Chapter 1: Introduction to Google Gadgets

In This Chapter

✔ **Taking a look at the available Google Gadgets**

✔ **Assembling the gadgets into your own personal creation**

✔ **Making gadgets work for you**

✔ **Putting Google on your desktop**

Google's capability to supply and configure information is what makes it the dominant force on the Internet that it is. In addition to the search functions and applications Google provides, it offers the ability to customize and tweak that information and these services into exactly what the user wants. This information isn't just available on Google's standard home page, though. Google offers information and functionality through a series of small programs called *gadgets*, which users can discover, modify, and embed in their own home pages and elsewhere. Better still, these users can create their own gadgets and spread them to the home pages of other users.

Exploring the Gadget Directory

Whether you're using an individual account or a Google Apps domain start page, you have an impressive selection of Google Gadgets available to you. These gadgets can be installed anywhere on your page just by dragging and dropping, and you can arrange them into different tabs as you want. First, though, let's take a look at what's available in the main directory.

The Gadget directory may look a little different, depending on whether you access it through iGoogle or Google Apps. Still, the same gadgets are available to either view. Click the Add Stuff link on the homepage of either service to see the screens shown in Figures 1-1 and 1-2. You can also point your browser to `http://google.com/ig/directory` to see what's available.

Figure 1-1:
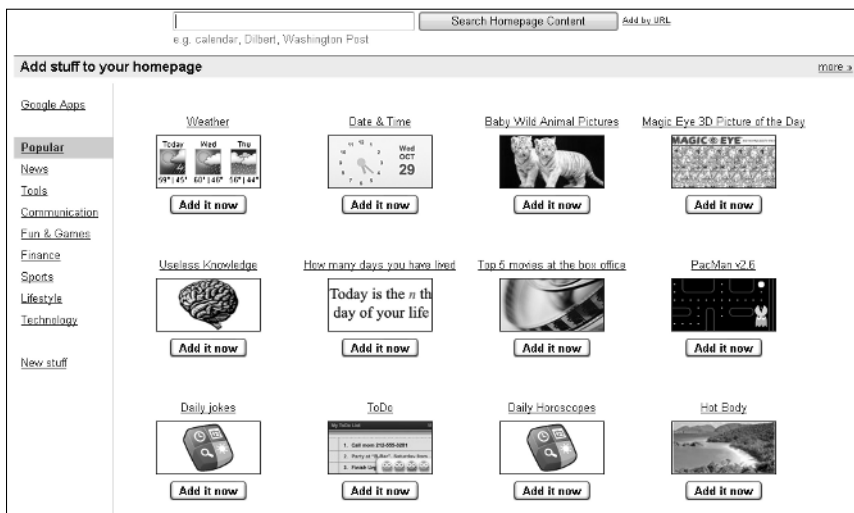Google
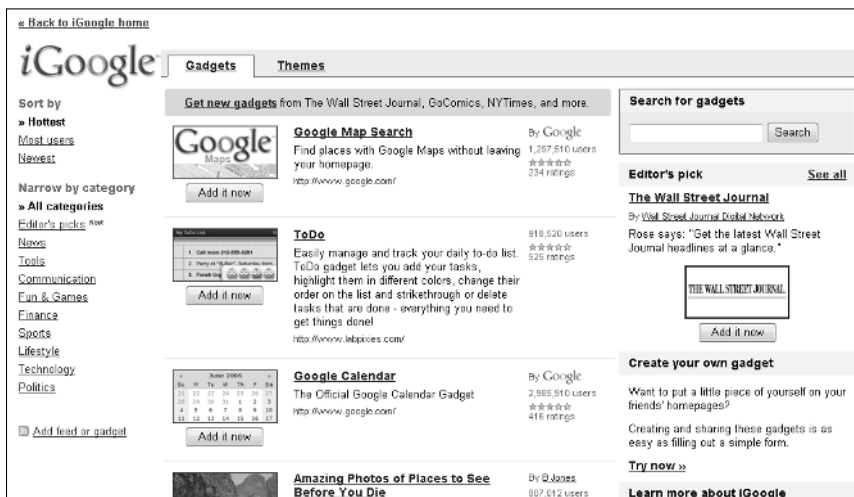Gadgets
in Google
Apps.

