

Insider tips to get the most out of your computer

3 Critical Facts Every Computer User Must Know About Keeping Their Personal and Financial Information Safe Online

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Despite all of my nagging about online security, computer users never seem to give enough attention to online security and protection UNTIL a virus or a hacker wipes out their hard drive. Once this happens, it can be very expensive if not impossible to repair the damages done.

If you own a computer that is connected to the Internet without proper firewall and security measures set up, it's only a matter of time before a worm, virus, hacker, or spyware takes over your computer.

Cyber criminals lurk *everywhere* on the Internet and are constantly figuring out new ways to access your personal and financial information. Even legitimate Web sites have sophisticated methods of snooping, such as cookies and spyware, that track your identity, browsing habits, and personal information.

This month, I thought I would take some time to outline the 3 biggest threats to you online, and show you how you can keep your private information from falling into the wrong hands.

Threat #1: Hackers

Small business owners and home users tend to think that because they are "just a small business" or "just a home user" no one would waste time trying to hack in to their computer. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Just recently I conducted experiments where I connected a single computer to the internet with no firewall. Within hours, over 13 gigabytes of space were taken over with malicious code and files that I could not delete.

Hackers are malicious individuals who prey on unsuspecting computer users who have not properly secured their PC from outside access.

These cyber criminals run scanning programs over the Internet to find computers with electronic openings, called ports. Once they find such an opening, they have as much access to your computer as you do. That means your online banking, personal data, passwords, family data, and files. Often the goal of these intruders is to install a Trojan horse to your hard drive.

Here are some of the tell tale signs that your computer has been hacked:

- Mysterious files suddenly start appearing.
- Your CD drawer starts opening and closing by itself.

Observations:

- There's nothing wrong with underachievement. It just doesn't pay very well.
- Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.
- The trouble with doing something right the first time is that nobody realizes how hard it was.
- The stuff written in the fine print is never good news.

- You get constant runtime errors in MS Outlook/Outlook Express.
- You find e-mails in your sent items folder that you didn't send.
- Some of your files are moved or deleted.
- Icons on your desktop or toolbars are blank or missing.
- Your mouse feels sluggish, like someone else is trying to control it.

The best protection from a hacker is a good firewall. When properly set up, a firewall will make your computer invisible to the scanners and prevent hackers from accessing your computer.

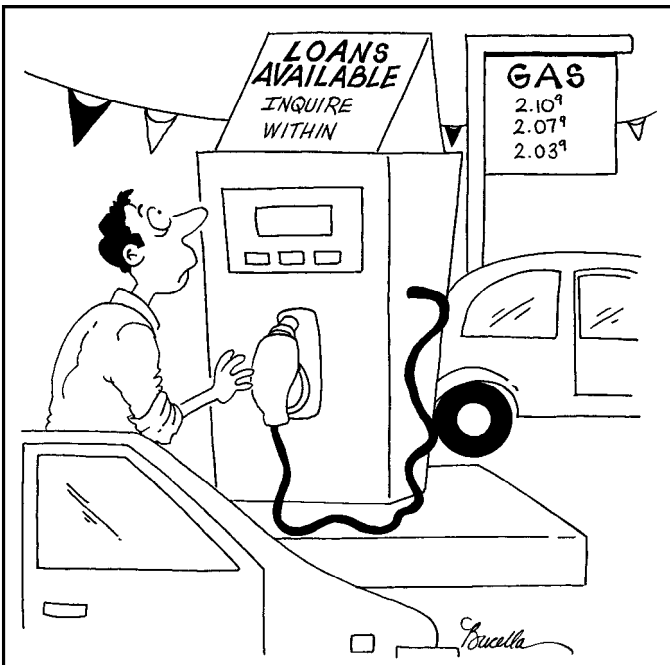
Threat #2: Viruses & Worms

A virus is a freeloading program designed to install itself onto your computer without your knowledge or permission. Once installed, the virus attaches itself to files or boot sectors with the intent of taking over your computer's programs.

A worm is a parasitic program designed to replicate itself on your computer and then spread to other computers via email (through your address book) or an IRC (chat program).

Many of the worms on the Internet today have been designed by advertising agencies to gain lists of working email addresses for spam.

If you get a worm, not only are you affected, but also every person in your address book (friends, family, and



clients). Most viruses are spread via e-mail attachments. That is why you should NEVER open any email attachment from someone you don't know, or that looks suspicious.

Once the attachment has been opened, the computer virus will run on your computer and perform its intended function. Sometimes the computer virus is designed to delete specific files on the computer, send commands and information to other computers, or to wreak havoc on your computer in some other way.

It will also try to send copies of itself (also known as 'spoofing') to other email addresses that it finds in your email address book. In this way, the computer virus can spread across the Internet by way of email.

You can also get a computer virus by inserting and reading infected floppy disks and CD-ROMs or by downloading files from the Internet. If you download music files or pictures from a file sharing sites such as KaZZA, there is good chance you'll end up with a virus.

