

No. 93. Sometimes Microsoft Does It Right!

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Credit should be given where credit is due. There are some features of Windows 98 that are quite well done. This month is the subject of one – Windows Update.

If you click the Start button, the one in the lower left corner of your system tray, a Taskbar pops up with options. Shutdown, Log Off, Run, Help, Find, Settings, Documents, Favorites, Programs, and then several others depending upon the contents of your computer. Usually, however, the top item in the list is Windows Update. Maybe you have never used it. Well, you should, and it is even safe!

Before I tell you exactly what it does, let me tell you how to use it. First, make an Internet connection – dial up your ISP (Internet Service Provider), but don't bother starting your browser (Netscape or Internet Explorer). Once you are connected, then click the Start button and select Windows Update.

When you do, typically Internet Explorer will start and connect you to the Microsoft Windows Update site. In the upper left corner of the window, you will see three options. 1. Windows Update Home Page (that is where you are at present, and it appears in blue), 2. Product Updates (that is what you are interested in), and 3. Support Information. Select Product Updates by clicking it.

If you have never visited the site and done this before, the site will want to download a small program that it needs to be present on your machine. Let it - it is safe (discussed below). Once the little utility program has been downloaded, the site will pop up a notification in the middle of your screen with the following message:

Windows Update is customizing the product update catalog for your computer. This is done without sending any information to Microsoft.

While that message is on your screen, the site sends a complete catalog to your computer. The catalog lists all the Windows updates that are available (but you don't get to view it yet). Next, the little utility program that you downloaded now looks at the dates and versions of various Microsoft Windows components that are installed on your machine, and compares them with the catalog. For example, it might find that most components of your Windows OS (Operating System) are up-to-date. However, let us say a few components on your machine are not up-to-date - more recent versions are available on their website. Those OS components that are up-to-date will be deleted from the catalog listing, and only entries for those components for which there are updates will remain. Remember, this modified catalog resides in your machine, not on the Microsoft website.

When this process is all done, the box above will disappear and you will be presented with the catalog, organized in several categories, from which you can select those items you wish to download and install. The categories are Critical Updates, Picks of the Month, Recommended Updates, Additional Windows Features and Device Drivers. Pay particular attention to the first and the last – Critical Updates and Device Drivers. These are the ones that you absolutely should

download and install. It may take you several sessions to get these items, depending on what they are and how large they are. One minute downloads are no sweat, but some are quite large and may take some time to download. Some can be downloaded in groups, but others must be downloaded by themselves, installed, and a reboot done before additional updates can be downloaded. In any case, installation is automatic when downloading is finished, so the process is painless except for the time it takes. Do it. Critical Updates are most often security features designed to make your machine safer and less open to invasion by unscrupulous hackers. Device drivers will make your machine work better. Do it! It is safe and effective. Most important, as Microsoft promised in the pop-up window, no information about you or your computer is shared with Microsoft, since the catalog is modified directly on your machine.

Microsoft has done a very good job with this aspect of Windows. I cannot imagine a safer, more painless way to update the operating system and its components over the Internet. The only other way to do a good job at keeping your system up to date would be for Microsoft to send you a CD-ROM with updates. You and I both know that is not going to happen. However, they really have done a fine job of making it available, safely, via the Internet.

Microsoft deserves special kudos for protecting your security during this process. Downloading the entire catalog, then comparing it with what you have installed and deleting those items that are up to date is a very good feature. Your machine does not send them any information about you or it – just your requests for downloads when the comparison process is complete. Nice going, Microsoft! Happy Computing!