Figure 1-2:
Google
Gadgets in
iGoogle.

The categories of gadgets hint at the possibilities of what's available in the directory, and you can search for additional gadgets on whatever topic you want (would you expect any different from Google?) by entering a few keywords in the Search for Gadgets field and clicking Search.

TIP

Both Google and third-party developers are constantly adding gadgets to Google's directory, so it's best to check back on a regular basis and see what's available.

Click one of the categories to see a list of what's generally available for that topic. For instance, Figure 1-3 shows what's new and available in the world of finance for Google Gadgets.

You can also search the directory by keyword, as shown in Figure 1-4 (can you guess what the search keywords were?). If you're interested in searching for gadgets that only apply to certain topics, click the category first and then enter your search terms. Your search will be further restricted, and you can find what you're looking for much more quickly.

Figure 1-3:
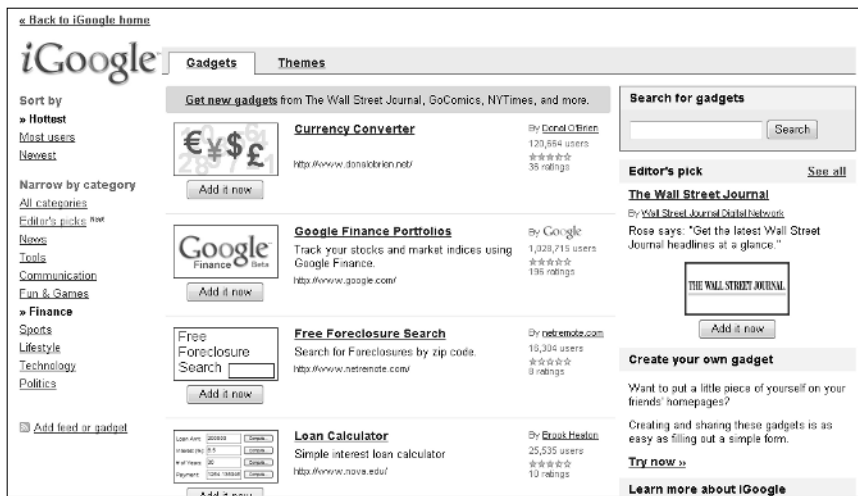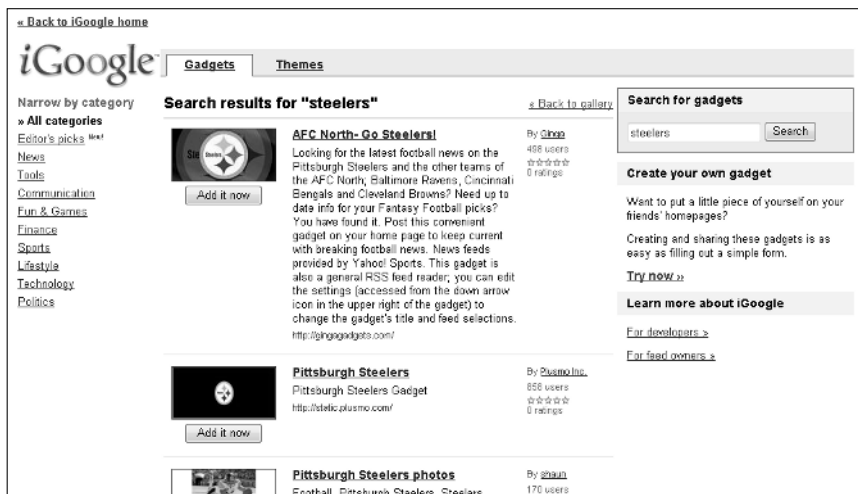Financial
Google
Gadgets.

Figure 1-4:
Searching
for Google
Gadgets by
keywords.

Whenever you do find the gadget you're looking for, click the Add It Now button under the gadget (shown in Figure 1-5) to put it on your main home-page. After it appears there, you can move it around as you see fit.

