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June 25-July 1, 2002

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ALAN ZISMAN

Gear Guide

Home-grown innovation rules

Canadian heroes: Wireless PCs, privacy protectors

With Canada Day around the corner, this month I'll celebrate by featuring a trio of Canuck companies making world-class products.

Shielding your computers

Does the term "firewall" make you shudder?

While most users of "always-on" broadband Internet connections recognize the need for added security, software and hardwall firewalls have typically required the sort of configuration that makes most users pause.



Burnaby-based **Alphashield** (www.alphashield.com; formerly Saafnet International) hopes to change that. Its \$199

Alphashield privacy protection device offers plug-and-play ease of setup and use. The company promises it requires "no

maintenance, no configuration, and no upgrades." The device is a small silver box that sits between the cable or DSL modem and the computer.

In my tests, it worked as advertised. Setup took only a moment or two. And unlike routers, which also provide firewall security, no configuration of the Alphashield unit, the computer, or my network was necessary. In fact, no software is included in the package. Testing at the well-known **Shields Up** Web site (www.grc.com) showed that my computer was hidden to outsiders on the Net. Unlike software-based firewalls, the Alphashield boasts its own built-in CPU, and has no noticeable impact on Internet performance. And it works with any sort of computer.

A few things to note, however. Making your computer invisible

A few things to note, however. Making your computer invisible to outsiders on the Internet means it's invisible to peer-to-peer file sharing software, instant messaging, and remote access software. You can use all of these sorts of programs from your protected computer, but you have to initiate the contact -- since your computer is hidden, others cannot contact you first.

Home or small offices with multiple computers on a network can protect the entire network with a single unit placed between the modem and the network router. But since most network routers also have firewall protection, Alphashield's firewall is less needed.

Picture Perfect

While Toronto-based **ATI Technologies** has more mindshare (and market share) in the hot market for computer video adapters, Montreal-based **Matrox Graphics** (www.matrox.com) is a competitor worth keeping in mind.

Many of their current products support multiple monitors from a single video card; the Millennium G550 Dual-DVI is the only card on the market capable of controlling two flat-panel displays at once.

AirCard on the go

Last month, we noted how cellphone-provider **Microcell** offered notebook and PDA users a wireless PC Card, the **Novatel Merlin** for Internet-access on the go.



Not to be outdone, **Telus Mobility** now offers computer users its **Velocity Wireless** service, featuring the **AirCard 555** from Richmond's **Sierra Wireless**.

The AirCard is a credit-card-sized PC Card for notebooks and personal digital assistants that combines the features of a wireless modem and a network card. It even allows users to make voice calls and send text message to cellphones from their laptop computers. The AirCard is designed to work on Telus's (and **Bell Canada's**) new CDMA2000 1X network at speeds between 86 and 144 Kbps (about 10 times as fast as typical wireless data transmission speeds), but will also connect at slower speeds on Telus's older networks. The card costs \$480, with a special offer from Telus of unlimited data

service for \$50 a month. High-speed service is available in major Canadian cities and is being expanded to smaller centres. Roaming privileges in the U.S. through Telus partner **Verizon** are expected later this year. Stay tuned.

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