The most important thing you can do to protect your PC from viruses is to install and regularly update your virus protection software. Many software programs offer an automatic update feature that will make it far easier to keep your PC safe.

Threat #3: Spyware

If you spend a lot of time online, share music files or photos with other users, or if you download shareware or other Internet "freebies", chances are your computer is infected with spyware.

Spyware is Internet jargon for hidden, undetected programs advertisers install on your PC to gather and report information about you and your online activities. This program is usually installed without the user's knowledge by piggybacking on another program or file being downloaded.

While some spyware is harmless, there can be serious consequences of unidentified spyware which include spam, identity theft, corruption and slowing of your PC, and annoying pop-up ads.

These programs can also profile your shopping preferences, hijack your browser start page, and alter important system files without your knowledge or permission.

Unfortunately, Spyware is not illegal even though it allows a complete stranger to monitor and store information about you and your online activities.

Here are some signs that your PC is infected with Spyware:

- You are constantly getting pop-up ads whenever you surf the Internet.
- Your Internet start page has been changed (this is the web site that normally comes up whenever you open your browser).
- Your search engine bar has been changed.
- Most of the time, spyware can easily be detected and removed with Ad-aware or Spybot Search and Destroy. Both programs are free and easy to use.

Most spyware can easily be removed with a free program called Ad-Aware from Lavasoft. To get a free copy go to: www.lavasoftusa.com/support/download

However, there are some more stubborn programs that just won't go away.

There are harder to detect and require more extensive removal measures. That's when you have to call in the "big guns" (me) at GGT :)

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Tips For Staying Out of Trouble When Sending E-mail Messages

E-mail is quickly becoming the #1 way we communicate with friends, family, co-workers, employees, and clients.



But be careful! E-mail messages cannot accurately deliver the tone of your message and what you thought was funny sarcasm by be interpreted as an insult to your reader. Here are some e-mail etiquette tips to help you be a better e-mail communicator:

- ◆ Take a little time to explain your message and use adjectives or adverbs to clarify tone. Short, blunt messages may come across as being rude.
- ◆ Always address the person with a salutation such as "Hi Name" or "Dear Name". Using someone's first name without a salutation may appear brusque.
- ◆ Using ALL CAPS is the equivalent of screaming at someone. Only use this were it is appropriate.
- ◆ Don't send large attachments unless you've gotten permission from the recipient to do so. If the file is too large, it could take up a lot of space in their inbox and prevent them from getting other messages.
- ◆ Make sure you have up-to-date virus protection. E-mail is the number one way viruses are spread. You'll lose a lot of brownie points if you send someone a virus that wipes out their hard drive.
- ◆ Get to the point quickly and avoid rambling. Use a short description in your subject line to make filing and referencing your message easy.
- ◆ If you are sending a message to a large group of people, do not cut and paste everyone's e-mail address into the cc (carbon copy) field. Most people are very sensitive about giving out their e-mail address to strangers. Either create a group in Outlook or use the bcc (blind carbon copy) field.
- ◆ Do not send off-color jokes, profanity, private information, or other messages that you wouldn't want other people seeing via e-mail to anyone. Once you write it down and send it, you lose all control over where that message goes. Even if it's a trusted friend, they may accidentally forward it on to someone else or it may get found by another person. This goes double if you are using your company e-mail address.

Great Gates Technology

4230 N Oakland Ave
Suite 231
Shorewood, WI 53211
414-431-8599 Phone
414-431-7550 fax
cmack@greatgates.net

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Attention Small Businesses:

Get all of the computer support you need without the expense of hiring a full time IT staff. Ask about our Small Business Computer Support Program.

Computer Question of The Month:

Q: I recently installed some Microsoft Windows updates, and now I can't open my e-mail attachments anymore. Help!

A: One of the "features" of the Windows update was that it is trying to protect your computer from a virus or other malicious file. It does so by blocking the access to ALL email attachments.

While this is certainly a good gesture and a safety feature, sometimes you know that the attachments are ok to open. Here's how to solve the puzzle:

In Outlook Express, click on the Tools menu, then choose Options. In the Options box, click on the Security tab. The second check box from the top says "Do not allow attachments to be saved or opened ...". Uncheck the box and the problem will be solved.

Please realize that this safety feature is now disabled. You may want to consider just un-checking the box when you know you have a safe attachment, and leave it checked the rest of the time.

If you use Outlook, your choices are more restrictive. Outlook completely blocks certain attachments (files with an extension of bat, exe, and others; basically any file that will run a program when opened).

Microsoft's statement is: "Unfortunately this makes file sharing less convenient for many people, but security must take precedence."

Files with an extension of doc or xls or ppt are not blocked. The way around this issue is to send and receive files that are renamed with a different extension or sent in a zip file.

Send your questions to: cmack@greatgates.net



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