Interacting with the iGoogle Homepage

Google wants iGoogle to be your homepage whenever you open a browser. It gives you a customized portal filled with all the information you could want. It's like a totally customizable car dashboard, or a newspaper with just the information you want and no glossy circulars. As your homepage, it's the first thing you'll see whenever you open a browser, and that means you'd like your gadget to be on that desktop whenever anybody looks at it. If you can get that placement, you can make your information seen over and over again. Any updates or changes are automatically pushed out to all your users.

In short, you want to use it because it's a cheap, easy, and consistent way to get to the people you want to reach.

The iGoogle homepage is probably the most common way people view and interact with the Google Gadgets they find and install from the Gadget Directory. The applications work the same on Google Apps homepages, but far more people use individual Google accounts than Google Apps accounts. Therefore, you have to understand how the iGoogle page functions so you can work with gadgets yourself and make your own gadgets work for others.

Before you sign up for iGoogle, all you see is the normal Google homepage when you go to `http://google.com`, as shown in Figure 1-6. However, note the two links in the upper-right corner. Clicking the sign-in link gives you the screen shown in Figure 1-6, and clicking the iGoogle link leads to the iGoogle page shown in Figure 1-7.

Either way, there's a link to sign in or create an account for iGoogle. First-time users get an invitation to create their home pages, as shown in Figure 1-8.

Figure 1-6:
Signing in to
Google.

Figure 1-7:
The generic
iGoogle
homepage.

Figure 1-8:
Creating the
home page.

After you've entered the information, click the See Your Page button to see
the screen shown in Figure 1-9. If you've already signed up for a Google
account, this page is saved and accessible from any computer you use. Just
sign in, and your homepage is there. If you don't have a Google account yet,
this homepage shows up until you clear the cookies out of your browser. It
won't be accessible from any other computer.

TIP

Given that a Google account is free, it's a good idea to sign up to keep your
homepage intact wherever you are. Google Apps accounts also hold their
homepages wherever you sign in.

Figure 1-9:
Your new
iGoogle
homepage.

After your page is created, there are a few basic ways to customize it. The most common choices are as follows:

✦ **Themes:** The default iGoogle homepage looks a lot like the pages Google creates for itself. It's got a white background, bright colors, and clearly defined borders. That's great if you want to keep it, but Google has plenty of other options available for you, if you wish. Click the Themes for Causes link or the Change Theme from Classic link to see the available themes.

At the time of this writing, iGoogle provides a standard set of themes along with specially designed artist themes and themes that help support a charitable cause. No matter which section you choose, you see a list of themes like the one shown in Figure 1-10.

Just click the Add It Now button to add the theme to your homepage. You can always change it to a different theme later, whether you see a new theme that you like or if you're just ready for a change.

✦ **Tabs and pages:** By default, iGoogle sets up your homepage with one tab and all of the gadgets placed under that tab on the page. If you start building up a wealth of useful gadgets, though, you may find yourself scrolling up and down your homepage just to get the information. Trust me, that gets very annoying very quickly. However, Google

enables you to manage several different tabs within your homepage — just a click, and you've got an entire different set of gadgets ready for your use.

Look for the arrow next to the home tab and click it. In the resulting menu, you have the option of adding, sharing, or editing the tab. After you've added more tabs, you also have the option of deleting tabs.

Clicking the Edit This Tab link brings up the screen shown in Figure 1-11. You can change the name of the tab here, or you can share or delete any of the gadgets currently in your tabs line-up.

