Low-cost and Free Software: Priceless Assets
For Your Public Relations Program

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ABSTRACT: There is a myriad of free and low-cost software available today that does not require an extensive amount of time and energy to comprehend – and is easy to learn. Programs geared toward graphic publication and web design, audio and video creation and editing will be profiled as well as a new map-making tool courtesy of Google that is ideal for posting information about ULV fogging – and at no cost. The software that will be discussed is geared toward everyday computer users and allows them to stay current with the fast-paced and always changing electronic world.

Webster's dictionary defines the word, "myth" as, "to explain a practice, belief or natural phenomenon of something." This word could also pertain to computer software, which is often perceived as being horribly expensive and garners a huge learning curve in order to use it successfully, when in fact, it is actually quite the contrary.

The World Wide Web serves two purposes (at least how I see it): Information and the incredible amount of free software that is available, which is usually supported with free tutorials and other means of instruction.   The internet is abundant with these resources and most software is at a cost that allows potential buyers to use it on a "free trial" basis for a limited period of time. The software and resources that will be examined in this paper relate to the audio, video and graphic design elements that are important components of a public relations program.

A useful, free audio editing program called Audacity allows users to record, play and edit sounds, as well as to convert other media such as cassette tapes into digital files (i.e, .mp3 files). Audacity also includes an array of different audio effects, including the ability to make precise adjustments to the audio's speed while maintaining pitch. This is especially useful when working on an audio or video project where the exact length of time is required.

Expanding the discussion of video, Movie Maker is a program that is a part of the Microsoft Windows. If you use Windows, you already have this program! Movie Maker is a video creating and editing program that allows users to either capture video footage from a camcorder or import existing footage, as well as still images. This program also includes various effects features

such as visual transitions, special effects that include changing colors, an effect that 'ages' a video with a grainy appearance, and the ability to insert text or titles within a video. Users can actually create video by simply using still images with the enhancement of such transitions and effects as well. Once a project is complete, users can export it to a format that is suitable for uploading to Web sites and that can be viewed by other user's computers.

A low-cost program that can perform a multitude of tasks in regard to graphic design is called Snag It (Figure 1). The name is in reference to its screen-capture capability. Users can copy anything that is visible on their computer screen, manipulate (if necessary) within Snag It's powerful image editing program and then save it to a variety of file formats. Snag It even allows users to record video of what is visible on their computer screen. This is an excellent tool for putting together a tutorial of how to use a particular computer program or perhaps for capturing footage from a video online. A free trial is available before purchasing, which is about fifty dollars.

Two other resources on the Web that are of great benefit to a vector control district's public relations program are Google Maps and YouTube. Both applications are user-friendly, readily available on the internet, and of course, free of charge to use!

Google Maps is an ideal tool for posting ULV fogging maps on a district's Web site (Figure 2). Simple to use tools allow users to clearly mark and label fogging areas. It is completely interactive – visitors can zoom in or zoom out of the map and scroll around in any direction to give a better perspective of the fogging area. Once a free account is created with Google, users can pinpoint where they would like to create a map, and then a simple drawing tool is used to border the fogging area. Text can also be added if additional information is necessary. Once a map is created, the user can then copy the map's HTML code, which has already been provided, and then paste that code within the district website. The implementation of Google Maps with CCMVCD's website has significantly diminished the number of phone calls from the public, as well as the media, seeking more specific information in regard to ULV fogging activity.

YouTube is a popular Web site that allows users who create a free account to post videos that can be viewed by people worldwide. Aside from creating a personalized page, users can also embed their videos directly onto their own personal or business Web site. The benefit of embedding videos or maps onto a Web site is that this function uses no additional memory or storage space from your Web site hosting provider. The ability to post videos and maps is (literally) endless.

