently (October 22, 2008) released an out-of-cycle patch (patch 958644) for Windows for what has

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been described as a very serious opening that could be exploited regardless of the browser you are using. There have also been recent articles on "clickjacking". In this situation "buttons" or links are floated behind the link you think you are clicking. The only option to prevent this is to disable JavaScript. That creates more problems as JavaScript is a very important part of the whole web experience and is used on almost every page. So when you do know that you can run a script and when you can't? Well, the "**Sandbox**" may be a way to surf safely and avoid the installation of malware on your computer without having to disable JavaScript.

My Sandbox experience is based on using the software application "Sandboxie" ([www.sandboxie.com](http://www.sandboxie.com)) with Windows XP and Firefox 3.0. As with everything related to computing, your results might be different. Sandboxie is a very small program, approximately 450 KB. So it is quick to download and doesn't require a lot of memory to run.

Next, let's take a look at what is meant when I talk about a computer sandbox. The sandbox is a complete "virtual computer" running in your computer's memory. This virtual computer is isolated from the real operating system files and creates any files it needs for use within the sandbox. When the sandbox closes, everything in it disappears unless you chose to keep it. It's like having a bank vault within a building where everything can be locked within the vault and nothing is removed without special permission. The neat thing is that nothing that happens within the sandbox can have any effect on your computer. This means that Trojans, rootkits and other malware have no chance to affect the operation of your computer outside of the sandbox. If a problem occurs when you are running in the sandbox, all you need to do is shut it down, you are returned to your normal computer operations and the malware is erased.

When Sandboxie is started it creates a sandboxed folder which contains a drive folder, user folder, and Registry "hives". The "hive" is Microsoft's term for collections of related Registry keys stored together. The parts of the Registry needed for sandboxed operations are stored in a hive which is then integrated into the Registry. There are also instances of Windows services stored within the sandboxed folder that can be accessed by applications running within the sandbox. These are referred to as "process objects" and are needed for normal operations. When the sandbox is running there may be instances of these objects running both sandboxed and non-sandboxed. Also, you can run an application within the sandbox at the same you are running it outside the sandbox. The complete operating system is not loaded into the sandbox. This reduces the memory required for the sandbox operations.

Applications running in the sandbox can not hijack non-sandboxed programs. Therefore they can not operate outside the sandbox. New files or other created objects have a path assigned by Sandboxie which directs them into the sandboxed folders. Sandboxie prevents any programs running inside the sandbox from loading drivers directly. It also prevents programs from asking a central system component, known as the Service Control Manager, to load drivers on their behalf. In this way, drivers, and more importantly, rootkits, cannot be installed by a sandboxed program. This is one of the features that prevents rootkits from being installed outside the sandbox.

In actual operation, using Sandboxie is very simple. To make it even simpler, there is a short tutorial available on the Sandboxie web site. This can be accessed from within the program the first time you run it or directly from the Sandboxie home page by clicking on the "FAQ & Help" link.

After installation it can be set to load whenever the computer is started. This puts an icon in the system tray. Clicking on this icon brings up the Sandboxie Control Center. This window lists all sandboxed applications and object. When I started it, the window indicated nothing was sandboxed. So, using the menu I selected run an application and then selected Firefox. This changed the list in the window to show Firefox as well as the two RegHive files. With Firefox up, I did my usual web surfing. Along the way I received a message from Sandboxie that a new version was available that I could

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download. At this point, I really couldn't tell that anything was different from my previous surfing experience with Firefox. So I went to the Sandboxie page and downloaded the new version. After finishing I closed the Sandboxie Control Center. Then I went looking for the download so I could install it. Well, it didn't exist anywhere on the hard drive! I had closed Sandboxie without marking the update to be saved! As a result the download was deleted, along with all the other sandboxed files when I closed the Control Center. So I opened the Control Center, restarted Firefox and downloaded the update. This time I selected it to be saved before I closed the Control Center. Then I was able to install the update.