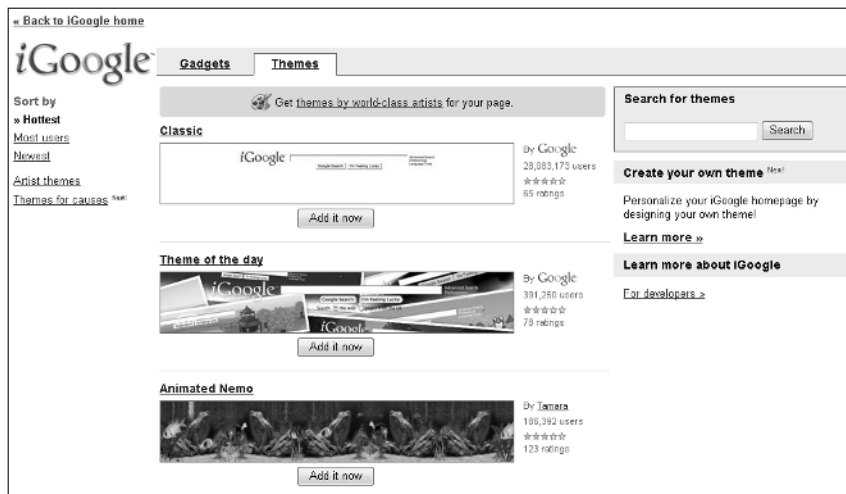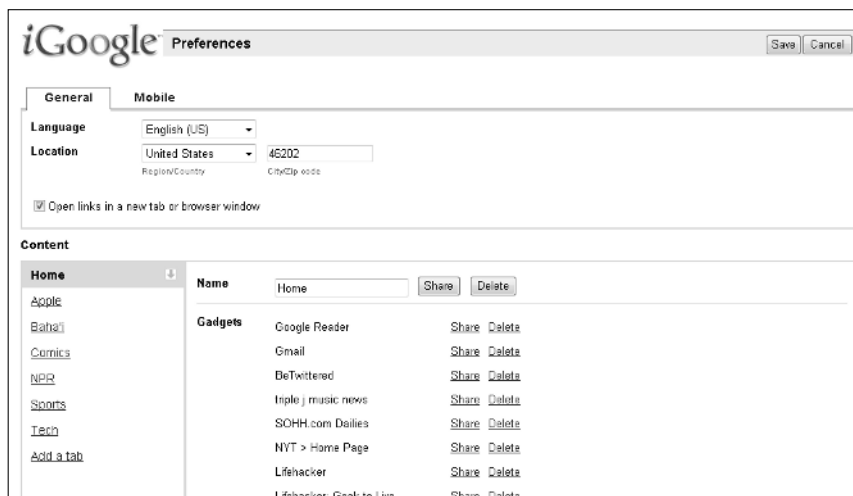**Figure 1-10:** Available iGoogle themes.

Figure 1-11: Editing tabs in iGoogle.

Clicking the Share This Tab link allows you to send the tab and its associated gadgets to anybody else, although they need an iGoogle account to take full advantage of these gadgets. If she accepts the invitation, that tab is included on her homepage as well. If you're sharing a series of gadgets that could make your normal business activities a little easier, this is a great way of sending them off to friends or coworkers. Take a look at the screen in Figure 1-12 to see an example.
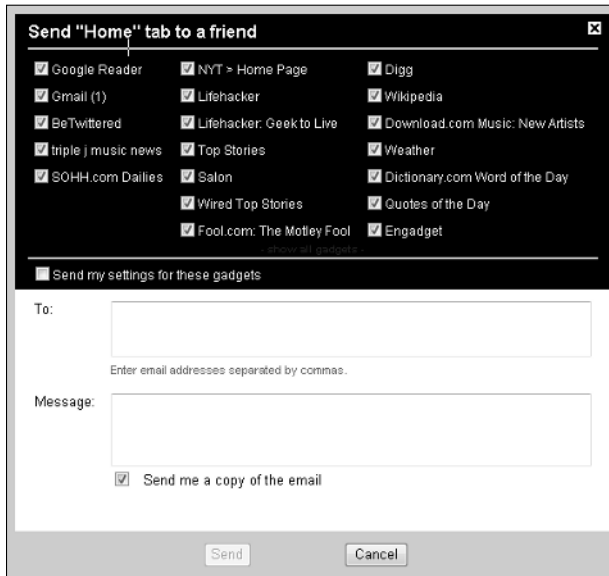

Figure 1-12: Sharing your iGoogle tabs.

You can also add and delete tabs. Click the Add a Tab link to name the tab and, if you choose, have Google add a series of gadgets to your tab based on the name you give it. Type the name, make your selection in the check box for adding gadgets, and click OK, as shown in Figure 1-13.

