

November 2011 Newsletter

Passwords Revisited, Sticky Notes, and “Don’t press that Reset Button!”

This month, I have three short topics about making passwords easier to remember but harder to crack, an often overlooked Windows 7 feature, and a warning about those little red reset buttons.

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Passwords Revisited

I consider myself to be somewhat the creator of good passwords. A recent cartoon (of all things) sent to me by my son gave me a reason to question long-held assumptions about what is a good password. The issue is complexity – in order to have what is considered a good, strong password the general rules are:

- Don’t use names
- Don’t use common words found in the Dictionary
- Use a mix of letters, (Upper and Lower case), numbers, and symbols
- Make it longer than 6 characters

That strategy works, to a point. Let’s say the resulting password is \$G4t73Hy. Pretty good, but hard to remember for the average human. The cartoon from the website <http://xkcd.com/936/> argues that you can create a much easier-to-remember password by simply making it into a pass**phrase** that is long enough so even a computer would take too long to guess it, if ever. Using a pass**phrase** instead of a pass**word** is a very interesting concept. If you have trouble remembering complex passwords, I recommend using a passphrase for any website, computer or other device that does not have length restrictions.

Windows 7 “Sticky Notes”

I’ll bet you didn’t know Windows 7 has this neat little feature – I didn’t. I was introduced to it by a friend, and Sticky Notes are a good way to help you remember things you need to do. Simply stated, Windows Sticky Notes replicates in digital fashion on your computer desktop the same concept as paper 3M Post-it Notes.

To find Sticky Notes, click the Start Button, select All Programs, select Accessories, select Sticky Notes. Voila, the first one appears – just type a note. To make another, click the plus (+) symbol. To delete a sticky note, simply click the “X” symbol.

Sticky Notes are perhaps the ultimate in simplicity – there are no menus, nothing to click except the Add or delete symbols, and they stay on top of whatever program you are using until you delete them. If you typically have or accumulate several “to-do’s” throughout the day, it is a quick and easy way to jot them down and remember to actually do them. I found it to be somewhat fun to make notes, and more fun to delete them, knowing I got things done that day.

Don't Press That Reset Button!

All computer network equipment manufacturers put a "Reset" button on the bottom or rear of their equipment. This is a good thing, as a mis-configured router can easily be set back to the factory settings, and you can start over. The key phrase to keep in mind is "back to factory settings". Too often, in the fog of trying to troubleshoot why the internet does not work, many see that reset button and interpret it to be the same thing as rebooting a computer...

It is not the same thing! A "Reset" will erase all settings, and put the device in its as-delivered state. Especially with wireless routers, this will definitely cause your laptop to lose the internet, because it is looking for settings and passwords that no longer exist. If your wired devices require static IP addresses or certain port assignments, those are gone, and you will not be able to connect using a cable either. In the case of internet delivered via DSL, your DSL login and passwords are gone too, and no connection is possible until the login is restored.

Moral of The Story: Unless you know the settings for the router, and are prepared to re-enter the settings, don't press the Reset button! If you think the Router is stalled, or has lost the connection, simply un-plug the power cable, and leave it out for 5 minutes. Then plug it back in, wait another 2 minutes, then try to connect to the Internet. Exhaust all other troubleshooting steps before you consider using that oh-so-tempting little button!

As always, I welcome comments or suggestions!

-John Becker