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NO NOVEMBER NEWSLETTER MY APOLOGIES

My wife and I took a vacation for a few weeks in November. Because it was an out of the country vacation, there was more than the usual amount of packing and preparation, and I dropped the ball on the November newsletter. My apologies.

USB FLASH DRIVES NEED SOME CARE

Flash drives (aka thumbdrives, memory sticks) are easy to use but like most everything else, they can be problematic if not used correctly.

In order to keep your computer from slowing down, when data is written to a flash drive, the write is frequently delayed. If you just disconnect the flash drive from a computer and not all of the data has been completely written to the drive, the data can be lost. For this reason, always use the little icon in the Windows notification area – all of those miniscule icons on the bottom right of the screen – to disconnect flash drives. Here is how it works:

1. Before removing a flash drive, click on the icon and a list of USB devices connected to the computer will be displayed.
2. Select your flash drive from the list (it may be the only item in the list) and click on it.

3. In a few seconds you will see a message indicating that the device is safe to remove. You can now safely remove the flash drive from the computer.
4. Sometimes you will see a message that the drive is in use and cannot be disconnected at that time. If you remove the flash drive from the computer now, you risk losing or corrupting one or more files on the flash drive.

OK – I know that most people just pull their flash drives out of the computer without any problems. That is because most of the time, it is safe to do so. Using the notification area icon doesn't do anything except let you know if it is safe to remove the drive, so you don't really *need* to use it, but it is a good safety precaution.

By the way, this notification icon applies to all USB connections, such as cameras, printers, external hard drives, etc. If a printer is not actually printing, it's probably safe to just unplug the USB cable. But I do recommend using this icon for cameras, flash drives and external hard drives.

Boot problems with USB drives. I sometimes come across computers that will just not start up past the opening screen. Sometimes this is because the computer is trying to (unsuccessfully) boot from the USB device. Modern computers can be configured to look for flash drives and/or bootable CDs/DVDs before looking on the hard drive for the operating system (usually Windows). If there is a flash drive in the computer, the startup may hang trying to boot from the drive. For this reason, it is always a good idea to remove all flash drives from a computer before starting it up.

Also, I sometimes come across a problem with other USB devices

preventing a computer from starting properly. If Windows hangs at startup, try disconnecting all USB devices, including printers, and then restart the computer. If it boots up you can then reconnect the USB devices.

RETRIEVING DATA FROM OLD FLOPPY DISCS

For those of you living with computers more than a few years old, you will find it disconcerting when you get a new computer and find that it doesn't have a floppy drive.

Floppies, with a capacity of 0.72Mb or 1.44MB have been replaced with flash drives, having a capacity of at least 64MB and up to 32GB (32,000MB).

So how can you retrieve the data from those old floppies?

1. You can find an old computer with a floppy drive and use it to copy the floppies to a flash drive, CD or DVD, or a hard drive.
2. You can buy an external (USB) floppy drive for about \$30 or so and use that. But do it soon, because earlier this year the last manufacturer of external floppy drives stopped making them. You will still be able to get used drives on eBay for many years to come.

But do you really want to make the effort? That depends on what is on the floppies. If the floppies contain data from an old program such as WordStar or Lotus 1-2-3 you may not have a program on your computer that can read the data. If you do have a program that can read the data files, then after retrieving them from the floppies, be sure to convert them to a newer format such as Word or WordPerfect for word processing and Excel

IDENTITY THEFT IS REAL PAY ATTENTION TO IT!

I recently had to change my VISA credit card for the second time this year due to identity theft.

Identity theft is new, somewhat confusing to some people, but very, very real. Identity theft is nothing different from the pre-computer days when someone stole your checkbook or your credit card, except that because we use computers so much now that the scope of these thefts has greatly expanded because thieves don't need your actual checks or card anymore, they just grab it from your computer.

My wife and I were recently in Argentina for a few weeks (we are Argentine Tango dancers) and while there some charges accrued on our VISA card – from Sweden. I contacted the credit card company and within a week or so they had refunded the amounts back to my account, having wisely decided that it was unlikely that I could not be in Argentina and Sweden at the same time.

There are many articles appearing in all sorts of magazines and newspapers about what people should do to prevent them from becoming victims of identity theft and I won't belabor this info. But here are some basics that you should really pay attention to:

1. If you do any banking, investing, or financial transactions online (including just checking your information) and use a password to access the website, make sure it is a **strong password**. A strong password is at least 8 characters long, contains both letters and numbers, and is not based on your name, birthday, names of children, and so forth. I shudder every time that a client tells me that their password is "password"!
2. If you have online access to your banking and credit card account, check them daily to make sure that no bogus charges show up. If they do, call the number on your debit or credit card immediately and ask for the fraud department.
3. If you are travelling with a computer, **never do any financial transactions using a public WiFi network** because anyone else in the same network (such as sitting in Starbucks where you are) can hack into your computer pretty easily.

There is much more, and I suggest that you read up on it.

By the way, just before we went to Argentina, I notified my bank and credit card company that I would be out of the country, specifically gave them the country I would be visiting, and the charges from halfway around the world still went through. Also, the credit card company recommended that I take out a 30-day trial of a credit card identify theft protection programs and I took their recommendation – and that company also failed to notify me of the illicit transactions – so I cancelled the identity theft program trial.

Fortunately, both times my credit card info was stolen, the credit card company was on top of the situation, refunded the bogus charges and I was only inconvenienced for a few days until the replacement cards arrived. The credit card company even offered to send the replacement cards priority delivery at no cost to me, which I accepted, and the cards arrived 2 days later.

INTERNET SECURITY TEST REFERENCES

If you want to see some unbiased tests of internet security programs (antivirus, etc), here are some independent testing lab websites you should visit:

Virus Bulletin www.virusbtn.com

AV-Comparatives
www.av-comparatives.org

AV-Test www.av-test.org

FINE TUNE YOUR MONITOR AUTOMATICALLY

Lighting changes throughout the day & night and these changes affect how you see your computer monitor.

F.lux is a free utility that changes the colors of your monitor based on the time of day or night, and on your geolocation in the world. Daylight is different in Seattle than in San Diego or Atlanta.

F.lux sets your monitor to bright daylight tones during the day, gradually changes to warmer tones during sunset time for night lighting. You may or may not like it, but it's worth trying.

Go to <http://stereopsis.com/flux/> for the free download and try it.

HP TO OFFER A DOUBLE- EDGED "INSTANT" SERVICE

HP is gearing up to offer an **InstantInk** subscription service that will send you all the ink you need for \$6-\$11/month. Sounds great, except...HP will also offer instant subscriptions to Conde Nast publishing which will allow you to download their magazines – and of course you will use up gallons of ink and paper printing out the magazines. Read about it at <http://www.geek.com/articles/news/hp-to-offer-ink-subscriptions-and-on-demand-conde-naste-mag-printing-20111012/>

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Disclaimer: Coastal Computer Care presents information in this newsletter as a courtesy. The recommendations are made in good faith and are believed to be reliable and safe. CCC cannot, however, foresee every possibility and assumes no responsibility for any problems that may be encountered as a consequence of the recommendations. Always backup your computer and make sure that System Restore is set to On.