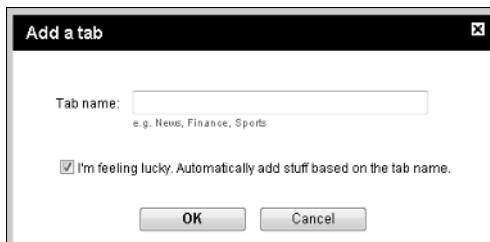To delete a tab, just click the Delete Tab link and click OK to confirm your decision.

**Figure 1-13:** Adding an iGoogle tab.

Keeping Informed with Google Desktop

If you're interacting with a Web browser, iGoogle gives you everything you need from whatever computer you're using. However, most people have a main computer, or at least one that they use more than others. Google makes a package of software for that computer that allows you to access Google Gadgets (and just about everything else on your computer) without opening up a browser window. Google Desktop puts a sidebar on your computer that uses Google Gadgets to keep you informed, and it also lets you search and access just about everything on your computer.

Installing Google Desktop

Navigate to `http://desktop.google.com` and click the appropriate link for your operating system, as shown in Figure 1-14. Follow the directions to install Google Desktop on your system.

Figure 1-14: Installing Google Desktop.
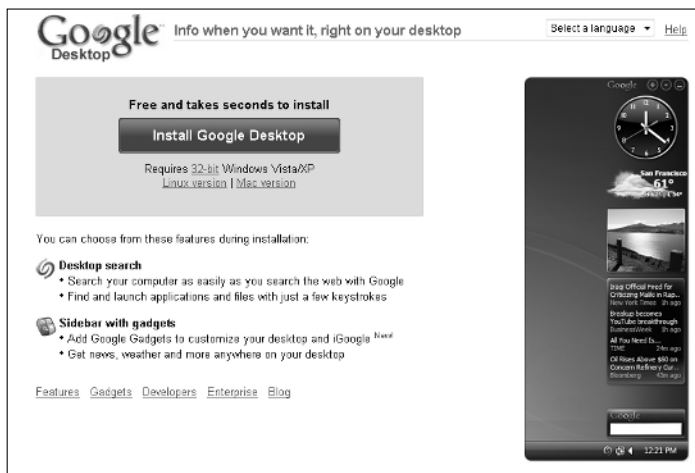
After you've installed the Desktop software, you see a sidebar on the right side of your screen and, on Windows systems, a small icon in the bottom-right corner of your screen. In the screen shown in Figure 1-15, the Google Desktop icon shows up at the left side of the notification area, below the Google Desktop sidebar.

Google throws in a default series of gadgets, and you can change them to whatever you want. There is significantly less space than on the iGoogle desktop, so you're going to have to be a little judicious in choosing which gadgets make the cut.
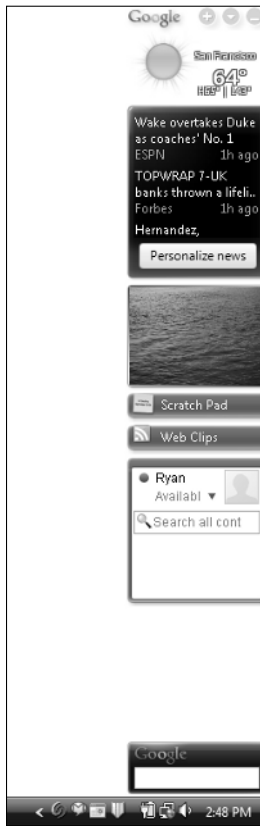
Figure 1-15: Google Desktop's sidebar and icon.

TIP

News, e-mail, and chat gadgets are always a good place to start. These services change quickly and stay useful no matter what happens.

Google Desktop also includes a small search window at the bottom of the sidebar. Google Desktop indexes the content of your computer and makes it available when you search for anything on your system. Depending on how you set up Google Desktop, you can also have it search additional locations or other computers. Let's take a look at Google Desktop's search and then continue on to the other Google Gadgets.

Searching from Google Desktop

From the moment you install Google Desktop, the program is taking an inventory of everything on your computer, from programs to files to Web searches. After it's done, you can type search terms into the bottom gadget on your sidebar and get a list of matching results. It's a lifesaver when you're looking for missing invoices, contact lists, or business letters.

