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focus on TECH

Office suites, 'cloud computing,' LED lighting in the news

By Art Snyder

Technology is your best friend, so to speak, but that doesn't mean that technology enriches only your back-office rink activities. Nope. Software is made for computing, away from the rush of skates and nacho-chomping teens, but your lighting and signage offer rich prospects for improving your profit profile. That holds for your redemption area, your vending and foodservice areas, your pro shop and every other area that builds your success. To these ends, we have details below on LED lighting and signage, Microsoft Office 2010 and Ashampoo® Office 2010 suites, ClubSymantec and a few other items.

Office suites from Ashampoo® and Microsoft

Competition often brings out the best in participants, and that's never truer than with software suites for everyday use in your office. Ashampoo® Office 2010 and

Microsoft Office 2010 are two such offerings, and I've had time to use Ashampoo® for several weeks, to impressive results. It's a full-featured suite that with its word-processing program, TextMaker, you'll think you're using a recent version of the familiar Microsoft Word program. You'll be able to compose everything from media releases to work schedules, and not give the tasks much undue thought. TextMaker is very intuitive, for easy use, and it's fully compatible with MS Word — any file created in TextMaker is Word-accessible. You can "test drive" Ashampoo® Office 2010 for free; just download the program to any Windows XP or later computer and give it a whirl. If you like it, you can ante up the list price of $59.99. For more, visit ashampoo.com.

MS Office 2010 is almost official, with the target release date this month, but full-featured beta versions of the suite are free to download and test to your heart's content. As with most office suites, the word-processing

component is the workhorse, and it generally gets 95 percent of an office suite's use (no matter who makes the suite), and Word has long been the industry standard. It's an excellent program, and it has a jillion features that you seldom or never use. But, it's comforting to know it's the pacesetter. (I've generated all kinds of editorial with Word 2002, for almost a decade, and it's never fallen short of even the latest tasks.) Word 2010 is in this overkill mode, and it can do almost any job you throw at it, judging from the beta version I've tested. Pricing varies, but $100 or more for Word 2010 is about the lowest you'll find, and it can range far beyond that as part of MS Office 2010. The graphics-and-text program in the suite is MS Publisher, and it, too, is a worthy member of MS Office 2010 that should see good use for you, especially if you print fliers, newsletters, announcements and other documents where photographs and other digital graphics are essential.

For more on the suite, visit tinyurl.com/y8uaogo. While you're there, check out all the instructional materials Microsoft offers. Very extraordinary, thorough and helpful. Just watch yourself when tallying prices for suite upgrades or outright purchases of MS Office 2010.

The future now: LED lighting and signage

LED lighting is about to bust out all over, and that can spell savings for your energy-dependent rink. You use traditional lighting and signage everywhere, from your admissions area to your foodservice and vending areas and out over the floor, of course, with major-league lighting and sound equipment twirling your electric meter non-stop. And, those century-old forms of lighting and signage are inefficient users of energy. Fluorescent bulbs no doubt have established themselves as an efficient-energy partner at your rink, but the industry is moving toward fulltime use of the latest lighting format, LED lighting.

LED lighting and signage have a much longer service life compared to other types, and this technology permits more style variety and zip, to serve your customers better and bolster your bottom line. Jazzy LED signage is sure to hoist up total and per-transaction sales volumes in your pro shop, as well as your redemption, foodservice, private party and other profit centers. But right now, many — but not all — LED applications are a bit pricier than your mainstays, but the capital costs are sinking by the month. Your best bet for spring and

summer this year is to consult with LED specialists, such as Sound-Light-Karaoke, at werentsound.com and (425) 514-5595, and any other such advertisers. And be sure to call your local power company, as well as any LED electricians in your area, for initial LED prospects and an LED investment and upgrade timeline that stretches into 2011. It's probable that LED technology and big-dollar savings are in your immediate and long-term future.

Free Google Doc file storage

It's common to get part of your computer work done during your 9-to-5 day, but often enough, you might have to finish the task at hand — your rink schedule of upcoming hockey sessions or birthday parties, for example — when you get home. One option is to copy your unfinished document(s) onto a portable disk or USB plug-and-play flash drive, and that's fair enough. Now, however, you have cloud computing. That's where you save files to an online (Internet) site, to access later from home or any other location (say, a public library or friend's house, wherever you can go online through an available computer). Typically, that's so you can continue unfinished business via your home or other computer, accessing any files you stored at an online site where you previously had set up an account.

That's what Google now offers, thanks to their Google Docs service. Details: Store any file of 250 megabytes or less to your Google Docs account. Files can be ordinary Word or other text files, spreadsheets, presentations and PDF files, too. These may include graphic files and videos, as well. Google allows your account to have a total of 1GB of free storage. Should you exceed that threshold, Google will charge you annually 25 cents per gigabyte of needed storage. That's pretty capacious, and financially fair. The one major drawback with cloud computing: If your cloud host is knocked offline or somehow becomes "lost in space," or possibly goes belly-up bankrupt, you're out of luck trying to access your cloud account. This has happened with a number of providers of cloud services, but it's less likely to happen or to last for long when a host like gargantuan Google stutters with its service. For more, simply go to google.com and look for the Google Docs link.

In brief

•Xerox Phaser 8500: Xerox has stepped up with its Phaser 8500 series of small-business printers and multifunction devices that

are ideal for the busy rink. Most in this series can print, scan, fax and photocopy, and print output is rugged and fast, at 30PPM for color and black alike. Prices on these high-output printers start at $1,299. Ink color comes from high-efficiency, solid-color ink sticks that slash per-page print costs (and make for a quick, mess-free process when you need to replace an ink stick). For more, visit Xerox.com and do a Phaser search.

•ClubSymantec: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and that's the gist of Symantec's dedicated user site, ClubSymantec, at symantec.com/norton/clubsymantec. Famed for their several Norton antivirus, firewall and other safety software, Symantec here offers an array of their online software user manuals, tutorials

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and Q&A benefits tailored to a life of safe computing. The flagship program is Norton Internet Security 2010, and it's as mature and full-featured a suite of Windows security programs that you'll find. You can download it online at ClubSymantec and renew and update it there, too. A full discussion of cyber-threats and what Norton does about them is very beneficial. Free virus tests and security scans will give you insights regarding your computer's existing safety. As expected, ClubSymantec stands out as a pacesetter with your Windows safety being No. 1.

•Paint.NET: At getpaint.net, you can get a full rundown on a mature, richly featured graphics-editing program that will serve all rinks well: Paint.NET 3.5.2. You can download the software at their site and play with it all you wish, to get a handle on its abilities editing photographs and other graphics. Helpful site features for using the software will have you perusing a blog, a FAQ section, tutorials, plug-ins and more. The screenshots are especially effective, as they show exactly what the software looks like when you load it and begin to use it. Yes, it has all the bells and whistles you'd expect, such as clone, crop, contrast and other tools, and plenty of surprises that are too numerous to mention here. Trust me on this: Paint.NET 3.5.2. reminds me of pricey Photoshop graphics software, but without the cost. Nice!

Art Snyder is a longtime RINKSIDER contributor. He lives in Centerville, Ohio, and has used computers and technology since 1986.