

Scanner helps climb family tree

While working on my family tree, I often discover images in books, journals and courthouse manuals that I would like to copy. Photocopying the documents doesn't work well because the spine of the book distorts the item and the resolution just isn't there.

Plustek has brought to consumers a book scanner, a pretty slick idea that extends the scanning bed right to the edge of the screen. The OptiBook 3600 ought to be a first choice among genealogists, librarians, students, copy rooms and others who need book-scanning - but it's also a first-rate general scanner.

Featuring a high-resolution scanning engine with a hardware resolution of 1,200 dots per inch, the scanner has the background hardware to pull out decent scans. With a maximum flatbed scanning area of 8.5 x 11 inches, the Plustek will happily scan standard books and papers. Using in-house developed technology known as Shadow Elimination Element, the OpticBook 3600 is capable of performing scans on book pages without a hint of shadowing or distorted text

Its size is both a plus and a minus; it is compact enough to take with you to the library, your local Family History Center or on the road, but it's not large enough to copy legal documents or larger books in one pass. I tend to think the size is a positive, but if you need a large-format scanner this wouldn't be the one for you.

The scanner was simple to install on the Windows XP test system I used and the suite of software was complete and easy to use, including Ulead PhotoImpact and some specialized book software. The connection works fine on USB 2.0 connections with backward compatibility to the earlier USB format.

There are seven "one-touch" buttons on the scanner that, once the software suite is installed, make repetitive scans easy.

The scanner retails for about \$249. For details, hit www.plustek.com.

Users of instant messenger programs are often frustrated by the different platforms. Unlike the phone, where you can pick up a receiver and dial anyone in the country, you cannot connect to anyone via instant messenger until you know what platform they use, be it Yahoo, AIM, MSN, ICQ or others.

There are several programs out there that attempt to combine the disparate formats into one, a sort of online Esperanto. I have played with a couple and I think the best of them so far is Trillian, which comes in both free and paid versions. I am pretty impressed with even the free version because it does not install any spyware or adware that I could discover following the installation.

The pro version adds some features and costs a reasonable \$25, which includes a year's worth of patches and support.

Installation of both versions was simple and, if you remember all of your various logons for AIM, Yahoo and other IM systems, you'll be up and running in moments. Needless to say, the various platforms aren't crazy about services like Trillian taking their customers. But so far Trillian has successfully patched its systems to continue connections.

You can get Trillian at www.trillian.cc

WEEKLY WEB WONDER: Aside from the hogging graphic, I like the new Discovery Channel series of Web sites. See them at www.discovery.com.

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