Backups (5):
Labeling Media

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This is the fifth in a series of short articles reviewing the theory and practice of making backups.

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Regardless of the size of one’s backup, every storage device (from diskettes to tape cartridges) should be clearly and unambiguously labeled. At a minimum, one should see the date, system from which data were copied, a description of the data, and the name of the person responsible for the storage medium. Most devices allow electronic labeling; diskettes or removable hard disks used on Windows systems, for example, can be labeled with up to 11 letters, numbers or the underscore character. Larger-capacity media such as cartridges used for UNIX and mainframe systems have extensive electronic labeling available. On some systems, it is possible to request specific storage media and have the system automatically refuse the wrong media if they are mounted in error. Tape library systems typically use optical bar codes that are automatically generated by the backup software and affixed to each cartridge for unique identification. Magnetic tapes and cartridges have electronic labels written onto the start of each unit with specifics that are particular to each operating system and tape-handling software.

Giving someone a blank storage medium or one with a flimsily attached label is a bad practice that leads to confusion and error. Sticky notes, for example, are not a good way of labeling diskettes and removable disks: if they are taken off, they can get lost; if they are left on, they can jam the disk drives. There are many types of labels for storage media, including printable sheets suitable for laser or inkjet printers and using adhesive that allows removal of the labels without leaving a sticky residue. At the very least, an exterior label should include the following information:

* Date the volume was created (e.g., “2001-09-08”)

* Originator (e.g., “Bob R. Jones, Accounting Dept”)

* Description of the contents (e.g., “Engineering Accounting Data for 2000”)

* Application program (e.g., “Quicken v2002”)

* Operating system (e.g., Windows 98).

In the next article, we'll look at how to create files on each backup volume to help identify it and its contents.

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The author has no financial interest whatever in any of the companies mentioned in this article and references to products should not be construed as endorsement or recommendation.
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