Beware of SpyWare!

So you've made your investment in a personal computer and you're ready to take on the World Wide Web. The last thing you want to worry about is some kid in a dorm room sending you a virus, or worse, hacking into your system and stealing information about you. Unfortunately, that threat is more real than many of us would like to believe.

This threat is known as **SpyWar**e!

Is your computer all of a sudden **running slowly** lately, especially when you are surfing the Internet? *Crashing randomly* for no reason? *Gathering tons of spam e-mail*? Has your *default homepage changed* to some strange search page? Is your computer *screen constantly cluttered* with all sorts of weird pop-up advertising? If so you may be the victim of **SpyWare!** (Also known as AdWare)

What is SpyWare? Basically it started out as "Internet Marketing". Somewhere down the line it morphed its way into something that could invade your privacy and make your Internet surfing experience very frustrating. You may not even know you have SpyWare installed on your computer until it's out of control and you start to see visible signs of your computer's performance being adversely affected.

SpyWare **is capable of doing any of the following:**

- Tracking all web sites that you've visited.
- Capture information you type into search engines. This information can and become part of someone's marketing plan.
- Gather data you send over the Internet and make it available for others to read.
- Fill up your hard drive with illegal files and make it a pubic file storage place for others to visit without you even knowing.
- Hijack your web browser and forcefully redirect your Internet traffic to some other website then you originally intended on visiting.
- Steal passwords that you type into secure websites.
- Take remote control of your computer and thusly have access to all of your private information.

You may say *"But I have the latest anti-virus software and my brother In-Law came over last week and I think he installed one of those firewalls."* The problem with SpyWare is that it is sneaky and has ways of getting around anti-virus and firewalls by possibly tricking you. There may also be a misconception of what anti-virus software and a firewall can do. Simply speaking, anti-virus programs protect your computer from viruses. Firewalls protect you from hackers (a person or another computer) hacking into your computer in some way. Also take into consideration anti-virus software and firewalls only work well if they are installed and configured properly.

SpyWare is now in a category of its own by the way it spreads. It sneaks by the mechanisms you probably already have in place by taking advantage of human nature. We are all curious when we are on the Internet and can be easily fooled. For example, you are working on some research and a pop up screen flashes on your monitor informing you the time is wrong

on your computer. The pop-up blinks incessantly asking *"Would you like to download a free program to make sure the clock is accurate?"* **Once you agree to do this you have opened a door and let in SpyWare**. There are all sorts of little scams like this trying to trick you into opening a doorway to your computer to bypass the anti-virus software and firewall you already have installed defeating the purpose of both.

Hopefully by now I have your attention. Here's my advice on how to protect your computer from this "new" type of computer intrusion:

- Install a free pop-up ad blocker like Google's Toolbar http://www.google.com/toolbar/ie/index.html), or
   PanicWare's Pop-Up Stopper (http://www.panicware.comhttp://www.panicware.com/).
- Install and run a free SpyWare or AdWare removal tool like Spybot Search and Destroy
   (http://spybot.safer-networking.de/) or Ad-aware (http://www.lavasoft.de)
- Be careful of the websites you visit. The nature of the Internet and how it works could take
   you down some dark alleys on the other side of the world.
- Do not install any software given to you from a pop-up or banner ad from a company that
   you have never heard of offering you software to make you surf the internet faster and better,
   keep your time synchronized correctly, and adding more and improved search functionality to your web browser by clicking on the link.
- If you do get a pop-up the safest way to close it is by using the key combination **Alt-F4.**
   1st hold down the ALT key and while holding it down press on F4. (Command + W for Mac users.)
- Do not open e-mails from senders you don't know. Check with your ISP (Internet Service
   Provider) and see if they have a service to block SPAM. Most do and they're usually free.
- Utilize functions within your e-mail program like "Block Sender" & "Delete Known Junk Mail"
- Do not open unknown attachments even from friends without directly knowing what they sent.
   Even family and friends can inadvertently send malicious executables containing SpyWare and viruses without being aware of it.
- Don't let unqualified family and friends attempt to protect your computer unless they are properly trained and have the experience.
   Would you let anyone work on your car for a day just because they offered?
- Hire a *certified,* reputable, qualified, and experienced computer technician who has great references. Picking someone just because

they offer the lowest flat rate and ask no questions- probably isn't concerned about actually servicing your computer or building a solid customer following.

If the technician asks many questions to clarify what has been going on and runs solid diagnostic tests he is trouble shooting and are **looking for the core issues**.