To set which items are indexed in this search, click the Google Desktop icon and select Options, which brings up the screen shown in Figure 1-16. Under the Desktop Search tab, select the files you want indexed, install any search plug-ins you want to integrate with other programs (like Mozilla's Firefox Web browser), add additional locations to the search, and decide where you want your feeds stored and whether they're encrypted.

Figure 1-16: Desktop Search options.
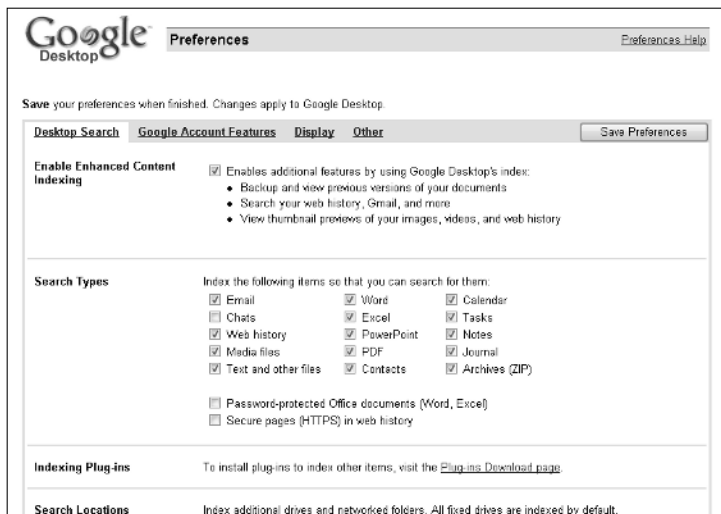
When you're satisfied with the index settings, click the Save Preferences button at the top of the page to put your choices into effect.

Under the Google Account Features tab, you can select whether your Gmail account and other computers are indexed as well. To search across computers, you have to name your computer and select whether indexes of documents, Web searches, both, or neither are transmitted to Google's servers for use across multiple systems. Again, after you've made your choices, click the Save Preferences button to make your decision final.

Click the Display tab to choose how to view your Google Desktop. Your choices are as follows:

✦ The Quick Search box is called when you press the Ctrl key twice on your keyboard. Type your search information and press Return to start the search.

✦ Quick Search displays results in your search bar as you type.

✦ Choose to display Google Desktop as a sidebar, a desktop bar (either floating or locked), or not at all.

✦ Choose whether your gadgets are shown as icons and text, icon only, or not at all.

The Other tab determines whether you share anonymous data about how you use Google Desktop and whether your search results are checked against a list of unsafe or malicious sites. As described before, click the Save Preferences button to make your choices final.

When you're finished, just type the search terms into the search window to get your results. You see a list like the one shown in Figure 1-17.

Figure 1-17:
Search
results in
Google
Desktop.

Click on the entry you want, and off you go.

TIP

If you want faster results from a smaller subset of documents, limit your search types in the Google Desktop Options menu. If you limit your searches to only your business folders, you get quicker and more defined results.

Using Gadgets in the sidebar

The gadgets used in the Google Desktop sidebar are similar to the ones used in the desktops for iGoogle and any Google Apps accounts. The selection isn't as great, but it can still give you some useful information. More important, you can use sidebar gadgets to monitor your Google account information, including Gmail and Google Talk.

The sidebar comes with a few preset gadgets, including news, weather, and some other items (depending on what you've signed up for with your Google account). If you want to add more gadgets to your sidebar, click the plus sign at the top of the sidebar shown in Figure 1-15. You see a screen like the one shown in Figure 1-18.

