

Experts' Picks: Home-Inventory Software

by Judy Dahl

If your home were destroyed by a tornado or hurricane, could you prove you owned it or what it contained? A home inventory can help, and software tools—simple or sophisticated—can ease the process.

"In 2004, hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne tore across Florida," says Lee Hydechuk of Haines City, Fla. "If you plot their paths, where they intersect is where I live." Although he describes the damage to his home as "only moderate," Hydechuk's experience dealing with insurance adjustors and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) showed him how unprepared he was to recover from disasters. He realized from his own personal experience he needed to create a home inventory or a record of his possessions and important documents.

A detailed home inventory lists and describes your possessions--from appliances to closet contents--and often includes photographs or videos of rooms and items. Descriptions note where you bought each item and its make, model, and serial number, along with sales receipts, purchase contracts, and appraisals, if you have them.

A detailed inventory also should include copies of documents--such as the deed to your house, your driver's license, insurance policies, and credit union and other financial account information--you'd need to prove your identity and recreate your financial life in the event of a disaster. Store a copy of the inventory away from your home, and you can use it to expedite insurance claims, access your funds, and go on with your life if your home is severely damaged or destroyed.

Decide what you want to accomplish

Before deciding what tools you need to prepare a home inventory, decide what you want to accomplish. "Ask yourself how you'll want to access the information, what format you'll want it in, and how detailed it needs to be," recommends Vicki Norris, president of organizing firm Restoring Order, Portland, Ore.

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"It has to be something that you're willing to maintain and update, and for many people photos of rooms with close-ups of big-ticket items are enough," she adds. "Then you can save it in a simple Excel spreadsheet, copy it to a CD, and put it in your safe deposit box."

Norris notes that if you use general software, like Excel, or an Access database, or a Word document to record your inventory, you can set up your own categories and structure it in a way

that makes sense to you. Some home-inventory software products specify the categories and require numerous fields of information for each item.

"When people shop for software, they often want the bells and whistles, and then it may be so overwhelming that they just give up," Norris says. It's better to have a simple system that you're willing to maintain than an incomplete, outdated record made using the latest software.

On the other hand, some people find it helpful to have a home-inventory software product provide categories that guide them through the inventory process. And detail-oriented, tech-savvy consumers may appreciate the bells and whistles--such as advanced search engines that let you easily locate individual items.

"It's especially important that people living in areas prone to natural disasters have very detailed home inventories," says Gordon P. Turner, owner of Mycroft Computing, Baltimore, which offers the Everything I Own product. There are a variety of products to choose from; a Google search on "home inventory software" yields pages and pages of results.

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Try before buying

Before Hydechuk selected software to assist with his home inventory, his first step was to determine what he wanted the product to do. "Home-inventory software must meet three criteria," he says.

1. "It must be capable of containing in-depth details to the level the user wants to go. If people just want photos and brief descriptions, that's fine. If they want to say where they bought it, scan in documents, and add other notes, it needs to allow that as well.
2. "It needs to perform efficiently and rapidly. Home inventory is a monumental task in itself; if the software is cumbersome, you can lose patience very quickly.
3. "Most important, you need to be able to back up the software on a CD or USB flash drive, so that in time of need you can recover the data from any computer in the world."

Hydechuk researched available products, but didn't find one that included all his desired features. Since he's president of software firm Custom Apps Inc., Haines City, Fla., his solution was to develop his own product, Computerize Your Assets (CYA) .

While that's not an option for most of us, we can try various products and find the best alternative. Kevin Sparks, director of Kaizen Software Solutions, Fremont, Calif., says, "Most of the software contains the same basic features, and I think people should evaluate the free trial versions to identify a home-inventory product they find easy to use. Then they're more likely to keep up the motivation to get started and finish this important task." His company offers the Home Manager home-inventory product.

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You can download trial versions from most products' Web sites, and Sparks suggests printing sample reports and having your insurance agent confirm they include all information you'd need in the event of a claim. "And of course it's important that the software provide a robust backup capability that provides options for storing the data outside of your home for safe-keeping," he says.

Store a copy away from home

Storing a copy of your inventory away from home is essential. "Most people who do home inventories end up placing them in their homes, offices, or vaults--three wrong places to have them," says long-time disaster-services expert Michael Emmerman. He's director of the Special Operations Support Group, which advises law enforcement and public safety agencies, and managing director of investment management firm Neuberger Berman, LLC, both located in New York City. "In disasters I've seen, when homes, offices, and financial institutions are in the same area, all can be affected."

Regardless of the tools used to develop a home inventory, Emmerman advocates creating two "red files," envelopes containing paper or electronic copies (a CD or USB flash drive) of all your financial documents and your home inventory. "Keep one copy and send the other to a trusted friend, family member, or paid fiduciary (such as a trust officer) in an area of the country where you're not," he says.

Some software allows you to store your home inventory online, but Emmerman recommends against this. "I have a real issue with placing financial information on a supposedly secure Internet site," he says. "We're not at the point where that's sufficiently secure. It's nice to access your information from anywhere in the world, but anyone else could potentially access it too. I'd rather have a trusted party ship it back to me after a disaster."

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Keep it up-to-date

Even the most sophisticated software can't keep your inventory up-to-date for you. "That's one of the trickiest things because it's so rare that you need the information," says Susan Lannis, president of ORGANIZATION Plus! Inc., Portland, Ore. "I don't live in a crisis-prone area, but you never know."

"It's hard to remember that as soon as I buy a new appliance, I need to update my inventory," she continues. "But I figure if I have 80% of my stuff recorded I'm probably in pretty good shape."

She's tried several mechanisms to help her remember, and has settled on making it a New Year's activity. "It doesn't always happen that day, but it does happen," says Lannis. "If I lived in a tornado area, I'd do it at the start of each year's tornado season."

Whatever system you use to manage your home inventory, "Take the time to document those things that you'll absolutely have to replace to get back on your feet after a disaster," Hydechuk stresses. "Whatever tools you use, even if it's a camera, a notepad, and a piece of paper, do something. I can't emphasize that enough."