I should also point out that now I have an icon on the desktop which automatically runs Firefox sandboxed. Sandboxie can be set up to isolate your browser automatically whenever you open it. To do so, add the name of your browser's executable file, such as firefox.exe or iexplore.exe, to the list of programs Sandboxie always opens in a sandbox. If you don't do this, Sandboxie will not set your browser to open automatically in the sandbox.

As you can tell from these comments, Sandboxie does not require a reboot to start the sandbox process. Sandboxie does sandbox access to files, but not to the complete hard drive. It does sandbox access to registry keys. It also sandboxes access to many other classes of system components, in order to trick the sandboxed program into believing that it isn't being tricked. So you can open and close Sandboxie repeatedly while you are using your computer without having to do any rebooting.

If this discussion has interested you and you would like to take Sandboxie for a test run, the free version can be downloaded from: [www.sandboxie.com](http://www.sandboxie.com). This application is free for personal use. However, there is a Pro version available for \$30.00. If you like the program and can afford it, buy the Pro version. This software is the work of one person, Ronen Tzur, and this payment is his means of support to continue working and improving this software. After some experience in running Sandboxie, I can highly recommend it as an excellent method of protecting your computer from malware. :

\*Dr. Lewis is a former university and medical school professor of physiology. He has been working with personal computers for over thirty years, developing software and assembling systems.

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### **Broadsides**

Written by Ron Broadhurst, Space Coast PC Users Group, FL  
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Dear friends,

These ideas are compiled from years of accumulations from various magazines, books, on-line sites, and my own personal experience. I claim neither originality nor ownership to any of its contents. My only intent is to share the various "tips", "tricks", & "hints" in hopes of helping & maybe enhancing your computing experiences. They are all intended for anyone who uses a PC. It is for beginners as well as advanced users. Enjoy and use as you will.



Ron Broadhurst

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## **HOW TO HAVE WINDOWS REMIND YOU ABOUT PENDING UPDATES**

Click **Remind Me Later** in the Automatic Updates dialog box before you download or install the update.

In the Reminder dialog box, you can specify the amount of time Windows should wait before reminding you.

If the reminder is for downloading, Windows reminds you only when you are connected to the Internet.

If the reminder is for installing, Windows reminds you according to the schedule that you specify.

## **AND HOW TO DOWNLOAD AVAILABLE UPDATES**

If you configured automatic updating to notify you before downloading any updates, an **icon** is displayed in the notification area each time new updates are found.

Double-click the icon in the notification area.

Do either of the following steps:

If you want Windows to download an update, make sure that the check box beside it is selected.

-or-

If you do not want Windows to download an update, click to clear the check box beside it. Your selected updates are downloaded in the background; this behavior allows you to continue working uninterrupted. Downloading does not interfere with or slow down other network activity, such as Internet browsing.

When downloading is finished, the icon is displayed in the notification area to notify you that updates are ready to be installed.

## **CUSTOMIZE THE START MENU**

The Start menu gets more real estate in XP than in previous versions, and it's more customizable. To make the Start menu display only the applications you want, rather than the default determined by Microsoft:

Right-click in an empty section of the Start menu's left column.

Select Properties > Start Menu > Customize. Here you'll find a list of your most frequently used programs. (XP keeps track of what you use and what you don't, then updates this list dynamically).

Don't want your boss to know that Pinball, Solitaire and Quake all make your list? Go to the General tab, click Clear List, and set the counter to zero.

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## **HOW TO PERFORM DISK ERROR CHECKING IN WINDOWS XP**

This describes how to check the integrity of the hard disk drive in Windows XP. After you install Windows XP, the Scandisk command is not available.

Double-click My Computer and then right-click the hard disk drive that you want to check. Click Properties and then click Tools. Under Error-checking click Check Now. Click Start.

## **ADD FAMILIAR ICONS BACK TO YOUR DESKTOP**

It's the case of the missing icons. Many of you may be wondering where all the icons from your desktop are in Windows XP? You can place at least My Computer, My Network Places and My Documents on the desktop.

