



## Windows, Doors and Ports of Call



MY COMPUTER is like a home to me. Much like being away on vacation too long and wanting to get back home, I start to miss my computer after being away from it for the day. There is some sort of security in checking e-mail, reviewing client information, or monitoring agency sales.

People usually don't compare their computers to a home, but maybe they should. After all, when one uses some one else's computer, it is much like visiting a stranger's home. Everything about the computer is a little different. Someone is not truly comfortable unless he or she is at home, in either sense of the word.

There are many similarities between a home and a computer. For instance, both offer areas for storage, both are personalized to our liking, both have "windows" and doors, but in a computer doors are called ports. And similar to in a home where we invest in things like an alarm system and pest control, the producer also should invest in items to protect his or her computer, such as an alarm (a firewall) and pest control (virus protection).

Comparing a home to a computer is a roundabout way of getting to the fairly mundane topic of computer security, but how else could I ask the reader to envision a house with 65,000 doors and relate that to a computer? That is how many virtual ports are available on a computer, however, for hackers to attempt to break in over the producer's Internet connection. Some ports, like the back door of a poorly lit home, are more tempting than others. Even if the producer had a home with only two doors and there was a chance one was open, he would take the time to secure it.

Many producers do not realize that their computers are vulnerable and that they may be exposed when going online. After all, exploring the complexities involved in a computer is not necessarily an entertaining pastime. Granted, the chances that a hacker would single out a producer's computer are fairly slim, but it still is every producer's duty to protect the personal information of his or her prospects and clients.

### **Defense 101**

A good defense requires multiple strategies. To help protect themselves from the threats posed by being online, users should install a combination of a firewall and anti-virus software. Several products are available that may help make this job easier. Both Symantec ([www.Symantec.com](http://www.Symantec.com)) and Network Associates ([www.nai.com](http://www.nai.com)) offer competing software packages named Internet Security. Both of these products combine virus protection with firewall security for around \$70. These packages are highly recommended for those who may not be tech savvy; they offer easy installation along with support and a help line should the user run into any difficulty.

When the producer is installing any software, particularly firewall software, there is a small chance that a change to system settings or files on the producer's computer may require the reinstallation of software or re-adjustments to the system settings.

## **Firewalls 101**

Firewalls are not for the timid. Some understanding of how the Internet works and TCP/IP protocol is required to implement one successfully, particularly if the producer's computer is involved in a network. Firewalls are essential to blocking potential hackers from gaining access to a computer. In every computer, virtual ports are used to connect to other services and resources on the Internet. Inbound e-mail uses port 110, sending e-mail uses port 25, and browsing most Web pages uses port 80. Other ports are used for various tasks, but most of them are not used at all. The firewall's job is to ensure that only authorized programs are using the ports the producer needs to use. All other ports should either be locked or concealed.

Firewalls are available in two flavors: hardware and software. Most routers now have built-in firewall security. In a networked environment a combination firewall/router is the easiest and recommended way to protect the workgroup. Stand-alone software offerings also are available. Black Ice (<http://blackice.iss.net/>) is a firewall product that has earned a strong reputation over the past several years.

Tech savvy producers also may opt to download free firewall software from [www.ZoneLabs.com](http://www.ZoneLabs.com). Zone Alarm is a longtime industry favorite. Zone Labs also has a paid version that offers support.

While Microsoft Windows XP offers a firewall, producers should be aware of its inherent vulnerabilities. Most experts agree that a third-party firewall is recommended for these users.

To prevent viruses from destroying the data on, or even outright hijacking, a producer's computer, anti-virus software is a must. Some viruses are so stealthy that they may hide on a Web page and download themselves on unsuspecting computers when the page is viewed. Other viruses spread through e-mail by attaching themselves to random files on the computer and mailing themselves out, using the stored address book in the user's Microsoft outlook program. Because some viruses are written specifically to exploit Outlook, uninstalling it and using other e-mail clients such as Eudora ([www.Eudora.com](http://www.Eudora.com)) may help reduce the risk of random files being mailed out if a virus finds its way past the virus protection.

In addition to the many anti-virus solutions that may be purchased, one of the better ones I have found is offered for free from [www.grisoft.com](http://www.grisoft.com). I have been using Avg Anti-Virus on various computers for several years. It works seamlessly in the background. Agencies that want to install the software on their computers may purchase the software for a nominal fee. It is free for personal use.

## **Port Browsing**

Two useful Web sites that I have referenced in previous articles are [www.grc.com](http://www.grc.com) and [www.Dslreports.com](http://www.Dslreports.com). Producers may want to visit these sites

to brush up on security issues and perform security scans on their computers for free. Both sites offer port scanners that can help identify vulnerabilities. Just as the producer takes time to secure his home, he also should invest the time to ensure that his computer is secure. Knowing that my computer and its data are properly guarded against the many threats posed to it enables me to meet with my clients with confidence. How confident are you?