Email Address for DRM Activation

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Software activation is the process of enabling newly installed software to run on a specific computer. Software vendors protect and license digital products to ensure that only specific users or paid customers can use their product or document and to enforce license restrictions.

The protection and licensing process is often referred to as Digital Rights Management (DRM). There are many types of digital products (applications, DLLs, plugins, libraries, etc.), platforms (Mac, Windows, Linux, Android, etc.), license types Trial, Product, Try/Buy, Subscription, Floating, etc. and licensing features (License Release, Restore, Suspend, etc.)

Protection and licensing tools must be scaleable. A vendor may distribute 10 licenses each year for one product that costs $10,000 or thousands of licenses for dozens of products that cost $10 each. The customer base, sales process, distribution model and activation process will vary dramatically for different vendors and products.

DRM is a big subject. One tool cannot possibility satisfy every need. Excel Software offers a rich family of DRM tools and services where each vendor can pick and mix to achieve the best solution for their specific needs.

This paper describes how an email address can be used as a Serial Number to activate a protected digital product. It describes the setup process, pros, cons and implications.

Serial Number Activation

Consider the traditional process where a customer buy a digital product and receives a download link or CD containing the product plus a Serial Number of the form 12345-12345-12345 used to activate it.

On first use, an Activation dialog is presented to activate the license on the customer computer using an online activation server.
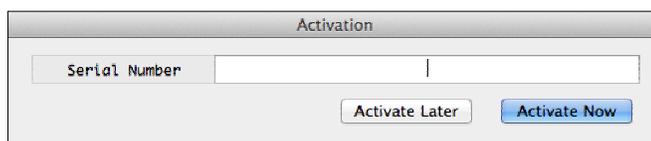
The customer enters the Serial Number received at the time of purchase and clicks Activate Now. The Serial Number and a Request Number that uniquely represents the customer's computer is sent to an online activation server. If activation is granted, the digital product can be used and is controlled by the applied license.

The process described above can be fully automated starting with a Buy button on the vendor website that collects payment data and triggers an order fulfillment process to send an email to the customer containing the download link and assigned Serial Number. On first launch, if Internet is available the activation process is fully automated. If the computer has no Internet connection a manual activation process can be performed.

Safe Activation Service 3 can automate the process described above.

Email Address as Serial Number

Imagine that a vendor has produced a digital product (document or application) that they would like to make available to a large group of people. To ensure the digital product is not shared with other users or used on additional computers, DRM is required.

The vendor could send a batch email to thousands of users with a download link to the protected product and instruct them to use their email address to activate the license. The setup process and user experience of this approach is demonstrated in a video.

Play the "Activate Document with Email Address" in your browser or within the free SafeWebApp viewer by typing EmailActivation and clicking the **Add** button. The video and SafeWebApp player are freely available at www.excelsoftware.com.

The video demonstrates how email addresses are preloaded as Serial Numbers within a low cost account on Safe Activation Service 1. In this video, DocProtect is used to protect a document. The same process can be applied with AppProtect, QuickLicense and other protection and licensing tools available from Excel Software.

Pros and Cons

There are several advantages to using an email address as a Serial Number.

The same message can be sent to thousands of users. No special mechanism is required to insert a unique Serial Number into each message, since the Email Address itself is unique.

The user won't forget their Serial Number since it is the same as their email address. The same protection, license types and features can be applied to the digital product as could be done with a traditional Serial Number.

Safe Activation Service 1, 2 or 3 will support this approach. Desktop License Server or WebActivation running on a vendor website will also support this approach.

If this approach is used for a time-sensitive product, the vendor might choose to delete all Serial Numbers and customer records after some time period, then reuse that storage space within the Safe Activation account. Safe Activation Service 2 or 3 makes it easier to delete a range of Serial Numbers or customer records with one command.

There are several disadvantages to using an email address as a Serial Number.

Some vendors embed useful information into the Serial Number like the reseller that purchased that block of Serial Numbers or information used by the protected product.

Email addresses change over time, but a traditional Serial Number like 12345-12345-12345 remains fixed forever. No problem is created with an activated license if the user's email address changes, but now it is not as easy for the user to remember it.

Safe Activation assumes that each Request Number and Serial Number pair within a customer record is unique within the vendor account. That means the same email address should not be used as a Serial Number for multiple products.

If the vendor account on Safe Activation is used for multiple products, a unique Serial Number like ProductName-EmailAddress is needed for each product. Desktop License Server or WebActivation will allow the same Request Number-Serial Number pair to be used for each product.