Right-click on the desktop and then click Properties. Click the Desktop tab and then click on Customize Desktop.

Put a check mark in the box next to My Document, My Computer, My Network Places or Internet Explorer, to add those familiar icons to your desktop.

## **HOW TO FIND YOUR IP ADDRESS IN WINDOWS XP**

Start and click Run  
Type "cmd" (without quotes) and hit enter  
Once the box opens type "ipconfig /all" (without quotes) and hit enter.

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### **Juice Your Broadband Speed**

Written by Vinny La Bash, a member of the Sarasota Personal Computer Users Group, Inc., FL  
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People prefer broadband internet connections because of the obvious speed advantages over dial-up and satellite links. Then why is it that broadband never seems to be fast enough? Are you getting the speed promised by your ISP? Broadband can cost \$100 a month or more, but does the provider really provide the advertised speed? Is the connection reliable or does the modem need a reboot several times a day? Fortunately, there are ways to achieve high, reliable throughput without having to have an engineering degree. Here are some suggestions to get every bit per second possible from your modem without any technical hiccups or interruptions in service.

Start with your computer and TV equipment. A common source of line noise can be traced to improper grounding of anything that plugs into household electrical circuits. This can seriously degrade performance of cable equipment. Every electrical device, especially those in the same room as the cable modem, should be plugged into properly grounded outlets. The best connections are with polarized plugs oriented in the correct direction, and please don't use any three prong to two prong adapters. Get up-to-date gear. Electric outlet testers are cheap. Buy one and use it to test for excess voltage on your ca-

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ble wiring. Any problem could indicate a serious safety hazard. Engage a licensed electrician to fix it. Almost anything manufactured today in the consumer electronics world is light years ahead of its predecessors manufactured only two or three years ago. Cable modems are no exception, so if yours is more than three years old get a new one from your provider. Most providers will make a free exchange, but some will require an extension of your contract. You want to do this because the latest modems conform to the DOCSIS 2.0 standard. This offers higher upload and download capabilities and supports other advanced broadband applications, including online gaming and peer-to-peer computing.

Ask your ISP if they automatically update firmware for the modem. If they don't, have them supply the website address of your modem's manufacturer so you can download the most recent firmware. Check the website about twice a year for new updates.

Next, go to a test site such as PC Pitstop, and check your upload and download speeds to see if they match the terms of your service contract. If they don't, give your ISP a call and have them reset the modem's settings. While you're at it, have them check the signal-to-noise ratio. Too much noise can cause interference, and your modem will then have to resend information cutting down on your throughput.

It's possible that your cable wiring may contain too many splices or simply be too long. That can be fixed by a visit from your ISP technician. Have the technician check the line quality leading to your house. If the signal is good and you're having problems, the house wiring may be the culprit. The definitive answer for cable modems is to create a split directly after the junction box and then run a new cable directly to your modem. The other side of the split will take care of your television sets which aren't nearly as sensitive to line noise.

After you've done everything from a hardware and firmware standpoint, and your cable connection is as clean as possible, you're ready to fine tune the system for best performance. Vista users don't have to do much of anything to optimize the operating system since Vista does TCP stack tuning dynamically. Any internet performance adjustments can be made through the browser. Firefox users may want to try Firetune or Fasterfox. They are both free utilities and allow adjustment to cache memory, capacity and other settings such as pipelining.

If you do a lot of downloading, you can save time by installing a download manager like Flashget. This widely used utility claims the highest number of users on the internet. It uses MHT (Multi-server Hyper-threading Transportation) technique. It's very easy to use and comes with exceptional document management features. Best of all, it's free.

After all this work, it would be a tragedy if you didn't keep in mind that sometimes the simplest solutions are the best ones. Most cable modems and routers have reset features. Many a mysterious internet ailment has been corrected simply by resetting the equipment. Turn off the computer and the modem. Un-plug the modem for a few minutes and then power everything back on. You may be pleasantly surprised.