

By Jo Becker, BA

I'm almost certain you've all heard folks advise and tout the virtues of backing up your computer, but are you doing it? Do you do it often enough? As Tyson Stockton of Electronics Unlimited (local computer services company) suggests, the average life of a hard drive is three to five years and a good rule of thumb to live by is: **If you can't reinstall it then you need to back it up.**

In other words, you should have the original installation disks for all of the software you run on your computer (the operating system and device drivers, MS Word, Internet Explorer, etc., etc.) so if your hard drive died or your computer otherwise crashed, you should be able to pick up where you left off with a new computer (or new hard drive) by installing these programs one by one. It's a pain in the fanny and time consuming but it will get you back up and running.

However, your *documents* (files that you created or that others created and shared with you) would be lost entirely if you hadn't back them up before the crash. For example, all MS Word documents--perhaps memos to clients or drafts of sale addendums, in my case, a *lot* of original marketing materials (flyers, presentation books, mailings, and newsletters, etc.) would be lost in the event of a hard disk crash if not backed up. Your files have, undoubtedly, taken hours to create and I, for one, would cry alligator tears if I lost mine. Family photos and pictures from your last vacation, if stored on your computer electronically, would be wiped out. Your client database (unless synched to an online application such as Top Producer), would be gone in an instant. Any data input into spreadsheets or financial programs such as QuickBooks would be irretrievable if you haven't backed them up. Even calendar entries and email messages stored in MS Outlook will be history!

Once upon a time, my parents/partners and I employed a remote service to access our computer and back up the data weekly. With the advent of affordable compact disk drives that not only play but also burn disks, that's the way to go for most of us. If you don't yet have a drive that will burn a disk, they're fairly inexpensive at 40to 80 bucks at any office or electronics store. When you buy disks to back up your data, I'd recommend buying CDR/RWs. That stands for Compact Disk Recordable / Re-Writable. In other words, you can record on the CD once, then erase it and re-write on it again. The same is true for DVD/RWs if you have a DVD drive that will burn discs.

It's recommended that you keep two to three 'generations' of back ups so that if your latest back up copy is destroyed (perhaps it burns up in a fire along with your computer), you'll have the second most recent copy you saved and stored, ever-so-smartly, somewhere else. It's commonly suggested to keep one copy at home and another at your office. For me, I choose to carry a copy of back up CDs with me. It not only means the disks are a safe distance from my computer if the computer were to perish in a fire, but it's also handy while I'm out and about to grab a CD and quickly access a specific file any time I hop onto a computer.

The discussion of multiple copies (that is, 'generations') rather begs the question of how frequently one should back up files. The answer is: as frequently as you make changes or create new files that you'd cry alligator tears over if you lost. For some that might be weekly or monthly; whereas for my Grandma, annually is more than sufficient. Like so much is in life, the real answer is, "it depends." You'll have to find the frequency and medium (CD, DVD, portable drive, online data services, etc.) and frequency that are best for you.

As always, if this seems overwhelming ask for help, but keep trying! Before long you'll get the hang of it. In the meantime, *hang in there!*

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Jo Becker has eight years of licensed real estate experience. As a former broker, she knows how important, and sometimes scary, technology and self-promotion can be. Jo has provided personalized one-on-one marketing consultation and computer software training to the industry since 2002.

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