

# RANDOM

William Blinn  
COMMUNICATIONS

179 Caren Avenue  
Worthington, Ohio 43085  
614-785-9359  
Fax 877-870-4892  
www.Blinn.com

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

# THOUGHTS

## Making repetitive tasks more tolerable

If only somebody would make a Macro Express for mowing the lawn, washing dishes, or doing the laundry! I can't help you with any of those tasks, but if you have some computer-based tasks that you have to repeat and repeat and repeat, you're going to like Macro Express. It's a \$40 program that you can teach to perform complex tasks, even when you're sleeping.

It works like this: You tell Macro Express, either by pointing and clicking or by having the program watch what you do, what you want done. Then you tell Macro Express to do what you told it to do.

And, unlike a cat, it does exactly that.

Here's an example. Let's say I have a business that needs to send eight data files to an FTP site every weekday. To obtain these files, I have to run a report generator program and each report takes several minutes to complete because I have to answer questions indicating the date range I want to use and then wait for the report to finish. The task takes perhaps 30 to 40 minutes per day.

What if I had a way to examine the working directory on my computer to find existing copies of the report files, delete those files if they are present, then open the report generator, select the appropriate report, enter today's data and a date 30 days in the past, choose the appropriate company to run the report for, wait until the report has finished generating the output file, close the report generator, and transmit the file via FTP? And what if I could have the process repeat 7 more times, once for each of the files that I need to submit. And what if I could have this all happen at 1am, when the workstation and the server are both idle?

Macro Express can do all this and lots more, as you can tell from the list of commands shown at the right. Each of the general categories (indicated by a black triangle) has several, and in many cases several dozen, related commands. There's very little a human can do that Macro Express can't accomplish.

### One big macro or lots of smaller ones?

It makes sense to me to break large tasks up into smaller components that can be tested and debugged individually (not that I ever make a mistake that requires debugging, of course.)

This approach also allows me to create macros that can be reused within other macros—submitting the password, for

example, and setting internal variables at the beginning of each macro.

Macro Express commands are added when you select them and tell Macro Express to add them to the stack. In most cases, you'll then see a dialog box that asks for specific information about the command.

Macro Express has an encrypted text option so that a password can be hidden from prying eyes, but entering passwords in plain text within a macro makes updates easier and macros can be secured with individual passwords.

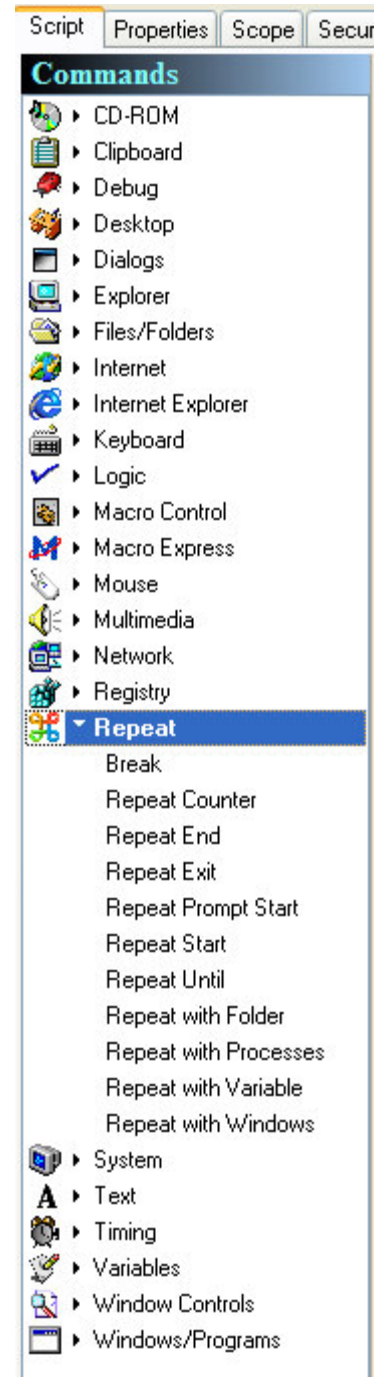
### Connectivity

Because Macro Express must establish an FTP connection, it needs the name of the FTP server, a user name, and a password. The password is encrypted.

I can save the result from the login to a variable that I can then use to confirm success. Macro Express has four types of variables, text, integer, floating, and control (99 of each).

I want this procedure to run Monday through Friday at 1am when I'm sleeping and the computer isn't busy. To make that happen, I scheduled the master macro to run and it calls each of the other macros sequentially.

