

Information Technology

Viruses, Worms, and other Computer Wildlife - Again

Blasted by “Blaster”? Doomed by “MyDoom”? In January, 2004, Trend Micro, an anti-virus software maker, estimated that computer virus attacks cost global businesses an estimated \$55 billion in damages in 2003, twice as much as in 2002. Who’s behind these attacks, and how can you protect your business from them?

As early as the mid 1980s social misfits were devising small programs to cause mischief. Since computer users wouldn’t knowingly install such programs, they were written to attach themselves to legitimate programs and spread like viruses when users exchanged diskettes. The first “worms”, named for how they worm their way through a network, appeared about 1987. To increase the power and flexibility of products like Word and Excel, Microsoft provides ways of writing programs, called macros, and inserting them into Word and Excel files, inevitably leading to macro viruses.

“Mydoom”, a.k.a. “Novarg” or “Mimail” is technically unsophisticated, relying on “social engineering” (a tongue-in-cheek way of saying “deceiving the unwary”) to spread. Hackers break into inadequately defended computers and take control, often to send spam, host chat groups or attack other computers. A consultant I know got a call to look at a server that was slow and short of disk space. It turned out that it had been hacked and was hosting a chat group.

What should you do to protect your business from computer attacks? There are different threats, requiring different defenses.

To defend against worms and viruses you’ll need to install an antivirus program like Norton, McAfee or PC-cillin and keep it updated. Alas, the nature of an antivirus program requires it to monitor the computer closely, possibly causing conflicts with other programs. If one antivirus product causes problems, try uninstalling it and installing a different one.

Fast, always-on Internet connections like DSL and cable create openings through which hackers anywhere in the world can penetrate unprotected computers and steal or damage data. To defend against such attacks you’ll need a firewall - hardware or software that detects and stops unauthorized access to your network. Windows XP has a firewall and most security software packages include one.

Viruses, worms, Trojan horses, hackers, firewalls – ain’t technology wonderful?

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com. Past columns are available by e-mailing Denis.