

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

June 18, 2002
Online Circ. 460,000

Protecting broadband users the hardware way; Alpha Shield box is useful alternative to firewall software

The number of users having broadband connections to the Internet is increasing rapidly, up from just 2 percent or 3 percent a couple of years ago to nearly 20 percent today.

Such connections deliver high-speed response, making browsing a pleasure instead of a frustration, but they are always on. Always on means always available to access from intruders who can then rummage through your computer and even take control of it.

Numerous firewalls are available, such as the popular Black Ice Defender, Sygate, Symantec, Norton, Wyvern, Analog X and others. If you do a search on "firewall" at Web sites such as ZDnet (www.zdnet.com) and www.download.com, you can come up with free ones and free trials of commercially available software. A more sure approach is a hardware gate, a physical lockout for intruders.

Alpha Shield is just such a device - a small \$170 (\$270 Canadian) box that sits between your PC and the high-speed ethernet cable that connects you to the broadband service. It blocks both intruders and viruses, and works with all platforms (PC, Mac, Linux, etc.).

Its first line of defense is that when you are not sending or receiving data it cuts the connection. This has no affect on your use of the Internet; the on/off switching is instant and invisible. Almost all data transmission with a high-speed hookup takes place in just a fraction of the time you need to be online; a three-hour session, for example, would probably only have a few minutes of actual line use.

The next level of protection is stealth. Every PC on the Internet has what's called an "IP" (Internet Protocol) address, which identifies that machine. If you leave your PC on all day, that address remains visible and accessible to anyone. (An ordinary phone hookup is less vulnerable, by the way, because the connection is not always on, and the IP address changes every time you log on again.)

Alpha Shield hides your broadband IP address and allows you to visit Web sites and browse the Internet essentially without being seen. They can't latch onto your machine if they don't know it's there. (Saves you from some junk mail, too.) Data coming in is monitored to see if it is in fact coming from the source you connected to, and it's also monitored for viruses. Alpha Shield can do this for more than one computer, but it must be told the IP address for each machine being connected.

All this is seamless and automatic. Connecting and setting up the small Alpha Shield box takes just two or three minutes. To you, the user, your high-speed connection will be the same as always, except you are now protected. If you're really paranoid you can also use anti-virus and firewall software; these programs will not

interfere with the operation of the shield. Alpha Shield is a product of Saafnet, in Burnaby, Canada: www.saafnet.com or www.alphashield.com. Online services, going for broke

A recent marketing study from Jupiter Media Metrix found that more than two-thirds of U.S. consumers are not willing to pay for any services on the Internet. Resistance to paying for services is slightly higher than similar resistance to paying for content.

The Wall Street Journal and a few investment services have been able to successfully charge for delivering content, but services such as instant messaging, file sharing, special e-mail handling, software sharing, etc., are meeting a lot of sales resistance.

Books: Dilbert is real

I get a lot of e-mails asking for technical support for an amazing variety of problems. I don't do technical support. And the main reason is embodied in the slim volume below.

Welcome to I.T. is a collection of calls to Fred, the tech support guy at CDW Computer Sales in Chicago, from some of the company's corporate customers. The book is \$12 from CDW (www.cdw.com). Some samples below:

"How do you use the 'save as' function in Word? My computer just gives me a file list."

"My computer keeps making a squeaking noise. Can you send someone over to oil it?"

"I spilled iced tea into my keyboard. But it was unsweetened so it shouldn't be too bad."

A woman called to complain that she couldn't read any of the letters on her monitor when she turned it on in the morning but as it warmed up during the day it became more readable. A technician was sent out and closed her window blinds. Things were fine after that.

An executive with a faulty computer called to say it wasn't working. Send the box back, he was told, and they would replace it. So he sent back an empty box.

A woman called to say nothing happened when she used the mouse. A technician was sent over and watched while she stood up, pointed the mouse at the computer and kept clicking.

A CEO called to say he was having trouble getting his e-mail and he would like to have his e-mail sent to his last company, where it was working fine.

Readers can search more than two years of columns at the On Computers Web site, www.oncomp.com, and can send e-mail to Robert Schwabach at bobschwab@oncomp.com or bobschwab@aol.com.