



ANSWER QUEST TIP SHEET

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THE IN'S AND OUT'S OF BETA TESTING

How do you "break into" beta testing?

There are several ways. The easiest way is if you know someone who is already a beta tester, frequently they can "recommend" someone to the company and that person is given priority over a random selection.

Another way is the "random selection." For example, you fill out a survey saying you are interested in beta testing a particular product (or a general request for any product). If there is an opening for someone with your skills / knowledge, you may be asked to participate. Please be careful to verify who the email request is coming from. There have been forged emails.

Mr. BBTE (Best Beta Tester Ever – as he requested to be referred to) became a beta tester by completing a survey at <http://www.microsoft.com/playtest/> when he was 12 years old. Many gaming software companies need large test groups for their new software. He was accepted. After that, he signed up for every beta testing request he received.

Because of his skill in finding and reporting software bugs, soon he was given the opportunity to test non-gaming software. He has been on many non-game betas including several Office & Operating System (OS) betas and is looking forward to the new one. The more active you are the better chance you have of being on other, sometimes more exciting betas.

Other companies besides Microsoft look for beta testers. You can find out more information from the websites listed at the end of this newsletter or check out the website of your favorite software to see if they have a beta program.

Here's one thing to keep in mind. If you are not detail-oriented, or if you get frustrated by things not working correctly all the time, then you should pass on testing pre-released software. You also need the drive to test and retest and be able to keep detailed logs explaining everything you do.

How much time do you spend on each beta?

It totally depends on what you are testing. Some testing programs have a very short beta cycle (you could get the software on a Monday and it's over in a week). Others might be ongoing (as the Windows Update is for Microsoft). As new versions are released, you are asked to re-test.

What are the different "levels" of beta testing?

There can be many levels of a beta testing before it is released to the public. Also, they may be called something other than listed here.

For example, Mr. BBTE spoke about an older OS that started with a "developers release" which had very little new items except new core code for developers to make programs and drivers. Then he received the "alpha" version. After the "alpha" phase is done, the first "beta" is released (this is where many beta testers start using the software). With the "beta" phase, there can be many interim builds of the software: beta 0, 1, 2 and maybe a beta 1 refresh before 2 comes out, etc. For each new build (which is essentially the entire software program that you have to reinstall from scratch), you receive a CD or a location to download it.

The final "gold" copy is what is ready to be Released To Manufacture (RTM). Sometimes the beta tester will receive a copy of the final version.

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Do you use one dedicated PC for testing -- or do you use the same PC that you use for every day computing?

Some people use a dedicated PC for several reasons: the beta test software is an OS; the beta tester does not want beta software on their other PC because it may not be stable.

Others might use their regular-use PC and create a dual-boot (allowing two OSs to reside on the same PC).

The last option is to install beta software on your regular-use PC but always be ready to reinstall ALL your software (beta and retail) if a problem occurs. Mr. BBTE suggested using software that creates "virtual drives" of his program CDs. The program he uses is called Alcohol 120% (www.alcohol-soft.com). This allows him to reinstall quickly without having to reinsert each original CD for all of his software programs he owns.

If the software that is being beta tested is for a Game Console or for hardware such as peripherals, this may not become an issue.

Do you receive anything for testing beta software?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Mr. BBTE explained that at the end of one beta, he received a boxed "gold" copy plus 5 extra software keys (serial numbers). For a game console test, he received a free controller. The other day he received an executive pen with a logo on it for just filling out a survey.

There have been many instances where he received nothing. Sometimes the reward depends on the amount of effort put into the testing. Once he received the software of his choice for doing a one week intensive hardware test that including playing for at least X many hours a day and logging every time he played and noting the results.

Word of caution: if you want to beta test just for the "freebies" please don't. There is no guarantee you will receive anything.

Do you have to sign a contract with the company?

Yes. Whether it is a paper document that you must sign and mail back or it is a website document that you must sign digitally and agree to the EULA (End User License Agreement).

This protects the company from a beta tester taking ideas and giving or selling them to an outside source. The contract normally contains a non-disclosure meaning you are not allowed to talk about what you are doing and sometimes you are not even allowed to tell someone you are on the beta until it has been released to the public.

Sometimes a beta involves hardware. The contract would then specify you are responsible for the hardware until it's asked to be returned. For a game console beta testing, a special piece of equipment was given to testers but ONLY AFTER they signed an agreement that if they do not return it, the company had the right to charge their credit card. I would not do this if it's not for a well-known company.

What type of "bugs" will you find when beta testing?

In OS beta testing, you can find some major issues. That is why every bug that is found needs to be reported in detail so it can be fixed. With non-OS beta testing, the bug could be with the software being tested causing minor problems such as typos to crashing software.

Are some bugs just not fixable?

The issue isn't that it is not fixable, the issue is whether it can be recreated. This is the reason why there are so many beta testers on each project. This allows for a wide range of computer testers with a wide range of hardware and software for the beta software to be tested with.

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Can you be "kicked off" a beta?

Yes, there are several ways to be removed.

If you violate the contract that you signed, you will be removed. This includes talking about a beta when you should not -- posting information or uploading screenshots to a public forum. Some ex-beta testers tried to sell the current "beta" version of the software on auction sites. Notice they are EX testers.

Another way is to sign up for a new beta project and then not actively participate in it. For example, you are working on a beta project and you are expected to download the update within a certain time frame and install it. One tester received an email stating that he had not logged in and downloaded the software, and if it wasn't downloaded within a week, they would be removed so someone else could participate.

Conclusion

I asked Mr. BBTE if he had one piece of advice for a new beta tester, what would it be ... he said "Do the best testing you can on every project and you might get the opportunity to work on bigger and better betas."

DOs and DON'Ts of Beta Testing

DO:

When you find a software bug, make sure to file DETAILED bug reports. These are necessary for the programmers to recreate the bug you found. The company will let you know what they consider to be a good bug reports.

If a private newsgroup is provided, be actively involved in it, especially if it's a smaller beta.

Always complete all surveys during or between beta testing projects.

DON'T:

Be careful what you post in the private beta newsgroups. Although Off Topic (OT) posting are allowed, sometimes they are directed to a particular forum. Read up on any FAQs before posting as well as taking the time to read previous posts to get the "tone" of the forum.

Do not file VAGUE bug reports.

Do not violate the contract you signed. Talking about an active beta in a public forum or providing other confidential information will get you banned from further testing.

Websites to check out

Here are just a few websites to get information about current or upcoming beta projects (in alphabetical order):

www.betanews.com
www.betasphere.com

www.bink.nu
www.iexbeta.com

www.neowin.net
www.winbeta.org

beta.microsoft.com (must have a passport account) ---- Login as Guest -- password is BetaReq <case sensitive

Disclaimer:

As always, this newsletter is for information purposes. If you decide to participate in a beta testing project or try any item listed in this newsletter, you are doing so at your OWN RISK.



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