Figure 1-18:
Adding new gadgets to the Google Desktop sidebar.
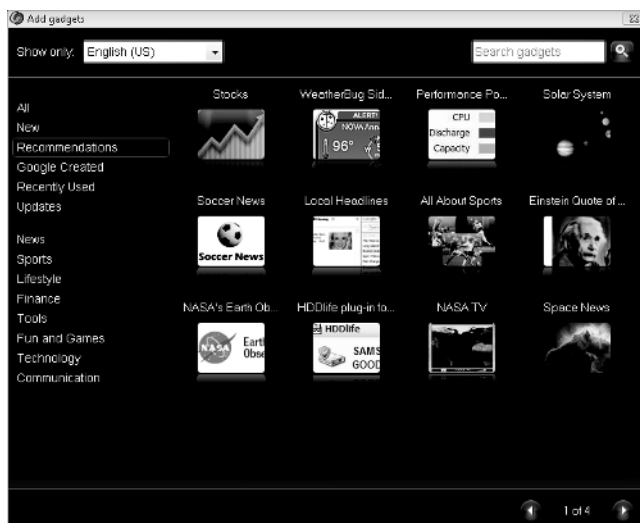
After you find the gadget you're looking for, move your cursor over it and click Add. The gadget appears at the top of your sidebar, and from there you can drag-and-drop it anywhere in the sidebar. Depending on the properties of the gadget, you can also right-click on it and consider more options. For example, you can use the location of the weather gadget or edit the feeds shown in the Web clips.

Again, all these options are dependent on the type and properties of the gadget. Right-click and play around with the options to see what is possible.

The Google Desktop sidebar also has a menu option, accessible by clicking the downward-facing arrow at the top of the screen shown in Figure 1-15. From there, you can add more gadgets, configure and set your gadget options, or choose the position of your Google Desktop sidebar, as follows:

✦ **Sidebar:** This option places the sidebar as shown in Figure 1-15.

✦ **Deskbar:** This option places the sidebar as a toolbar at the bottom of the screen.

✦ **Floating Deskbar:** This option creates a toolbar that you can position at any point on your desktop.

✦ **Auto-Hide:** This option hides the sidebar unless you click a gadgets icon at the bottom of your screen or press Shift twice.

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✦ **Always on Top:** This option stakes out some permanent real estate for the sidebar, pushing everything else on the screen aside. If you've got a widescreen computer, this might be a good option for you.

✦ **Dock Sidebar:** This option moves the sidebar either to the left of the screen or to the right.

✦ **Font Size:** This option lets you choose the default font size, a larger option, or a smaller option.

Play around with the options and see which works best for you. You can find a setup that works for you.

Uncovering the Secrets to Creating Viral Gadgets

So other than convenience and usefulness, why bother with Google Desktop, iGoogle, and Google Gadgets? They're useful tools, but how can they help your business? The answer is that anybody can create Google Gadgets, including you, and you can use them to help promote your business.

Given the amount of gadgets available for Google users, you have to make your gadget stand out among the others. That doesn't mean that you have to conquer the world, though. Keep a few things in mind when designing your gadget to make it as useful as possible:

✦ **You're not conquering the world:** The world is filled with all sorts of people with all sorts of different interests, and it's impossible to please all of them at the same time. Trying to design your gadget to be all things to all people means you're destined to be disappointed. Don't try to be all-inclusive — pick your idea and stick with it. Make it work for your business and your customers.

✦ **Know your audience:** If you're a small business, you've probably gotten to know your customers fairly well. You can set aside items each one might want. You know their preferences, likes, and dislikes. Use that same kind of knowledge when you're writing your gadgets. Target your most loyal customers when you create the gadget — chances are more users like them are out there, and your gadget will help them as well.

✦ **Get people talking:** Viral marketing depends on word-of-mouth recommendations, so you have to make sure people want to talk about your gadget. Pass along word of your gadget to your customers, and encourage them to pass the word along as well. Your goal is to have everybody passing around word about your gadget and business. After people know of your existence, you can talk to them about using your business.

✦ **Make it useful:** Virtual pet rocks might be cute, but they're not very useful, and people will pass them up quickly to add something more useful to their desktops or sidebar. People won't waste real estate on useless items, so it's up to you to make it work for them. If you make a gadget simple but useful, more people are likely to use the gadget and pass it on to others.

✦ **Change your information often:** If nothing ever changes about your gadget, why do people need to go back and look at it? Make sure that your gadget remains useful by refreshing your content often and keeping it interesting. New and different items always capture attention, and you'll have a larger audience because of it.

Now that you've taken a look at the theory behind making gadgets, you can move on to actually creating your gadgets. That information is presented in Chapter 2 of this minibook, entitled "Creating Your First Google Gadgets."