Having an effective public relations program that looks professional doesn't have to cost a fortune in order for it to succeed and the learning curve has never been simpler.
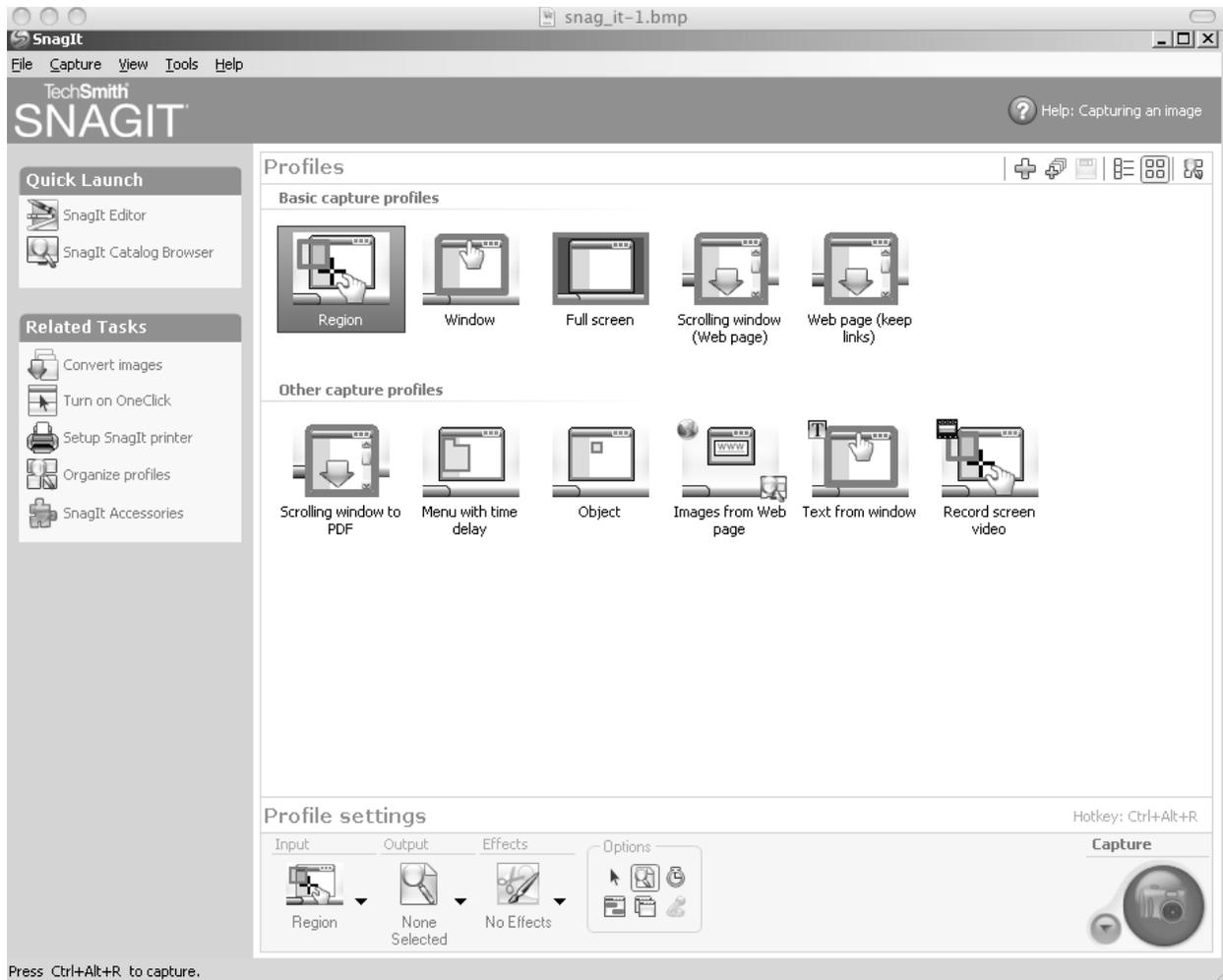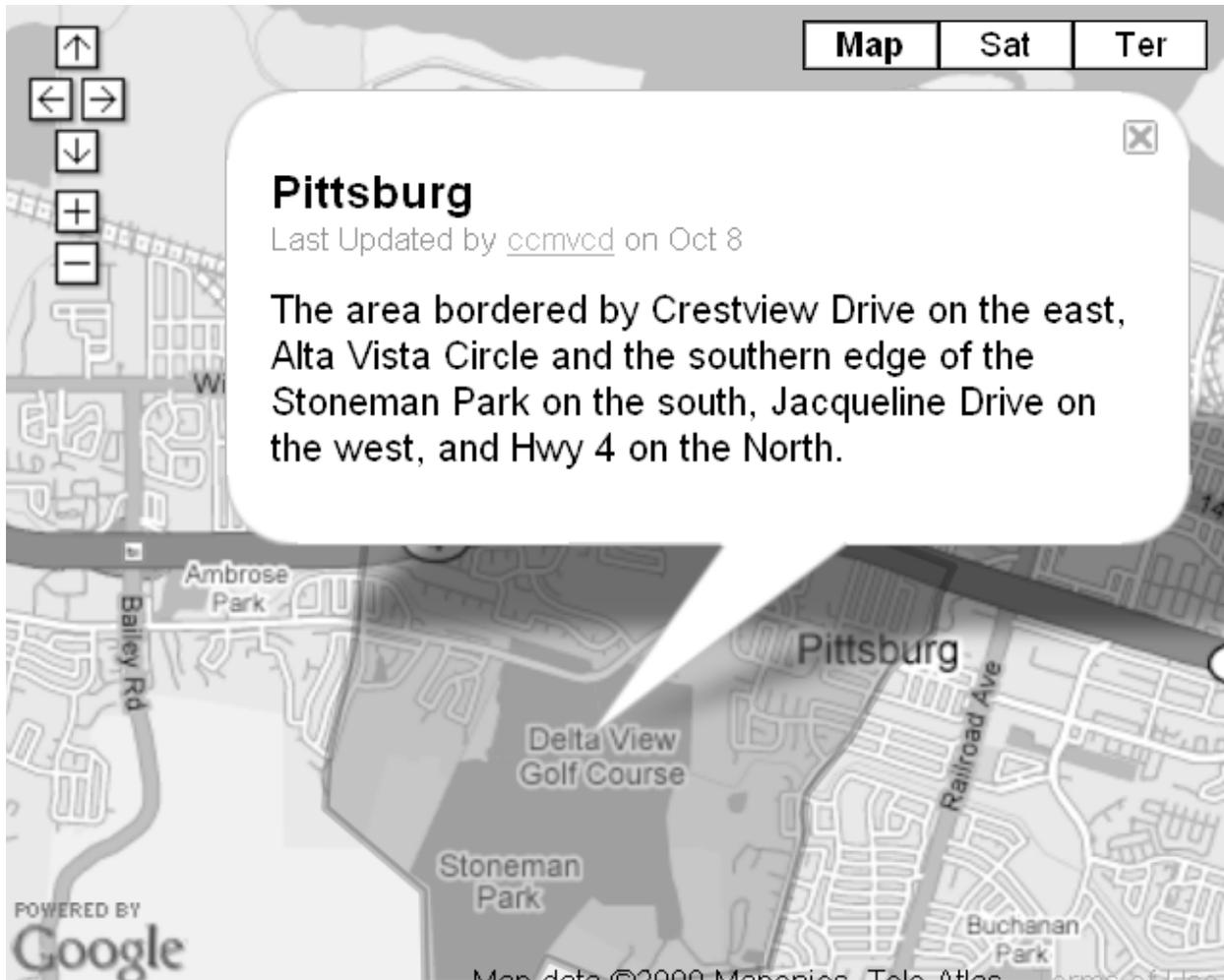
Figure 1. Screen-capture options available in Snag it.

Figure 2. ULV fogging map created in Google Maps.