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Best way to back up your data? Here's YOUR advice

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Not long ago, I began addressing the question: "What's the best way to back up data?" The reader reaction has been great. I received literally hundreds of responses from you about that first column.

Many of those responses centered on tragic real-life stories of how you got started on the road to data redemption. Make no mistake: Your hard drive will eventually crash. If you aren't backed up, you'll suffer the consequences--and they can be dire.

But many more of you offered some great, concrete suggestions for successful backup strategies. So, while it's impossible to offer a "one size fits all" solution, I hope you'll find the following ideas--some of them based on your input, others on my own research--useful in keeping your data safe.

What to back up. There are two schools of thought: Some people say you should back up your entire hard drive, others that you should just back up your important data. I subscribe to the latter theory, yet actually follow the former.

Automated vs. manual. Automated backups are always better than manual ones. Since backups can hog computer resources, it's best to do them at 3 a.m. or some other slack time. But, if you choose to back up during the late night or early morning, you'll have to leave your computer turned on overnight.

Tape. For most of us, tape-based backup solutions are too expensive and/or too complicated. Most require multiple tape changes, which is a pain, and the tapes themselves aren't cheap. But they do have the advantage of being easily portable, so you can take your precious data to a different location, where it's secure from fire and theft.

CDs and DVDs. I don't recommend CDs or even DVDs for backing up. CDs don't hold enough data for most backups, and you have to sit there and change the disks. DVDs hold more data, but you'll still need maybe a dozen to back up your drive, and they cost \$5 each. Recordable disks are great for small backups, I suppose, but lousy for anything else.

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Software. There are [too many options](#) when it comes to backup software. The one I trust is still Dantz's [Retrospect](#). Other people prefer other programs, with all sorts of good reasons. You can ask your friends what they use--but that probably won't be much help, because hardly anyone actually backs up their data.

Files and Settings Transfer Wizard. If all you're backing up is critical data, you should consider the [Files and Settings Transfer Wizard](#) in Windows XP. It's intended to move your data from an old machine to a new one. But it can also be used to make occasional backups of your documents, mail, and important application settings.

Online. Consider backing up online. Connected Corp.'s [BackupMyStuff](#), for example, costs as little as \$6.95 a month. Unfortunately, storage space is limited--as "little" as 100MB. Apple's [.Mac service](#) offers a similar feature.

Hard drives. One of the easiest ways to back up one of today's giant hard drives is with another of today's giant hard drives. They're cheap, fast, and frequently include a free copy of the personal version of Retrospect. I've invested in several FireWire/1394 and USB 2.0 devices, of varying capacities; if your computer doesn't support FireWire/1394 or USB 2.0, you can buy an add-on card.

Network storage. If you're backing up multiple machines on a network, you can use a network-attached storage device, like the [Quantum Snap Server](#). It'll back up all the hard drives on your network, as well as make public files accessible to everyone. One caveat: Because of its relatively slow connection (11mbps), my 802.11b wireless network seemed to crash when I was backing up across the net. I haven't fully tested this problem, and may have misdiagnosed it, but that's been my experience.

ABS. The absolute easiest way to back up may be one of the ABS (Automatic Backup System) devices from [CMS Peripherals](#). These are small (in size, not in capacity) hard drives built into sturdy, road-worthy cases. Plug one in and it backs up your machine. They work with all the MS operating systems as well as with Macintosh. Some even create a bootable drive that can be installed into your computer to replace a faulty drive. With a 60GB drive selling for \$699, this may be a pricey option on a per-machine basis. But it could be a great option for a notebook-heavy sales force.

The bottom line: Your best backup option is the one you'll actually use. It's all too easy to ignore the chore--so most people do. But if you think about how much it would cost to replace that information, then regular backups aren't really optional. Around my office, they're the law.

What do you think? Do you back up? If so, how do you do it? [TalkBack to me!](#)

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