

# Windows tinkers with Sidebar and Gadgets



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Windows XP is finally starting to fade. XP was one of the best versions of Windows Microsoft has ever put out before Windows 7. The worst, of course, was 10 years ago when they threw out (after throwing it together) Windows ME. Anyone who bought a computer during those painful six months of ME availability knows what I'm talking about.

Though XP had a rough start in 2002, it really took off after the first major update called XP Service Pack I. From that point Windows users and support yahoos like me had a stable operating system with very few "blue screens of death."

Vista was another story. At the get-go, incompatibility problems plagued Microsoft along with users fussing how it significantly slowed down their computers. I was scrambling to add memory to poorly configured computers due to needing at least 1 GB of RAM just to run the operating system sufficiently.

Things stabilized a bit later after Vista Service Pack 1 came out but the damage was already done. That version of Windows was so blackballed it not only hurt Microsoft sales but it forced them to do something I'd never seen before.

Vendors like Dell and Acer started shipping Windows XP downgrade discs within the Vista installed computer boxes so users could drop their PC back down to XP.

The final result of this was an utter contempt for Vista with XP remaining the dominant Windows version for many years. Most large corporate environments shunned Vista and kept their solid and stabilized version of Windows XP on company PCs.

Only now with Windows 7 are both home users and company PC admins willing to upgrade due to the improved stability, better performance, and slicker user interface.

One good thing about Windows Vista I liked is the Windows Sidebar to the right of the desktop and the assortment of available gadgets. I jumped on this years ago as I was watching the stock market rise in 2007 and then crash in 2008. One of the first gadgets I installed was the Stock Ticker whose data is provided by MSN.

These gadgets are small programs with a reduced display that pins onto the right side of your desktop within the Windows Sidebar. They are active components dynamically displaying information associated with the specific

gadget. In the fall of 2008 when the market was melting, I was continuously and nervously watching the Stock Ticker gadget display red negative numbers at almost every closing bell.

Sometimes too much information can drive you nuts, and that financial gadget was both a worrisome source as well as a valuable catalyst that urged me to get out of the American financial system and bring those resources back home to Washington County and start up a home rental company.

Other economic gadgets I have installed and constantly watch to this day are the Currency Gadget from Microsoft and Silver & Gold Gadget from Strickland Software. The Currency Gadget has been quite interesting to watch over the past year observing the dollar drop like a rock until December and rocket back up due to the Euro getting trashed due to worse financial problems in places like Greece and Spain.

The Silver and Gold Gadget has been displaying a static price with gold around \$1,100/oz. and silver rounding \$17/oz. since December. Odds are when the deficit/debt monster rears its ugly head in our country, the numbers from those two Gadgets are going to really take off along with my Stock and Currency Gadgets taking a big dive into the red.

But don't listen to Johnny Doom and

Gloom since all I reference is history — remember what ended the Soviet Union?

On to the lighter side as my wife rolls her eyes. I've got some other standard Sidebar Gadgets that are also helpful. I have both the analog clock and the calendar Gadgets running just to keep me mindful of the time and date.

Just seeing the highlighted date of the month helps me remember things like the 15th to deposit my payroll taxes, and the 20th for state sales taxes filings, and the 25th for the group health insurance payment.

Since space is limited on the sidebar I only have room for one last Gadget and that is the Multi Meter which graphically shows the consumption of my computer's CPU and memory. This helps me debug problems with overbearing Windows applications that slow down my laptop.

All Sidebar Gadgets are available at [vista.gallery.microsoft.com](http://vista.gallery.microsoft.com) and most of them are free. On your Vista PC right-click on the Windows Sidebar and chose "Add Gadgets..." A window will pop up showing you the default Gadgets immediately available to you to initiate and configure.

From there you can find hundreds more helpful Gadgets by clicking on the lower right links that says "Get more Gadgets online" which takes you to that previously mentioned Web site.

You can choose from ones that provide weather, news feeds, and communications capabilities.

Think of these Gadgets as small Apps like the iPhone has just for the PC and fewer of them. There are Gadgets for social networking from Twitter and Facebook, ones for buying stuff on eBay and Amazon, and others to get your constantly flowing news like from the conservative *Wall Street Journal* or the liberal MSNBC.

Again, due to space restrictions you will probably limit the number of Gadgets to five or six depending on their size and layout. Any more than that and you'll have to scroll the Sidebar to see them which kills the "always showing" dynamic display.

Windows 7 dumped the Sidebar but kept the Gadgets by allowing them to show up anywhere on the active desktop. So that enables you to have many more times the Gadgets continuously running and displaying real-time information.

Bottom line: Windows Vista was painful but it did bring about the Sidebar and numerous helpful Gadgets.

Next week's column: Technology in the courtroom.

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