

What You Need To Know About Degaussing

Selecting a Degausser, Using a Degausser and Outsourcing Degaussing Services

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DEGAUSSING

Individuals and businesses alike should be acutely aware of the importance of protecting personal data, as well as extremely diligent in the process of destroying old or unneeded data. Until about five years ago it wasn't a priority. Identity theft has become big business for thieves. We all remember the TV ad where a thief rummages through your garbage the night before pickup, ready to steal your identity and important documents.

There are rules and regulations today that outline how to protect valuable information.

Sarbanes-Oxley, FACTA, HIPAA, and a host of state rules and regulations all pontificate about the protection and disposal of recorded media, or what I will refer to as stored media. They all spell out the fact that individuals and business cannot discard of anything that has, or relates to, private information without first eliminating the data. Although these regulations relate to personnel information, most public, private and governmental entities want to -- and demand -- protection of production processing information, tax returns, trade secrets, military and governmental data, product formulas, software codes, and the like. All the aforementioned regulations can be found on the Internet. If your firm is not in compliance with these regulations, it could face a hefty fine, sometimes to the tune of \$250,000.

WHAT IS DEGAUSSING? HOW DOES DEGAUSSING WORK?

One of the most secure ways to eliminate information on hard drives and magnetic computer tape media is to degauss\erase the information. Simply put, degaussing is a magnetic field using an alternating field of sufficient intensity to saturate the media. The magnetic field is then slowly withdrawn or reduced and the magnetic media is left in a magnetic neutral state, or erased. Part of the hard drive has a program called a servo, installed on the drive by the manufacturer, which also is erased. Degaussing the servo renders the drive useless.

A common misperception many first time degausser users have is their belief that they must have a degausser that is Department of Defense (DOD) or National Security Agency (NSA) compliant. Usually, when I question this statement, folks tell me their boss said that was a requirement. Or, they tell me it has to be Sarbanes-Oxley, FACTA, or HIPAA compliant. These regulations are guidelines and do not tell you what equipment to use or indicate a specific way of eliminating proprietary data. They simply state that you have to do it.

Another misperception concerns DOD approval. The DOD does not approve of anything, but merely recommends. If a manufacturer presents a degausser to DOD and the specifications claim it will erase a 300 GB hard drive, then DOD would probably add it to their list of recommended products. The problem is DOD, as of this writing, has not tested or recommended products in several years. This means that all the degaussers that degauss high coercivity drives and tape made today have

never been tested by a governmental agency. This does not mean newer degaussers will not work. In fact, they function quite well. There are a few degaussers that are approved by DOD and NSA, however, they have limited erase capabilities (megabyte capacity) and were blessed several years ago.

PURCHASING A DEGAUSSER

There are two considerations when researching a potential purchase: 1) Present hard drive and computer tape capacity and 2) future capacity. Why? In the last year or so most degausser manufacturers recognized the severe increase in gigabyte capacity and have had to redesign to match or exceed the increase in degauss/erase capability.

Depending on how your company is structured, a degausser could be a capital expenditure and depreciated over several years. Higher erase-capacity degaussers are more expensive now than even a year ago. Often I get requests for an inexpensive degausser to erase today's higher capacity drives and media. I equate this to someone seeking a heart transplant for the cost of an oil change. The truth is that degaussers used to be inexpensive because hard drives and magnetic tapes were not very complicated. Diskettes, round reel tape, and tape cartridges are made of gamma ferric oxide and are somewhat easy to erase. Today, computer tape and hard drives are made of metal particle oxide. This material, together with the higher capacity of smaller discs, makes them extremely hard to erase. Faster degauss time, continuous duty machines, and larger magnets all add to increased degausser costs. It may be necessary to reallocate some of your IT budget for the proper equipment to satisfy your security requirements. Remember this simple truth: The cost of a degausser is going to be much less than the cost of a security breach.

Considering which degausser fills your present and future requirements should also include questions about the warranty and any other services provided by the retailer. DOD recommends testing each degausser at least once a year for continued use. It is in your best interest to look for a retailer that will recertify your degausser each year at little or no cost to you.

USING YOUR EXISTING DEGAUSSER

If your firm is currently using a degausser, how do you know it is degaussing your hard drives and media? Has anyone in your company read the manual to see what its degauss capability is? Do you even have the manual? Have you ever had it tested? Do you have a security program that keeps track of old drives and tapes? If you don't, you could be guilty of "Avoidance of Tolerance Risk." This means you're probably taking a big risk that your firm's hard drives and media are never found or reused. Although DOD suggests that degaussers are tested at least once a year, I can tell you that almost no one follows this recommendation.

USING AN OUTSIDE SERVICE

One way to dispose of IT equipment in an environmentally safe manner is to use a recycling facility or degausser service firm. One important issue not known to many users, and even many of the recycling firms, is the concept of "Transfer of Liability." In regard to hard drives and magnetic computer tape, the liability of any information on said media does not transfer from the originator of said media to the recycler\service firms, or one that accepts the equipment. There are consequences which, unfortunately, can come back to haunt you if you are not careful in selecting the right recycling\service firm.

To insure reliability from your recycler, you need to ask some pointed questions. As with purchasing a degausser, you want to be sure your stored media, hard drives and tapes are fully degaussed.

- § What type of degausser will be used?
- § How old is the degausser?
- § Has it ever been tested?
- § Where was it tested?
- § How do they know it works?
- § What type of accountability program do they have? For example, do they log in your drives? Do they issue an RA (return authorization) so they can track your media?
- § Are they going to overwrite or degauss, and then resell your hard drive or tape?

These are a few suggestions for determining how secure your stored media will be when it leaves your facility. Remember that the liability remains with you.

RETURNING A BROKEN HARD DRIVE OR MAGNETIC COMPUTER TAPE TO A MANUFACTURER

When a drive malfunctions, either a board problem or head-to-disc interference has occurred. There are times when you can recover the cost of a drive under warranty by returning it to the manufacturer. In some instances, you may have to send the drive or tape to a reseller. They, in turn, do some paperwork and forward the media to the manufacturer. In either case your information could be compromised.

If the heads crash on the surface it would be very difficult to recover any data. If there is a board failure, your information is available to anyone. Handing off the drive or tape to someone else will not let you off the hook. You can transfer assets but the liability of information on the drive or tape still rests with your firm. You really need to know how your product will be handled. As with any outside service, you need to ask the same questions I outlined above.

We all fall into one of the categories previously mentioned. I hope you have a better understanding of how to protect your company's information. Also, be aware of the consequences if you don't. When you consider that your company's private data is on other firms' media, it brings a whole new understanding of the responsibility we all have to treat other's data in the way we'd want our own to be treated.

You can contact Ron Carboy at www.periphman.com, www.server-room-furniture.com or call 1-800-468-6888. Peripheral Manufacturing, Inc. sells and services degaussers. The company offers certification service (free of charge under some conditions) once a year for equipment they sell. Peripheral Manufacturing also offers a service to test all degaussers for a small fee. If you want to see how your degausser stacks up, call or email periphman@periphman.com for additional information.