A tidy option for data pack rats

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Millions of PC users have relied on Flash drives or other pint-size hard drive storage units to safeguard valuable files. But those portable drives can be broken or lost. And if you need critical documents--or favorite songs or photos--while on the road, many Internet kiosk computers in places like airports do not have USB ports to plug the portable drive into.

Internet companies like Yahoo and America Online, as well as some smaller competitors, have taken aim at these problems by allowing users to store nearly any kind of file on their secure servers. The stored files can then be retrieved from any Internet-connected computer.

These services--some charge a fee, others are free--are useful for many, but not all, consumers and businesspeople, according to Ross Rubin, an analyst with the technology research firm NPD Group. For one thing, having a high-speed Internet connection is practically a requirement, Rubin said. "One of the key issues with all of these is upload time," he said.

And even with a high-speed link, patience is necessary. Using the online data lockers can be confusing at times and unreliable at others--which is perhaps why some digital pack rats are relying on Google's simple e-mail service for storage.

Gmail, which is more than a year old but still available only by invitation, offers 2GB of free storage. That is enough to squirrel away roughly 500 standard-length digital music files, or just about anything else of importance.

I have backed up critical folders and documents through other e-mail services in the past, but Gmail is particularly useful in this regard. Not only does it offer more storage than most other services, but if you forget a file name, you can find it with Gmail's search function.

There is, however, a drawback. Google's terms of service bar users from e-mailing files of more than 10MB. Since most music files are about 5MB, unless a user is willing to build an online music library on Gmail two songs at a time, the service is not very practical for storing music.

Apart from allowing users to upload much bigger files, storage services such as Xdrive, BigVault, Streamload, Apple Computer's iDisk, Yahoo's Briefcase and AOL's My Storage provide more options, like letting users share blocks of digital files with friends or the general public.

On Yahoo, registered users receive 30MB of free storage--a relatively paltry amount compared with other services--but users can buy more capacity for fees ranging from $3 a month (for 50MB) to $5 a month (for 100MB).

Xdrive users pay $10 a month for a minimum storage account of 5GB, BigVault users pay $36 a year for every 100MB stored, while AOL is testing a service with a small number of users that gives them 100MB of online storage for no additional charge beyond the monthly AOL subscriber fee. Apple's iDisk, which works with both Windows and Macintosh computers, costs $100 a year for 250MB of storage.

In terms of free storage, none of the services can beat Streamload. The company began offering 10GB of free disk space this year.

Full Story [2].

Web

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