

How to Protect Your Hardware and Software Investments Intelligently and **WITHOUT** spending a fortune



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I had begun to think of Tammy as a modern-day Job. She and her husband run a small party rental store in the south. A year earlier, they had made the scary decision to go from paper to a computerized operation. Initially, her major concern had been whether our RentControl software would be easy enough for her to learn and use. As it turned out, that was one of the few problems she didn't have.

They had an older PC, slightly underpowered, but adequate for use with RentControl. Within a short time and after only a few questions, she was running without difficulty and you would have thought there would be smooth sailing ahead. You would have been wrong. Because she didn't have virus software, she picked up a computer worm that could not be removed and that rendered her computer inoperable.

They bought a new but unbranded computer from a local PC technician and salvaged the data from the wormy machine. This was an annoying but only slightly costly digression, and they were soon taking care of business again—this time with a virus checker that would get regularly updated.

Three months later, the hard disk crashed on the new PC. This, in itself, is inconvenient and annoying, but not catastrophic unless, like Tammy, your last backup is several months old and on the same disk that just crashed. The tech who sold them the machine had no idea how to help them retrieve their rental data. A new tech along with a recovery specialist (who charged thousands of dollars) had to be hired to try to salvage their rental records from the crashed disk. Meanwhile, we worked with the new tech to try to recreate Tammy's data from the recovered fragments. (I've omitted the incident of her being struck by lightning because, while consistent with her luck, it's irrelevant to her computer troubles.)

How is she doing now? She has a new, branded machine with warranties on all the important parts. A new and competent technician to help her. A procedure for taking off-site backups daily, and a popular, regularly-updated virus checker, among other safety precautions.

Her troubles, while extreme, hold several lessons for anyone thinking of moving to rental software from a paper system. (How to avoid lightning will be covered in a separate article.)



Realistically assess your computer skills and those of your staff. If you only know how to surf the web, that won't be adequate. If the basic computer skills of your staff are inadequate, enroll them in short, basic PC courses (like those given by local high schools or community colleges, or those given by PC superstores like CompUSA). If you or one of your employees has good technical skills,



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consider investing in more extensive training so the chosen person can become your on-site technician. Or arrange for a competent outside technician to set up your operation initially and respond to problems that occur. It's not enough to know how to operate the rental software you ultimately buy; you also have to know how to maintain your computer environment—or have access to someone who does. And remember to assess outside help if you opt for a consultant. Get references and referrals and go through the trouble of checking them, not only for technical competence but also for reliability. It won't help to have a good tech if he disappears when you need him.

Take standard precautions for your equipment. Computers, like cars, consist of hundreds of parts, any one of which can break at any time. Nothing lasts forever. Assume, at the outset, that you will occasionally have problems, both man-made and Act-of-God. (Recent hurricanes in the south devastated more than one business.) Prepare for them. This isn't as large a task as it might appear. Really it means only:

- If a PC has a connection to the web, purchase a virus checker, and purchase the update program for that checker so that you get new virus definitions the minute they are released. This is not the place to save money. A good virus checker costs \$30.
- Abnormal shutdowns of PCs can destroy data. If you're in an environment that has erratic electrical problems—or even if you aren't—or you have employees who think the off button on the computer is the way to deal with a software problem, correct for both. Purchase and use a UPS (uninterruptable power supply), and teach employees not to power down a PC arbitrarily. Teach them how to recover from problems, so that the power button is a last, not a first resort. This, too, is not a place to save money as a UPS can be had for under \$75.



Back up religiously! This point can't be stressed enough. Your livelihood is on your computer. Make copies of it at least daily. In fact, make several copies and store them in different places. As Tammy discovered the hard way, an old backup may be better than none, but not if it, too, is on the hard disk that crashes. There are a number of ways to back up data: If you have a network, you can write all backups to different PCs in the network. You can burn a CD, write to a ZIP drive or memory stick. CDs, ZIP drives and memory sticks are inexpensive media. There are also internet sites that serve as backup repositories. After you make your backups, keep some of them off-site. The odds of both your store, your home and your safe deposit box all being destroyed at the same time are small—and should this happen, your backups will be the least of your problems.

In this same connection, people who back up religiously often overlook testing their backups. In other words, they think they have backups but when the need to use them arises, they find the backups aren't any good. Have a procedure for occasionally testing the backups you take to make sure you're taking them correctly and that the ones you take are good.

Keep all warranties, user manuals and receipts for equipment. It will soften the blow somewhat if the hard disk that crashes is still under warranty. Or an apparently catastrophic problem has a solution.

Do not think these precautions are only for those buying rental software by itself, that if you purchase a full-service package, one that includes not only the software, but hardware, training and technical support, you won't have to care about all this. Not true. The hardware is still in your store or warehouse. Even if supplied by the vendor, it will still need shut-down protection, backup systems that work, virus checkers if any machines access the web. When evaluating such vendors, you will want to find out how many of these necessary precautions are included in the price so you can personally provide for any that are not. You will want to query the vendor about support policies when hardware or software problems occur: How fast do they respond? Does response include replacement hardware and at what cost? Is all of this done by the vendor and at what cost or must some of it be done by you? And you will still want trained employees.



If a lot of this sounds daunting, it really isn't. And the effort is worthwhile. After all, when Tammy's husband suggested they just go back to paper, she told him she had used rental software long enough to know she couldn't function without it. Once you've seen the Promised Land, Podunk will no longer do.



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