

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 103. How Do You Get the Labels Off?

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I have been asked this by many hams over the years, and thought the answer(s) would be worth sharing, even though it is a rather mundane topic. Basically, how do you get old labels off of floppy disks? The answer applies not only to floppies, but also to pill bottles, household cleaning containers and most any kind of plastic, glass or metal container that a ham might want to use. My approach comes from a lot of personal experimenting, but also from consultation with an engineer whose job it was to design the "sticky" in sticky labels. He and I were having dinner together after judging the state Science Fair, and when I found out what he did for a living, dinner conversation consisted of me pumping him about sticky stuff!

The best way, of course, is to simply peel off the label in one piece. Many times that will work straight away. However, the engineer gave me one useful tip. The secret is to do it oh so very sloooooowly. The adhesives holding many labels to their containers or floppy disks are rubber cement or some modern polymer that resembles rubber cement in its properties. The adhesives will stretch and finally let go if pulled slowly, but are very tenacious when stressed rapidly. A quick pull will either cause the cement to tear, resulting in glue residue on the container surface, or it will cause the paper label itself to tear because the glue is stronger than the label. So, if you have a stack of floppies to de-label, do it slowly while watching the evening news.

Another tip I discovered is that, once you tease up a corner of the label, pull the label nearly in the same plane as the container or floppy surface. Don't pull up, away from the surface. Try to have the label folded back on itself as you pull to release it from the surface. I don't really know why, but the labels tear much less frequently when stressed this way than if pulled away from the surface to which they are stuck. It may have something to do with the shear plane of the thin layer of glue.

Heat can be a very real ally in getting the glue to release cleanly. If you are working with any kind of container, fill it with very hot tap water and let it sit for a minute or two before you start peeling. Often, the heat will soften the glue, which will release its hold on the container very nicely. Use care, though, not to get the label wet. A wet label will tear much more easily than a dry one. For a glass or metal container, you can even use a heat gun or hair dryer to warm up the label (and the glue). Use care, though, since a heat gun can start a fire. Please avoid that! I don't recommend using a heat source to soften glue on a floppy. It often will warp or partially melt the protective plastic jacket, which is definitely not good for the throat of your computer's disk drive. So, for floppies, use the following method.

Dip a Q-tip in ordinary paint thinner, turpentine or mineral spirits. Yes, WD-40, olive oil, butter and a number of other oil-based solvent containing products will work, but plain old paint thinner is cheap (\$2/gallon), and the Q-tip method will let you put the solvent just where it is needed. Do not use products containing the solvents acetone or ether. Not only do these solvents stink, they are also more dangerous to your health than paint thinner and they pose a much greater fire hazard. Paint thinner is flammable, too, but it is not nearly so volatile as acetone or ether. The proof of this is that paint thinner does not smell as strongly, which means that less is evaporating into the air. Furthermore, acetone and ether will dissolve the plastic housing of floppy disks, while paint thinner will not damage most plastics. Use a Q-tip to saturate just the label, and

avoid slopping it all over other areas of the disk. The label will immediately darken as the paint thinner soaks into the paper fibers. It needs to penetrate those fibers and wick all the way through the paper to reach and soften the underlying adhesive, so put enough on to saturate the label. Then, go have a cup of coffee or do something else for at least 10 minutes. When you come back, the label should peel off nicely.

Paint thinner may not penetrate some plastic-coated paper labels very well. You can tell that a coating is impeding penetration if the label doesn't darken quickly when you apply the paint thinner. This just means you may have to saturate the label more than once. Do it, let it soak for 10 minutes, then saturate it again. Rest assured, it will eventually soak through. Use patience; have two cups of coffee. Again, peel slowly so that the label does not tear. The aim is to have it come off in one piece. If it does tear, abandon that edge and start peeling again from another intact corner of the label. When the label is off, moisten your paper towel-covered finger with a minimal amount of paint thinner, and use this to clean off any residual glue on the surface. Dry the surface with a dry corner of the paper towel, and you are finished.

This method will work in almost every case. However, you may come across a label that will just not let go of the surface it is stuck to. I estimate that perhaps 1% of the thousands of floppies I have cleaned fall into this category. The solution? Throw that one away. It is not worth the effort.

There you have it. I hope you will forgive me for wandering off the high-tech topics for a moment. But the question is often asked, which means that people are interested in the answer. Just trying to meet a need. Happy Computing!