To ensure that Macro Express is running and has



the proper macro file loaded at 1am, I have the Windows Task Scheduler reload Macro Express at 12:30am.

## Hands off my macros!

Because I don't want anyone to tinker with my macros when I'm not around, I set password protection so that only someone who knows the password can open the file for editing, although anyone who can log on to the computer would be able to run the macro.

It's possible to require a password for running the macro. I didn't do that because it runs at 1am when nobody would be around to provide the password.

If you have jobs that you have to do over and over, this is the application that will make your life more sanguine. You'll find more information at [www.MacroExpress.com](http://www.MacroExpress.com). **B**

## Radio in a digital age

One year ago, on May 21, I wrote "Until such time (if ever) that Technology Corner returns to the air we'll give podcasting a try. Joe and I probably won't be able to schedule time during the week to record the show, so for now it'll be just me. I'm learning the procedure for creating a podcast as I write this article, which will give you the information you'll need to listen." During the past year, my long-time radio program, Technology Corner, changed its name to TechByter Worldwide and expanded its viewpoint from central Ohio to the entire planet. Most of the listeners previously listened to the program on WTVN, but many are new listeners who are far beyond the range of WTVN's 5000-watt signal. Radio continues to change.

## What are you listening to?

As I write this article, I'm listening to *Pandora*, an on-line "radio station" that plays on the music it thinks I'll like based on what I tell it. If Pandora plays something I don't like, I can tell it immediately and it moves to the next tune. My choices today include 18,000-plus selections I have in iTunes, services such as Pandora, XM radio's hundreds of channels, and broadcast. I listen to broadcast (NPR mostly) only when I'm in the car. This is a reality radio is facing everywhere.

A year ago, it appeared that Technology Corner had come to an end after something like 17 years on the air. Joe Bradley left the Sunday morning program and Clear Channel did what Clear Channel does when it can: It replaced a live local program with a canned program. Good for the bottom line. Not so good for the audience. But, to quote one of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut, so it goes.

Being a broadcast guy, I'd always considered podcasts to be inferior, much as the journalist in me generally considered blogs to be inferior. The past year has proven that I was wrong about podcasts and I'm beginning to rethink blogs.

Podcasting has advantages for listeners and for content providers. I can record the program at a time that's convenient for me; listeners can listen at a time that's convenient for them. If something interrupts, listeners can stop the podcast and continue it later. If the topic isn't interesting, they can

## Meowzers! Yep, it's true that this is the podcast's first birthday. Who needs a radio station these days?



fast forward through it or turn it off. And if I should happen to say something compelling, a listener can rewind and listen again. I don't have to drive to the radio station. There are no commercials or other program components that serve to reduce an hour's worth of a broadcast program to between 15 and 20 minutes. Instead, listeners get 15 to 20 minutes of tech talk in one more or less 15 to 20 minute cohesive lump.

## Does your business have similar challenges?

This is a tough time to be in radio. Clear Channel doesn't "fire" long-time employees, they just fail to renew their contracts. To be fair, it's not only Clear Channel; they're just the biggest and the ones doing the most harm to the medium. The competition is intense and getting worse. Technology makes it easy to obtain podcasts of your favorite programs and listen to them when it's convenient. Over-the-air broadcasting with its never-ending stream of commercials that repeat endlessly, hour after hour, continues to do everything it can to alienate listeners.

I'm not really knocking Clear Channel, though. Companies today see their primary task as taking care of the shareholders and staying in business; customers and employees come in a distant third and fourth. But let's face it: If a company doesn't stay in business, nobody has a job and the customers won't be served at all.

So in finding a way to increase revenue or decrease costs, it makes sense, from a business perspective, to sacrifice high-paid employees who have been around for 20 years or more and to bring in lower-wage employees. It is apparently not acceptable to ask the shareholders to expect a smaller return on investment or the top executives to forego the vacation home in the mountains. That may make it sound like I am bitter about all this, but change happens. I suspect that some people at Clear Channel wish they could find another way.

The state of radio today is not so good and, as I've told a lot of people, it's a good business to have been a part of, back when it was fun. I'm thankful that Clear Channel cut Technology Corner loose. If I'd really stopped to think about it, I probably would have been podcasting at least a year earlier—maybe two. Things change. What happens, happens. And I really do like things the way they are now. **B**

## on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"A successful manager  
has learned the difference between  
CHARGE! and FOLLOW ME!"