

Activation-Required Software Quietly Endangers Your Business

by Stever Robbins

Think twice before buying "activation required" software.

Microsoft has certainly endorsed a dangerous trend: software that requires activation to install and run it. More and more, it's not enough that you purchase software and install it with a serial number they give you; you must also be connected to the internet or call their telephone activation center to activate the software when you run it.

The reason is simple: the software publishers don't trust you. They think you're a thief, and want to monitor every installation of the software closely. It makes sense from their point of view, at least, if one assumes that customers are basically immoral, unethical criminals out to steal anything they can. But as customers, the activation trend is more than just unfriendly; it's outright dangerous.

The first of these activation schemes was Adobe Corporation's "Type on Call." They would sell you a CD full of fonts, and you would call Adobe to "unlock" fonts you had purchased.

Over time, I purchased over \$2,000 worth of fonts from Adobe. My corporate identity was built on those fonts, some of which cost upwards of \$500 for all the different weights and styles.

Then a couple of years ago, I bought a new computer. I went to install my Type-on-Call fonts and discovered that the activation servers had been shut down. Adobe had decided to discontinue the service, and suddenly I was no longer able to access fonts I'd paid dearly for. No one at Adobe was able to help, until bombarding the upper management with letters led one marketing manager sent me a CD-ROM of the fonts.

Here's the danger: in the interests of their fraud protection, you are integrating the business fortunes and decisions of the software vendor into your infrastructure. If they go out of business, get acquired, or just decide to stop supporting their service, the next time you need to install their software, you can't do it. If that software is critical to your business, you're just plain out of luck.

And even if they're still in business, it's still a business burden for you. You won't always have

a net connection when setting up a new machine. Sometimes—for security reasons or otherwise—you might want to install with your new machine disconnected from the network. Whatever the case, you'll now have to jump through activation hoops. Recently, Act 2005 required me to call an activation number, only to get a recorded message that all operators were at home preparing for a severe weather alert. So now, my business gets stalled by severe weather 3,000 miles away. Great.

Windows already takes way too long to reinstall, thanks to its convoluted design. If you have to make activation phone calls and convince a \$3.95/hour temp that you own the software you've already bought and paid for, you're spending more of your time and money just to satisfy their paranoia.

And speaking of paranoia, they don't trust you yet they expect you to trust them. They want you to let their activation program connect freely to the net. For all you know, their activation process also sends your financial data along with your activation code. Trust should be two-way, don't you think?

Of course, no company would ever use this as a technique for forcing you to upgrade. Microsoft, for example, would never abuse their activation system by dropping activation of old products, forcing you to upgrade the next time you buy a new computer. But if a Microsoft doobie reads this article, watch out, they just may change their mind.

Some of the best software I've ever used (and continue to use) has been discontinued over time. If it had required activation, I'd be out of luck, forced to use inferior software. Some great software has started requiring activation, so I'm sticking with the last version I could install at will:

- Windows 2000. XP requires activation.
- PGP 8. PGP 9.0 requires activation. Funny that a company supposedly devoted to their customers' integrity has a policy that could jeopardize a customer's entire business!
- Quicken and Quickbooks require activation.



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- Macromedia Dreamweaver MX. MX 2004 requires activation.
- AdSubtract Pro 2.55. AdSubtract Pro 3 requires activation.
- Act! 6.0. Act 2005 is a definite improvement, but requires activation.
- Most Adobe products now require activation.

It's a sorry world when vendors so callously disregard the business integrity of their customer, but as a customer, be wise and pressure vendors to sell us software that works the way our businesses require. ●