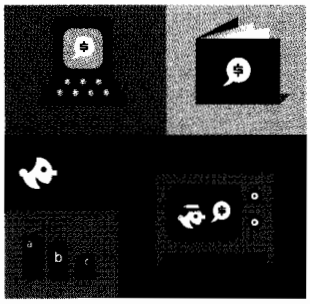


Better safe than sorry

I lost my cellphone while skiing this winter. I quickly realized that I must have dropped it at the top of the hill, since I had just made a phone call. Not a problem — I grabbed my cell-equipped Blackberry and phoned my number, hoping someone might hear my cell ringing.

No such luck. Imagine my surprise when I later found it at the ski club's lost and found. A ski patrol had spotted my cell whizzing down the hill and retrieved it at the bottom. (Given that the hill was rather icy, it wasn't surprising that my phone could ski as well as I can.)

This anecdote isn't important, other than it made me think about all the telephone numbers I now have.



A decade ago, I had three: office, home and fax. Today, I'm up to 10 numbers including my cell, Blackberry, VoIP account, one that comes with my roving cellular laptop modem and the inbound Dallas number I have through Skype (December 2005) to support my US activities. Oh, and my wife's cellphone.

This growth in telephone numbers tends to mirror the amount of data I have in my life. I've got thousands of e-mail messages, thousands of documents and speeches, thousands of pictures and music files, not to mention accounting, spreadsheet and other financial files. With all the servers and computers in my home, there's now about five terabytes of data storage — exceeding by a factor of thousands the 10 megabyte hard drive I had just 15 years ago.

Although my case might be a bit extreme, it's not off the mark. According to an analyst at JP Morgan, 93% of all information worldwide is now generated in digital form and is growing at a compounded rate of 61% a year. Although digital cameras are a relatively new technology, we're already taking 80 billion photos a year. Video cameras churn out four gigabytes of data for every hour of digital video. Another estimate suggests the business world will need 10 million storage administrators in the future simply to take care of all the data emerging in the corporate space. No wonder data storage vendors are happy people.

Needless to say, backup and redundancy are becoming important to everyone, and so it is with me. Redundancy is found by having multiple links to the digital cloud that is our world — that's why I carry both a cell and a Blackberry. If I lose one (which I have done several times) I still have the other.

Then there's data backup: having one copy simply won't do. I make multiple copies of my data and documents all over the place, so when a system inevitably crashes (which it does), I have copies elsewhere.

For instant backups, I've come to use a nifty little Google-hack called GMail Drive, which turns a Google Mail account into a backup tool. Install it in Windows and Google Mail appears on your computer as just another disk drive. As you work on a file, simply drag it and drop. At the start of each day, make copies of your new files.

My digital music files now total 135 gigabytes of data. It was cheaper for me to buy another hard disk for $120, copy all the songs onto it and stick it in the bank vault than mess around with all kinds of complicated tape storage software. And for regular backups of my data, I'll copy it to rewritable DVDs using Sonic's DVD recording software.

Then there's my website, which now consists of hundreds of Web pages, blog entries, video files and images. I use WGET, a utility that will quickly download the entire website to my office desktop where it can then become a part of my daily backup routine.

Am I paranoid? Perhaps, but I think I've got too much wrapped up in my digital media assets to take any risks.

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BACKUP TOOLS

GMail Drive www.viksoe.dk/code/gmail.htm

gDisk (for Mac) http://gdisk.sourceforge.net

How Much Information study www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info 2003

Sonic Solutions www.sonic.com