

## Powerful Tech Alternatives for Home Based Agents

### So many choices; so many FREE choices!

Not so long ago the typical computer user had very few real choices. Compatibility was the primary motivator. You HAD to be compatible with your customers and your colleagues. Thus, the ubiquitous Microsoft Windows, Microsoft Office (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Access, Publisher), Microsoft Internet Explorer, Microsoft Outlook, and Microsoft Outlook Express all became the world "standard."

So, what's the problem? Some people say choice, simplicity, price and security have become significant problems. Luckily, you can now have all of these AND compatibility. The world of available alternatives to the old stand-bys is bigger than ever, cheaper than ever (sometimes free), more secure than ever, easier than ever, and more compatible than ever.

**Should you switch to an alternative?** Maybe, maybe not; but you'll never know until you learn a bit more about what is available and what has motivated others to make the switch.

### The Cost Factor

Microsoft Office costs around \$500 (less for upgrade pricing) per computer. New "activation" systems prevent illegal installations on multiple.

Now imagine something that looks like MS Office, works like MS Office, is completely compatible with MS Office, but **costs absolutely nothing**? Oh, it is also more secure, less vulnerable to viruses and other malware, and it is easier to use, because it lacks the "bloat" of rarely used features. Sound good? It's called Open Office. Now perhaps you'll see why so many people are taking a second look at alternatives!

### The Security Factor

Viruses, worms, spyware hackers and other annoyances are another reason people are being drawn to alternatives. Microsoft Office is an amazing tool – an amazingly popular tool. This popularity also makes it a popular target for the computer evil-doers of the world. They are more likely to make a "hit" with more victims if they focus on widely used software.

Popularity is not the only thing that makes MS Office a target. The endless array of confusing patches, hot fixes and updates create vulnerability. Often the updates and fixes are not installed (lack of knowledge, time, or interest), or in many cases the updates themselves create other problems have made people leery of them. In other cases, the agents may simply ignore or cancel automatic updates.

### What are some of the top tech alternatives?

#### MS Office Suite Alternatives

- **Google – all components free**
  - Google Documents is an online alternative to Word and Excel
  - Gmail is an online alternatives to Outlook Express
  - Google Calendar is an online alternative to the calendar feature in Outlook
  - Google Picasa image management/editing

### Personal presentations, from anywhere!

When you consult with a client on the phone, you are doing something MOST sales people in world would refer to as a PRESENTATION! Imagine you were about to present your recommendations for a luxury travel client, but instead of it being on the phone, it was in a boardroom full of high-power executives. You would likely create a visual presentation using something like PowerPoint, right? Now, take that same concept and imagine doing it for your clients via the Internet – live.

Most travel agents are now familiar with "webinars" where you connect via telephone to an instructor and you watch the visuals (usually PowerPoint) by logging into a website. What if you did the same thing for your clients? Today, it's easy!



You have many choices for “remote presentations”, but the top provider is WebEx.com. You can set up an instant “meeting” where you can present anything on your computer to one or more other people. Once you start your “meeting” you’ll be given a unique URL (web address) to give to your clients. When they access that URL, anything you want them to see will magically appear on their screen. That could be a PowerPoint presentation, a website, a video, even you if you have a web cam!

WebEx is great, but there is a fee of about \$0.35 per minute per connection. Google to the rescue! Google now offers FREE remote presentations! You’ll need to set up a free Google Account (click sign-in on the Google home page). You can then make a presentation of anything that lives on your computer to as many people as you like.

*Tip: The only catch is that anyone viewing your presentation must also have a Google account. MOST people now use Gmail (which is a Google account). So, why not set up a few accounts of your own on Google, just for making presentations. Call them AgencyGuest1, AgencyGuest2, etc. Then, you can give your clients one of the accounts and it’s password to use for your presentation. Be sure and change the password later so you can keep control of the account.*

**Go to GOOGLE.COM, and then click MORE** – look for Docs and Spreadsheet, Gmail, Calendar and Picasa. Create a free Google Account to tie them all together!

- **Open Office – all components free**
  - “Write” is an alternative to Word
  - “Impress” is an alternative to PowerPoint
  - “Calc” is an alternative to Excel
  - “Draw” is an graphics program
  - “Base” is an alternative to Access
  - “Math” is a high-level mathematics application
  - Download separately or all together as a suite

**Download at: [OPENOFFICE.ORG](http://OPENOFFICE.ORG)**

**Using a Mac? Check out the Mac optimized version called Neo Office at [NEOFFICE.COM](http://NEOFFICE.COM)**

### **Internet Explorer (browser) Alternatives**

- **Firefox – by far the most popular free alternative browser**
  - Fast, secure, follows all industry standard (believe it or not, Internet Explorer does not follow all industry standards)
  - Spyware and adware cannot automatically install in Firefox!
  - Built-in pop-up blockers and ad blockers
  - “Tabbed browsing”
  - Built-in RSS reader
  - Google Toolbar integration (if desired)

**Download at [GETFIREFOX.COM](http://GETFIREFOX.COM)**

### **Outlook Alternatives**

- **Thunderbird – free, from the organization that brought you Firefox**
  - Not really a competitor to Outlook, but a definite alternative to Outlook EXPRESS
  - Full featured, IMAP, POP, HTML, and rich text
  - Automatically imports from existing email program
  - Built-in anti-phishing, Advanced security, encryption, and antivirus all with automatic updates



Download at [GETTHUNDERBIRD.COM](http://GETTHUNDERBIRD.COM)

- **Gmail** (see Google under MS Office Alternatives above)
- **Barco Pro** – not free but a great deal for full contact management
  - All the security of Thunderbird above, plus shared calendars and more for \$79

Download at [pocosystems.com](http://pocosystems.com)

#### Other Alternatives and Cool Tid Bits

- **Efax.com** – why pay for a dedicated phone line for faxes? With Efax, you'll be assigned your very own "fax number." Any faxes sent to that number will be redirected to your email inbox! The cost is \$12.95 a month – far less than a dedicated phone line. Efax also has outbound fax and broadcast fax services. You could just keep your fax machine and plug it into your primary line, just for sending outbound faxes. Many new multifunction printers can send/receive faxes too.
- **The GIMP – a free alternative to Photoshop**  
Photoshop is a \$600 professional level image-editing tool. The learning curve is steep but the results are amazing. For consumer level editing, opt for Photoshop ELEMENTS, a \$100 simplified version. If you want to spend ZERO money, The GIMP is an option, but it is on par with the pro version of Photoshop.  
**Download at [GIMP.ORG](http://GIMP.ORG)**
- **Blogger.com** (A Google company) – create your own website/blog in minutes! It's all free, and you don't need any knowledge of HTML!
- **Homesite** – inexpensive and easy website creation/management. This is an affordable alternative to Dreamweaver. **download at [MACROMEDIA.COM](http://MACROMEDIA.COM) for \$99.**
- **Inkscape** – graphics and image creation/editing, free **download at [INKSCAPE.ORG](http://INKSCAPE.ORG)**
- **CutePDF Writer** – turn any printable document into a PDF file. **Download at [CUTEPDF.COM](http://CUTEPDF.COM)**
- **Zamzar.com** – an online converter! Covert almost any file or graphic format into almost any other!
- **Yousendit.com** – send giant files without email size limitations.