



Window Washing



A recent incident brought me around to revisiting some of technology's often overlooked but necessary tasks. Some producers may not realize it, but much as an automobile needs a periodic oil and filter change, computers also require maintenance.

Most of us know about two items that are included with Windows but often overlooked: Disk Clean Up and Disk Defragmenter. The producer may recall the term "defrag." Both of these utilities can help improve system performance. Disk Clean Up removes unneeded files from the hard drive, while Disk Defragmenter organizes the data for faster access. Both utilities may be found under Start -> Programs -> Accessories -> System Tools.

Nowadays however, there are additional tasks that should be performed. Over the years I have found four programs that qualify for the Automated Agent's all-time greatest list. These utilities will help keep a producer's computer safe and humming along. These programs also prove that some of the best things in life are free — even in today's economy! I would consider all of these products better than many programs on which a producer might spend \$30, \$50, or even more.

Scrubbing the Registry

RegClean is a simple, free program that Microsoft created to assist in cleaning up old, irrelevant listings in the Windows registry. This registry essentially is a big database of everything Windows needs to know to make the producer's computer work.

As programs and items change or are updated on a computer, registry entries may become obsolete or outdated. RegClean looks for these entries and removes them. This can assist in speeding up the producer's computer because Windows then has less information through which to look. It also is possible to restore the removed items should the software make a mistake, however, I never have found this to be necessary. RegClean may be found at www.Downloads.com.

Color Guard

I have mentioned on several occasions that users with high-speed Internet connections must protect their computers with a firewall. Users who have a cable modem or DSL connection attached directly to their system should download the Zone Alarm basic firewall software (www.ZoneAlarm.com), which is free for personal use, or install an inexpensive router with built-in firewall protection. Although many high-speed companies say their systems have safe connections, time and time again this has proven not to be the case. These companies simply do not provide the amount of protection they would like us to believe.

A producer must take responsibility to ensure his computer is well protected from outside eyes. A quick visit to <http://www.dslreports.com/tools> will enable the producer to run a "port scan" to help determine if his or her computer is protected.

Installing an anti-virus program also is a must these days, but paying for one is not. Another great piece of software previously mentioned is AVG Antivirus available from www.grisoft.com. AVG Antivirus is one of the best, non-intrusive virus protection programs I have found, and the basic version is free for personal use.

Wringing the Dirt out

The Automated Agent's number one free software pick is one that every producer should have. Before revealing it, though, I should mention why. For all of the great things technology and the Internet bring to us, there also are pitfalls. As the producer will see, we all are prone to making a wrong turn or venturing to areas on the Web that may lead to trouble.

I was watching a techie TV show on cable one evening and was inspired to visit its Web site. I went online and typed in what I thought was the correct URL and egad! I had mistyped the address and ended up at a

malicious Web site that started to download software to my computer without my permission. I stared at the screen in disbelief as I tried every method I knew of stopping the download, but I was unsuccessful.

Menacing Web sites are becoming more common these days. Unscrupulous people purchase domain names and attempt to trick visitors into making their Web site the default start page, prompting users to changing settings on their computer. They also may try to hijack the user's computer as in my recent experience, and install unwanted software, adware, or spyware — anything to make money.

Many legitimate companies offer a few cents to other Web sites or companies that refer people to them. Many of these schemes take advantage of this and attempt to trick the uninformed into playing along. It is unfortunate, but the average person might not even realize when something like this has happened, and if it has, how to rectify it.

The Automated Agent's all-time favorite free software is Ad-aware (www.LavaSoft.de; note that this address is not .com). This program was written specifically to detect illegally installed software, spyware, adware, and settings on a user's computer.

Much like a virus protection program, the software scans all of the computer's files and settings and looks for certain known items. It will eliminate almost any item that is not supposed to be there. The producer might be surprised after installing and running this software by how many items he or she did not know were there.

The Final Rinse

An additional small utility program the producer may find useful is "Shoot the Messenger," available at <http://grc.com/freepopular.htm>. Several versions of Windows have a message server installed that runs by default. As the Web site explains, "It receives and accepts, among other things, unsolicited network messages that cause pop-up dialog boxes to appear on the desktop. Internet Spammers have discovered this and are spraying pop-up Spam across the Internet. Microsoft has finally fixed this issue in Windows 2003, but users of previous Windows need to take responsibility for this themselves." This utility allows the producer to disable the message server and eliminate these annoying pop-ups.

I would recommend that the producer perform routine maintenance on his or her computer at least once a month. Entering a recurring reminder in the producer's calendar will help. Not only will using these utilities assist in keeping the computer safe and performing at its peak, it also may eliminate unknown and unwanted items of which the producer may not even be aware. Taking steps to protect and maintain the computer will go a long way in ensuring that it will remain trouble-free.