

Sights & Sounds of Multimedia

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System Mechanic

There are numerous products that purport to clean and speed up your PC. I tested one of these, one with which I've had good experience in the past, System Mechanic.

SM examines many aspects of your computer and recommends changes that will improve performance and protection. It's up to you to select which to use, or you can use them all. Some of the tools SM offers are:

Repair the Registry. This file is the central file upon which Windows relies for all the information it needs to perform its work and to run the programs you want. As you add and delete programs, the Registry is supposed to be updated properly so that everything works as should be, but sometimes the update is imperfect. SM examines your Registry and offers to fix any problems it finds.

Fix broken shortcuts. You've probably had the experience of clicking on a program icon only to have Windows tell you that the program isn't there. It

may have been deleted or moved, but you and Windows don't know where or how. SM can find all those situations and fix them.

Repair hard drive problems. As your hard drive ages, parts of it may no longer work properly. When enough problems of this sort occur, drive failure is the result. SM can examine your drive, identify and repair many of these problems before they are serious enough to cause failure.

Fix an unbootable PC. When you can't boot it up, call on SM's Drive Medic recovery console to get back to business.

Speed up PC operation. There are several tools in SM to accomplish this, like drive defragmentation, Startup Optimizer, NetBooster and more.

SM includes a number of services that can be set up to be done automatically. SM calls these Active Care. Included are Clean-up Clutter (unneeded files), Registry Repair, Optimize Startup, Hard Drive Repair, Defragment and more.

The program checks for updates and, with your permission, downloads and installs them as they become available. This is a nice package of tools that is helpful, unobtrusive and inexpensive. The package may be installed on up to three computers at no additional cost.

About: System Mechanic 8.0

Manufacturer: iolo

www.iolo.com

Price: ±\$50; currently \$35 limited time special.

WildCharge

WildCharge is a tool that charges your electronic devices. It consists of a rectangle with silver bars (charging plates) running horizontally over the outer surface. A black bar on the left has an indicator light.

There's not much to using it. You plug one end of the supplied cord into a wall outlet, the other end into the WildCharge receptacle. When you do, a blue light in the black bar flashes briefly. It's now ready to charge one or more devices.



You can charge up to five “enabled” devices at the same time without the usual tangle of wires and plugs. (You may not have five devices to charge, but one or more can be simply set on the grid of silver bars to charge the device.)

The catch is that each device must be “WildCharge enabled.” To be “enabled” means encasing the device in a stretchy jacket that has contacts on the outside for the WildCharge plate and contacts on the inside touching terminals which connect inside your device to the battery. Each such jacket is tailored for the device with which it is used.

Instead of the tailored jacket, specific for each device to be charged, there is a small adapter that fits into the charging jack for many devices (the company says it works with 150 devices); the device can then be set on the WildCharge plate for charging.

The usefulness of the WildCharge depends mainly on how many devices you have to be charged at the same time. If only one, the charging cable that came with the device can be used just as easily, with no need for a jacket or adapter.

With more than one device, using the chargers that came with the devices means finding two wall plugs available and two sets of wires from device to wall plug. With even three the problem becomes unmanageable. Here is the advantage of WildCharge – only one wall plug and no wires.

The only caution in using the WildCharge is to not put anything on the plate other than your devices – not keys, coins or other metallic objects.

About: WildCharge

Manufacturer: Wildcharge
www.wildcharge.com

Price: ±\$80 for plate/jacket bundle; adapter alone ±\$35.



Weather Station

Honeywell has been known for many years for their instrumentation devices, applied to several industries. Recently, they have applied their expertise to develop a line of weather instruments.

I received a Weathertime unit for review. It is described as a long range forecaster, although “long range” is a relative term. We’re talking about the week ahead, not a month ahead.

The information provided includes:

- Date and time, provided from RF signals from US atomic clock.
- Display of month and day in any one of 6 languages.
- Sunrise/sunset times.
- Moon phase calendar and historical data.
- Cloud condition forecast for the next 12 and 24 hours.
- Barometric pressure.
- Indoor and outdoor temperature and humidity.
- Wind speed and gust history.

The station comes with three units: a main (indoor) display unit; an outdoor temperature sensor; and the wind sensor (anemometer). Each requires batteries, two for the main unit and two each for the other two units.

The display unit contains a wealth of information and it takes a while to understand it all. I found myself reading the manual, looking at the display, looking at the manual and back many times. I’ve finally figured out some of the information and how to retrieve that which is not constantly displayed, but it wasn’t easy!

The back and top of the main unit have several buttons that allow you to retrieve historical information and some data that you don’t need to know all the time. The Up and Down arrow buttons select which of the five data areas you wish to manipulate. Once selected, you use the Set and History buttons to cycle through the information.

The five data areas are: 1) Pressure window, which displays atmospheric pressure and history, sky condition and moon phase; 2) Clock window, which displays time, day of the week, time zone and alarms, if any are

set; 3) Sunrise/sunset times window; 4) Temperature and humidity window, which displays temperature and relative humidity outside (as reported by the outdoor sensor), temperature and humidity indoors and comfort level (as a single word, such as dry); 5) Wind window, which displays wind chill and wind speed (as reported by the wind sensor).

I could not get the wind sensor to work properly. I tried several locations, but the readings varied only from zero to about 8 nautical miles per hour, on a day when winds speeds were up to 40 mph. While there is a 15% difference between nautical miles and statute miles, it doesn't account for the dramatic difference between reported and actual wind speeds.

Another problem I had was the pressure window. It is supposed to be able to switch between two common ways to express atmospheric pressure: inches of mercury and millibars. Interestingly, the inches of mercury basis is shown in feet or meters! I'm not used to that sort of expression, and I don't know anyone else who is. Standard sea level pressure is 29.92 inches of mercury, which translates to about 2.5 feet. Even the millibar reading seemed "off," often being around 900; my recollection is that standard sea level pressure is 1012 mb.



Several alarms can be set: Snooze button, time alarm, temperature alarm (when temperature rises or decreases to alarm level) and freeze alarm.

I found the main unit display a bit difficult to read, especially the small print. This is in part due to the LCD screen with reflecting background. The shadow of the numbers/letters can make reading difficult. This is a complex instrument with a wealth of information available to you. The price is quite reasonable.

About: *Weather Station*

Manufacturer: Honeywell
www.hideckielectronics.com

Price: ±\$70

BACtrack

This is a breathalyzer unit I saw at the Consumer Electronics Show. I had heard that breathalyzers are not that accurate and asked to try one out.

The unit is quite small, being about one-half the size of a handheld cell phone. It has an information window and a button on the front side, two small holes on the sides at top and a battery compartment in the back. It requires two AA batteries, not provided.

The procedure is as follows:

- Take a drink or two (or three!)
- Wait at least 20 minutes without smoking, eating or further drinking
- Press the black button. The window will show a count-down starting from 50.
- When the count-down reaches 10, start to take a deep breath.
- When the count-down reaches zero, exhale for a full 5 seconds into one of the side holes
- You should exhale with mouth full open, not focus your breath into the holes.
- The unit will analyze your breath and give a blood-alcohol reading after a few seconds.