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Consumer-friendly PC backup utilities emerge

By Brian Bergstein

BOSTON (AP) - Shalin Mody's computer held innumerable things he'd love to have forever: TV shows, video games, papers and more than 50 gigabytes of music. So normally he would have panicked the day the PC completely failed, unable to start up.

Fortunately, the 26-year-old investment manager had only weeks earlier come across a blog describing Carbonite, an inexpensive new service that backed up everything on his PC over the Internet and stored it remotely.

When he bought a replacement PC, Carbonite repopulated it with his old files.

"It was extremely lucky," Mody said. "I just didn't stress too much."

The first part of Mody's experience is all too common. It's generally just a matter of when, not if, a disk drive fails.

The solution to Mody's woes, however, is much rarer. While backing up computer files is standard procedure in big companies, for regular people it traditionally has been a cumbersome, expensive and easy-to-blow-off affair.

Now, however, as people increasingly stuff the home computer with digital photos, videos, music and other valuable content, several companies are popping up to offer some insurance.

Taking advantage of cheap data storage and the proliferation of broadband Internet connections, Web-based services such as Carbonite can provide the equivalent of a fireproof safety deposit box for digital content.

"I think this is stuff that people don't really realize they can do," said David Friend, CEO of Boston-based Carbonite, which lets users back up unlimited amounts of data for less than \$5 a month.

Carbonite runs in the background of a Windows-based computer, copying files, encrypting them and sending them to remote servers. Because most broadband connections have much slower upload speeds than download speeds, the initial backup process can take several days.

Users can individually select which files or file types they want backed up. Or they can just have everything stored with Carbonite just in case. The software is designed to be like antivirus software: something the user doesn't have to think about.

In fact, security vendor Symantec Corp. -- which bought storage specialist Veritas Software Corp. last year -- soon plans to combine a Web-based backup product with its Norton antivirus software. **Glover Lawrence, a principal in the tech-focused investment bank McNamee Lawrence & Co., predicts other security-storage combos will follow because consumers already trust the vendors.**

Microsoft Corp. and Google Inc. are also weighing vast remote-storage services that could be free and backed by advertising, though neither company would offer details.

Even before products like that emerge, however, the choices for consumers are mushrooming.

IBM Corp. recently rolled out a \$35-per-computer software package that automatically backs up a consumer's files by routing the data to whatever sources happen to be available, including inexpensive "thumb" drives and online storage accounts offered by Internet providers.

For those willing to manually make sure important files are safely stored in more than one place, thumb drives and free services like Google's Gmail offer several gigabytes of space. That would be enough room to protect many users' important documents, though richer media like photos, music and video quickly eat up far more space.

Still more territory is available on CDs and "external" hard disk drives that plug into PCs. Some vendors offer drives with an astonishing 1 terabyte of storage -- more than enough room to back up multiple versions of every file on almost any consumer's computer. A terabyte can hold the text of roughly 1 million books.

Some external drives do come with automated "set and forget" backup powers. Even with such products available, however, Peter Radsliff, executive director of consumer marketing for Seagate Technology LLC, notes that plenty of people still don't ensure their stuff is backed up.

"It's the old flossing-your-teeth thing," he said. "We all know we need to do it and it's very important, and yet there are the flossers of the world and the nonflossers of the world."

Of course, if a fire or flood destroys your house, what good is it to have backed up your data on something that was sitting right next to the PC?

That's why Seagate is taking a multipronged approach, selling both hard drives and Web-based data services. Through its recent acquisition of Mirra Inc., Seagate offers a personal server that makes it easy to upload files, share them with others and recover them later if need be. It also plans to roll out a separate online storage and file-sharing service in August.

The file-sharing component is likely to please many users, and set some backup services apart from others. Although Mody raves about Carbonite (he's twice a winner with it, because he put it on his girlfriend's computer right before a machine-wrecking coffee spill) he wishes the service had a way for him to let friends and family access the pictures, videos and music he's uploaded for backup.

Some services already offer such media-sharing possibilities, including iBackup.com from Pro Softnet Corp. and Xdrive, which was bought last year by Time Warner Inc.'s AOL LLC. Both start at \$10 a month for 5 gigabytes of storage.

iBackup launched in 1999 and now holds more than 150 terabytes of data for its customers in five locations around the world, spokesman Raghu Kulkarni said.

Recall that 150 terabytes would be roughly equivalent to 150 million books. So it would seem iBackup is no secret. But Kulkarni suggests that amount of data is nothing compared to what would roll in if online backup really became widespread.

"It's still a field that has to get the real attention of the consumers," he said. "Because backup in general is not a very cool thing."

On the Net:

Some online backup services:

<http://www.carbonite.com>

<http://www.ibackup.com>

<http://www.xdrive.com>

<http://onlinebackup.connected.com>