

Keeping hackers at bay



SUCCESS:

Nizam Dean, senior vice-president, and Vikash Sami, CEO, show off the AlphaShield and some of the awards it's brought home in recognition of its contributions to technology. The firewall device was created in Burnaby.

By Julie MacLellan, Burnaby NOW reporter

Ask any computer user what their biggest worry is, and chances are the answer will be on the same theme: security.

Worms, viruses, Trojans - even if people don't entirely understand what they are, they know what they can do.

And they want them stopped.

That's where a Burnaby company comes in, with a small but powerful device that's making waves in the high-tech world.

AlphaShield Inc., based in the Metrotown area, is the maker of the AlphaShield.

The shield's purpose is simple: to prevent all non-invited traffic from reaching a computer. Installed between a computer and a modem, it effectively acts to make the computer 'invisible' to the outside world so that nothing gets in except what's wanted.

Firewalls certainly aren't a new idea.

But ask Vikash Sami, the company's CEO and chairman, about his product and he's quick to distinguish it from the other 326 firewall security products on the market.

For one thing, it's easy for even a non-technical person to install.

That was one of his goals back in June of 2000, when the company first started researching ways to create the product.

"We found out that 95 to 98 per cent of the people that use computers don't have the technical know-how to set up a firewall," Sami said.

Compared to traditional software firewalls, which can take from four to six hours to configure, the AlphaShield is a piece of "plug-and-play" hardware that connects quickly to computer and modem.

There's the added benefit that, once installed, the AlphaShield doesn't need to be patched, upgraded or reconfigured - as software firewalls are when new problems or challenges are found.

For the user, it's just that simple.

Behind the scenes, of course, the technology that allows AlphaShield to operate is complex.

It incorporates three separate security technologies - for techies, those are known as AlphaGap, IP Stealth and real-time packet authorization.

AlphaGap is the technology that will automatically disconnect the computer from the Internet during non-use periods of more than 15 minutes. It also allows the user to simply press a grey button on the top of the shield device to physically disconnect from the Internet.

That's critical, Sami notes, because physically disconnecting from the Internet is the only way to completely stop any malicious activity.

Once that switch is turned, Sami says, no one can reach you.

"If you do not exist, how are you going to hack it?" he said.

That's combined with the IP Stealth technology, which, as Sami puts it, operates effectively as a two-way mirror: "You can see everyone, but no one can see you."

The real-time packet authorization allows the device to block all 65,536 ports - the entry points into the computer. It will only open what Sami describes as a "tunnel" to connect to the specific IP address a user has requested.

Together, the three technologies combine to create a shield that the company is billing as "100 per cent unhackable."

It's kept out high-profile 'worms' such as MyDoom, which was first reported in January this year, and MS Blaster, which took out Air Canada's reservation systems last summer.

"AlphaShield was the only firewall on the market that stopped MS Blaster," Sami said, noting the company's sales soared four to five times after that incident.

Nizam Dean, the company's senior vice-president, points out that AlphaShield has an advantage over software firewalls because those are simply computer code.

"Anything that is a code can be manipulated by hackers," he said.

"The hardware firewall is the only way to go."

For computer users, there are a few limitations.

Because the AlphaShield makes the user 'invisible,' you can't use it if you host a website.

For peer-to-peer file sharing - such as Kazaa, which allows users to share music and video files - and instant messaging, AlphaShield can also create a barrier.

For instant messaging, the AlphaShield user can initiate messages but friends won't be able to "see" when they're online and available.

For Kazaa and other similar sites, users can still download information but aren't able to host files on an FTP site for others to share.

Still, Sami said, for most average home users, the advantages are far greater than the limitations.

Beyond the security, he noted, there are other advantages - the technology blocks third-party pop-up advertising and also, unlike software firewalls, does not take any processing speed away from the computer.

So far, the market is responding well to the device.

The AlphaShield, which retails for \$149 Canadian, is being sold through London Drugs and Future Shop and through Radio Shack in the U.S.

It has distributors in Europe, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand already, and Sami and Dean are eyeing Korea, Japan and China for distribution this year.

The AlphaShield recently won four major awards at RetailVision, one of the biggest retail trade shows in North America, as well as positive press from influential columnists in the New York Times and Chicago Tribune.

And Sami notes they have plans in the works for more products, though he doesn't want to be specific on details yet.

And they have no plans to move out of Burnaby, though they're hoping to buy their own building soon.

"We want to stay in Burnaby. Metrotown is a good area, it's a central location," Sami said, pointing out its easy access to the airport and downtown Vancouver - not to mention the first-class hotel where visitors to the company can stay.

Dean noted they both live in Burnaby and have appreciated the support of the community.

"We still want to remain a Burnaby company, as long as Burnaby supports us," he said.

More details on the company are available at www.alphashield.com.