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FREE
TECH TOOLS

*This column contains the word "free" 25 times—
try a few of these tools to beef up your computer skills.*

Since the 1960s, when scientists and academics used it to explore ideas and discuss their research when no other electronic method was available, the internet has continued to grow on the basis of sharing. Beyond the hype today, the essence of sharing remains people reaching out to pool resources and solve problems.

Some say today's internet creates more problems than it solves, but it has grown into a literal worldwide web of knowledge and information. We aren't all getting wealthy online, but we're definitely richer for the scope of free tools available. So log on and score with some of these great business resources.

SPYWARE PROTECTION

Ad-Aware is just one example of free software to protect your computer from intruders who enter through an open internet connection. Ad-Aware cleans spyware off your computer. You can download it for free at lavasoft.com.

BLOGS

Beyond web pages, businesses are starting to use blogs as a communication tool. And as you might guess, they're free. Visit blogger.com and view some online samples if you're unsure how to get started. Blogs are generally chronological, so you might create an online diary of a competition or a training season, sharing photos and stories about your team's success through the year. You can also post schedules, nutrition and fitness information, or other details relevant to your coaches and customers.

BOOKS

Public libraries and websites devoted to public domain literature, on which copyright has expired, offer free books, from classics to recent hot fiction. Check your library's website or Project Gutenberg at gutenberg.org.

E-NEWSLETTERS

Most e-mail newsletter services offer great value, keeping your name in front of the public, for a fee ranging from $15 to $40 per month for about 2,500 e-mails, depending on the size of your mailing list. Even better, though, is sending newsworthy information for free. With MailerMailer (mailermailer.com), you can send a professional newsletter to 200 people per month at no cost. And the service keeps track of the mailing list, logs subscriber preferences and provides reports showing you how many people open your messages.

FREEWARE

Think of it as software of the people, by the people, for the people. Good programmers enjoy writing software even if they don't have the means to sell it on the commercial market. You can find free software for everything from labels to databases at good sites such as freewarehome.com or search "freeware" at download.com.

DOCS & SPREADSHEETS

This is a free, online word processor and a spreadsheet program, similar to Excel. If you don't need to purchase the entire Microsoft Office online suite, you could do well with this. All you need is a free Google account. An added benefit is your documents are stored online, in a password-protected area, so you can access team standings, reports and financial documents from anywhere, and invite others to share and contribute to your documents. Visit docs.google.com to get started.

PDF MAKER

Adobe pioneered portable document format (PDF) files. The process makes a digital copy of a document, whether it's a spreadsheet, poster or financial statement, turning it into an image instead of text. The advantage is that users can't edit or alter the file. The best example would be our well-known IRS 1040 forms. Imagine the mess we'd have if people downloaded IRS forms and the text scrambled and spilled onto several pages, or if we could change numbers on the form itself. If you don't have the paid version of Adobe Acrobat to make a PDF, you can download a free PDF converter at Pdf995.com or primopdf.com.

PHOTO MANAGEMENT

Need to crop an extra leg from a team picture? FxFoto (fxfoto.com) can enhance, annotate, organize and archive your photos. The free standard edition includes editing tools to remove red-eye, crop and clone photo parts. If you're new to photo editing, FxFoto includes a free tutorial. Picasa, now owned by Google (picasa.google.com), offers similar features and you can post photos and videos online in free space.

PODCASTS

We're all familiar with the term "broadcast," where a television or radio program is aired to a wide audience. A podcast is a digital file, usually audio and video, broadcast over the internet, either from your computer, through syndication, or downloaded onto iPods and other portable media players. Podcasts are pretty new in consumer technology. If a team video is in your future, learn more at podcastingnews.com/topics/Podcast_Software.html.

PROMOTING YOUR BUSINESS

It takes a lot of money to keep a business running, but gaining visibility in the community and attracting new customers can be done with free tools. Look at vistaprint.com for free business cards, postcards and stationery. Get free advertising for your business through your local chamber of commerce. Most chambers promote your business for free on their website, which serves as an online directory for consumers and offers free mailing lists so you can promote your services to other members.

SEARCH ENGINES

When it comes to powerful web resources, don't forget search engines. Are you stuck in a rut using the same search tool for everything? While Google is great, it isn't always the best place to find specific information. Since Google displays results based on the most popular items searched, it may show you what everyone else is looking at, but not what you're seeking. Other good and free search tools are a9.com, clusty.com and ask.com.

STORAGE SPACE

Services like Yahoo! and Google offer huge amounts of free online storage. You can use that space for free backups, with your files protected by your password. Try briefcase.yahoo.com or mail.google.com.

SURVEY SOFTWARE

If you're in charge of an event or helping out on a committee, consider using research surveys to help gather opinions of participants. At SurveyMonkey.com, you can ask multiple-choice questions, rank preferences on a point scale or ask open-ended questions on attractive survey templates. The service is free if you have 10 survey questions and less than 100 responses per survey.

WEB DESIGN

CoffeeCup is one of many firms with free web-editing software. Most web pages are built with hypertext markup language (HTML), and CoffeeCup takes the grind out of creating pages by doing the HTML code for you. You drag and drop text and images into your exiting web pages, or create new pages based on your existing design. Their HTML editor is free to try for 30 days at coffeecup.com/html-editor. After that, it's $49 if it's a tool you find useful.

WIDGETS

Another type of free tech tool—hard to categorize—is widgets. Widgets are small desktop programs running in the background with updated information, such as streaming newsfeed, sports or weather. WeatherBug is a common example. Some are useful, others, if not well designed, drain the memory from your computer. They work by tapping into a live feed from the supplier's server to your desktop on your high-speed internet connection. As a result, they're also a target of hackers, since they know what program to look for and can latch onto it to plant spyware on your computer. Use these with caution.

If you want widgets, use reputable providers such as widgets.yahoo.com.

WI-FI

If your building or business complex has high-speed internet, you can use a wi-fi connection with your laptop or put a wi-fi card in your desktop computer. With a consistent signal you can do away with the monthly fee for DSL or cable modem service. Many American cities are moving to wi-fi access throughout entire downtown areas, including New Orleans, Madison, WI, and several others. Your city might be next. If you can get on a legitimate, secure wi-fi connection, you can buy a tank of gas each month with the money you save by not paying for high-speed internet. **CBN**

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