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Back up or tune in - thumb drives make it easy

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff | June 18, 2009

It's easy to take thumb drives for granted. These cheap little chunks of flash memory, which plug into a computer's USB port, are almost as plentiful as popcorn. I've got a plastic bag full of them at home, sent out as electronic press releases by various technology companies.

When a gadget becomes this commonplace, we can lose sight of its value. A thumb drive is more than a handy way to tote data files between home and office. Loaded with the right software, these drives can automatically preserve your critical data files, scan your computer for viruses, or tune in your favorite Internet audio streams.

Let's begin with dessert. There's lots of audio entertainment online, and a new USB thumb drive from Aluratek Inc. makes it easy to tune in. The Aluratek USB Internet Radio Jukebox has been programmed with the addresses of 13,000 online audio streams. When plugged in, it displays tuning software that lets you quickly find every conceivable kind of music, as well as news, sports, and weather reports.

You can find these Internet broadcast ers for free, if you know where to look, or you can pay about $20 for Aluratek's thumb drive and let the software find it for you.

File backup is serious business, and it's now practical to save your backups to a large-capacity thumb drive, like SanDisk Corp.'s Ultra Backup. You can buy one with storage capacity of up to 64 gigabytes, and with the backup software programmed right into the drive. Just plug it into a USB port to install it. You can set the drive to back up every file in sight. Or you can set it to copy only certain types of files - documents, photos, music. Then, just push the "backup'' button on top of the thumb drive and go have a cup of coffee.

That's the theory, anyhow. I tried the Ultra Backup on two computers and ran into difficulties with both. It caused an old Windows XP machine to lock up solid, forcing a reboot. On a brand-new machine running Windows Vista, the SanDisk software crashed, but at least it didn't take the whole computer down.

With a street price of around $160 for the 64-gigabyte version, the Ultra Backup is far more expensive than a good external hard drive, and not as reliable. Still, you've got to like its hip-pocket portability. Here's hoping SanDisk eventually gets it right.

I had better luck with a new thumb drive backup device from Back In A Flash LLC, of Coral Gables, Fla. It's even pricier than the SanDisk offering, and you get far less storage capacity: $130 for 15.5 gigabytes of storage, or $190 for 31.5 gigs. Still, the $130 model I tried worked exactly as advertised. Plug it in, run the software, and back up your stuff.

But Back In A Flash does a good deal more. Say your computer's hard drive has failed and you can't reboot. Just plug in Back In A Flash and hit the computer's on switch. The thumb drive contains a stripped-down version of the Linux operating system and a few basic software applications, like the Firefox Internet browser and OpenOffice, a program that's reasonably compatible with Microsoft Office. Back In A Flash will boot up your damaged machine and let you get some work done. It's almost like carrying an extra computer on a keychain. Then again, it costs almost as much.

You can build your own rescue thumb drive for a lot less money. First, get a blank thumb drive of two gigabytes or larger, available for well under $20 at any computer, office supply, or electronics store. Next, go to a website called pendrivelinux.com, where you'll find a do-it-yourself guide on loading up the drive with a bootable version of Linux for emergencies.

A thumb drive can also help you out when you're forced to use somebody else's computer. Maybe the machine doesn't have the Firefox browser on board, or maybe you're not sure it's been scanned for viruses lately. With a free download called PortableApps, you can use a USB drive to instantly customize any Windows-based computer.

Just go to portableapps.com and download a mini-suite of software, including Firefox, OpenOffice, an antivirus program called ClamWin, and dozens of other applications. Install PortableApps onto a blank thumb drive, and the software activates when you plug the drive into a PC. Now you can run the programs of your choice on any computer you choose.

I hung onto my bagful of thumb-drive press releases mainly out of laziness, and the suspicion that they'd turn out to be useful someday. Good guess.

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