THE INTERNET: FRIEND OR FOE?

THE SITUATION

Anyone can communicate by, and put information out on the internet which makes the internet one of the most valuable tools for research, study, daily business and search traffic. But here's the trick: anyone can communicate by, and put information on the internet, which makes the internet one of the most dangerous "places" to be.

Unlike the person-to-person world, the internet world can bombard you on a more regular basis with whatever its users choose. Whatever advertising, agenda, or jokes that can be forwarded – are forwarded around like junk mail in large quantities daily. Pop-ups on websites accost you while you surf the web. Ads are constantly challenging you to "click here", "take this survey", "poll", "vote", or even "find your soul mate". Their advertising techniques are solid enough that thousands of people will do whatever the ads say to do, each and every day.

Sometimes it may seem like you're going along just fine, and then for what seems like no reason at all – boom! You're getting pop-up messages by the dozens, "Spam" e-mail… so much junk you can't weed through it all. Before you know it, your computer can be full of viruses, spy ware, and pornography. This condition makes being on the computer miserable, makes you and your system vulnerable to more problems, and sometimes can damage a system to the point that your workstation will cease to operate at all – and therefore, your work is halted as well! How did it happen?

SPECIFYING THE PROBLEM

There are many myths surrounding the infection of a computer with viruses, spy ware, and internet pornography. There are several ways you can contract these things on your computer – and several commonly accepted views on the subject that are generally NOT true. Let's discuss the problem by category:

<u>VIRUSES</u>

It used to be that viruses were primarily contracted by opening an attachment within an e-mail. These files often ended in ".exe" – also known as executable files. Now there are a host of different file name extensions used, and keeping up with them is a near impossibility. And they can be contracted as easily as by visiting a website, and following instructions on that site to install software that they claim you need. Sometimes a site will disguise instructions so well that you can get a virus without doing much… but one click, and a virus all yours.

Viruses will install/run programs on your computer with code that eats away at any given part of your computer – therefore making it less functional over time. Sometimes a virus can destroy a computer within seconds. Other times a computer can run for weeks infected with one or more viruses, but over time it slows down and will most likely stop working altogether if uncorrected.

SPY WARE

Spy ware is most commonly installed on your computer without the user's knowledge, when another program is installed online, something is downloaded, or an online registration takes place, and the user didn't/couldn't read the fine print (perhaps in very small and hardly readable print) that said the spy ware software would also be installed. An online game, for instance, may claim that you need to install their software in order to play. What they don't tell you is that they are also installing spy ware on your machine at the same time. Many times, illegal music download sites are to blame as well, which shouldn't be surprising; their entire product is illegal in the first place. The user doesn't know it happened, but the workstation begins to slow down, and operate less efficiently.

INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY

Many people think that internet pornography "just happens" – or is just suddenly on a machine. Pop-Up messages and e-mail inquiries are as far as a website can go without user intervention or participation. This means that if the user is NOT seeking out porn sites, NOT seeking porn content, NOT clicking on Pop-Up messages with sex/porn-related materials, and NOT clicking on e-mail attachments and opening messages that they think is questionable or don't recognize – then pornography won't be a major problem on the computer.

Here's the deal – and what most people don't like to hear: Chances are, that if you have porn all over your workstation, it's not "just suddenly there". It means that someone, somewhere at some time was on your workstation, and clicked on, or accepted, some kind of incoming advertisement via e-mail, pop-up, or by seeking it on a website. *Someone made the choice. Whether on purpose, or by accident – it was a user-driven function.* Remember: computers won't seek information on their own, without user intervention at some point.

COMBATTING THE PROBLEM

This topic is larger than one article can handle, but following is a list of some "rules of thumb" for internet surfing, online transactions, and e-mail practices that may save you a lot of trouble.

1. Deal only with reputable or well-known vendors when transacting business over the internet. Stay above board.
   - Only frequent and transact business with reputable sites. Look for standard protocol – site/store policies, customer service info, return information, detail on the company, etc. (For example, iTunes is a viable and legal music download source… free music download sites are illegal per U.S. copyright laws, and are often the culprits of virus, spy ware, and porn installs.)
   - Be careful not to post your personal information on the web. This is a huge resource for identity thieves… so protect yourself and your family from it by jealously guarding your personal information. Transacting business on the internet is very convenient – be sure it's safe.
   - Know exactly what you are buying before you transact – obtain specifics.
   - Look for SSL Security when you do money/personal information portion of any online transaction. (Secured Server websites, with tools such as SSL Certification help to protect you.)
   - Be protected…use Credit Cards, not Debit Cards on the internet. Debit Cards often don't have the same buyer protection that Credit Cards do. Please contact your card issuer(s) for their specific information.

2. Don't click on, or follow the directions of unsolicited Pop-Up windows. These are advertisements, and they often claim that you need to update something on your computer. Just close the Pop-up window with the "X" in the corner. Operating system vendors including Microsoft will not send you update notifications via Pop-up windows or e-mail. (For information on proper update practices, please contact your Operating System manufacturer - or for assistance, please contact TONEDOG, INC.)

3. Avoid sites that require you to install their software from online to participate. This sounds harsh, but much of the spy ware installed out there is accomplished in this manner. There are valid gaming software packages available anywhere computer games or software is sold that has the entertainment value you are looking for, but is also legal and safe for your computer. The most common dangers:
    -   Online gaming sites which require software download to participate.
    -   "Free" media download sites, including music, video, mp3, etc. (These sites also tend to breech U.S. Copyright laws.)

CONCLUSION
This article contains much generalized information. Trying to boil this information down to anything less than a large book is a practical impossibility, but it all comes down to this: Common Sense.

But what does that mean in the confusing world of computers?

-   If you wouldn't do business with a particular type of company in the real world, don't do business with them on the internet.

-   If you didn't solicit information from a company/person on a topic, yet they are sending you ads or attachments don't open the e-mails and simply close the pop-up ads that present themselves.

-   Keep up on your updates for your computer's antivirus and operating system – and get the right equipment in the first place.

-   If your computer is running slowly or already has been infected with a virus, spy ware or internet porn – get assistance to be sure that the infected computer(s) is cleaned up properly and restored to good working order. (Like you would for your car if it made a noise or lost power, etc…)

-   If you are feeling unsure or uneasy about a website or transaction, stop and ask more questions before proceeding. Don't feel like you have to "buy now ask questions later". Remember – you're the consumer – you set the pace.

If you need assistance with any of the information in this article, please do not hesitate to call us. If you need more information on updates and antivirus software, or if your system/network is already infected, we can help you to put the tools into place to safeguard your computer(s) against the foes of the internet. The best friends you can have on the internet are your own good sense, and TONE DOG, INC.

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