

Tips, Tricks and Advice from your local “IT Guru”

This month I want to talk to you about that old favourite, viruses and spyware. Over the last few months I have seen a resurgence of nasty PC infections and I thought it was about time we had recap of the subject.

I used to make the distinction between viruses and spyware, but nowadays we can lump the whole lot under the banner of Malware; meaning the things that get onto your system that are there to do some sort of harm. The most common form is the “false positive” where you are informed by some sort of pop up window that your system is infected and you need to download some software or pay some money to remove them. The pop up window will often look just like a valid Windows dialog box with all the right branding for your own software, so it's easy to be fooled. The thing to remember is that no legitimate anti malware program will ask for money to remove an infection. If you get a message like this, don't click on anything and just switch the PC off. Even clicking on the “No” or “Cancel” button can be interpreted as a ‘Yes’ by these sort of programs. Also, don't worry that someone has been visiting doggy sites on your PC to cause these to appear, these sorts of popups can be injected onto your system even by visiting perfectly safe sites or even by just opening an email. The only way to protect yourself from these infections is to make sure that you have automatic updates switched on for your operating system, and to keep your anti-malware software updated. Other precautions to take are to make sure you never click on links in emails (as you can't be sure where you are being sent) and to switch off images in emails as this can be a way of getting nasty things on your system. It's also worth repeating that no company that I know of will ring you up and tell you your computer has a virus. If you get a call like that, just hang up as they are only interested in your credit card details. On a related subject, if you have a Smartphone, don't be fooled into thinking you need antivirus software for it. Just like the Mac operating system, viruses have been written for Smartphones but there are no known cases of infections actually happening in the real world.

I have been asked a lot over the years about what malware writers actually get out of it. My answer used to be that most just do it for fun and to prove they can, but nowadays that has changed. Today, creating viruses and spyware is big business. Some infections like the ones described above are blatant cons, with the purpose of getting money out of you. These don't hide within your system and it's obvious that you have been infected. Others are much more insidious. Some will just collect information from your system that can be sold, and others are used to take control of your system without you knowing. The sort of things these are used for are the modern equivalent of the protection racket. If the target doesn't respond to a demand for money, several thousand infected PC's can be called into action to bombard a website, effectively bringing the site down. Imagine how much money can be lost on a large shopping site if it's disabled, even for a few hours. Sometimes it's better to pay some “protection money” to make sure it doesn't happen!

Finally, I have written about the idea of using an Apple iPad rather than a full PC for people who are, shall we say, “technology challenged” and I am pleased to say that I now know of someone who is doing just that! So far things are going well, and I will report back next month with more details.

If you have any questions or anything you would like me to cover in this column, email me at look@4-11consultants.co.uk

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