

Firewalls for dummies -- or the techno-challenged

Small Burnaby company helps Internet users protect themselves from intruders

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Imagine that you had 65,536 doors to your house and that all of them were unlocked.

Do you think that, just possibly, someone might try to get inside to either steal your cheque book and credit cards or do a little creative vandalism, like destroying all your financial records?

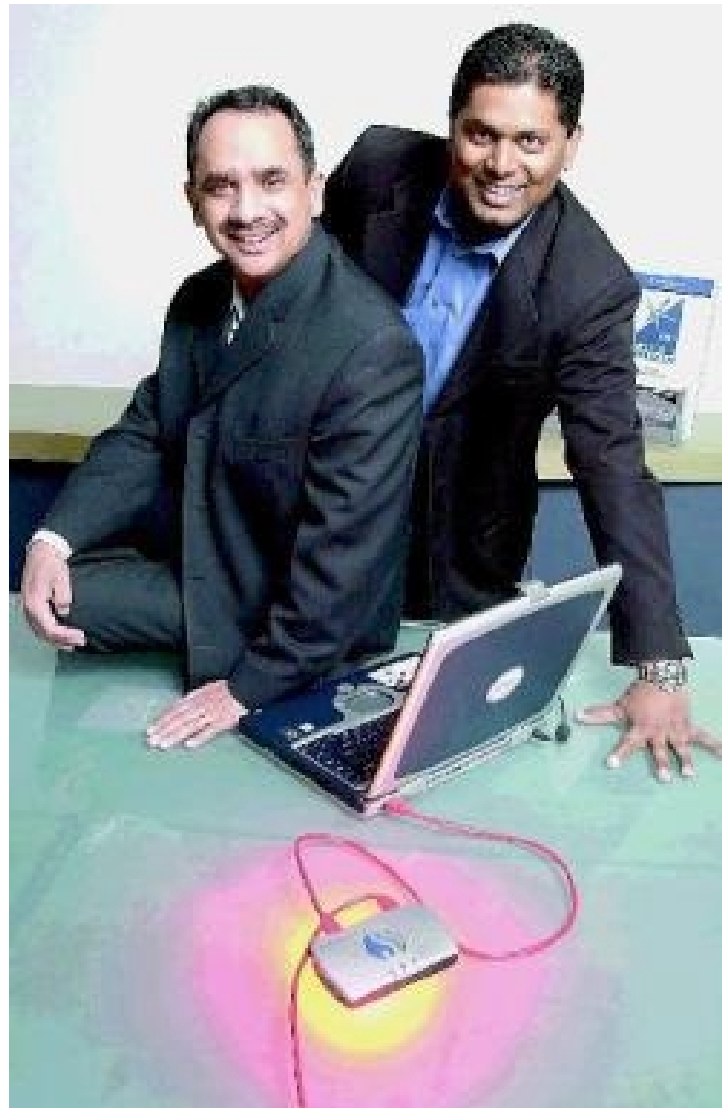
Or that they might even take up residence so they can do digital home invasions on your neighbours and their 65,536 open entrances?

Well, 65,536 is how many doors -- or ports, to use the proper term -- your computer has when it's connected to the Internet.

Worse yet, all of these ports, although most evildoers only use a few of them, are available to anyone who knows what's called your IP address, the one given you by your Internet service provider.

And getting that IP address is a snap because your computer, once on the Net, just blathers away constantly letting everyone know you're online and open for invasion.

This is, of course, why we're always being told to set up a firewall -- a protective shield that permits us to venture out on the Net through our ports, but stops people (call them hackers with a bad attitude if you like) coming at us the other way through various means, including viruses and



Burnaby AlphaShield senior vice-president Nizam Dean (left) and CEO Vikash Sami market a device that attaches to your cable or DSL modem and prevents external attacks.

CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun

worms.

But, as anyone who has configured a software firewall or installed a router with a built-in firewall knows, you're never quite sure if you're doing the right thing while attempting to protect your computer and your personal information.

And that's where AlphaShield Inc. -- a small privately held tech company with 12 employees at its Burnaby headquarters -- saw an opportunity.

"We found out that 98 per cent of consumers and people who use high-speed Internet don't have the technical knowledge or know-how to set up a firewall," said AlphaShield CEO Vikash Sami. "If you are a non-technical person and you set up a firewall, it's almost as good as not having one."

AlphaShield's (www.alphashield.com) solution is a small, inexpensive (\$149), easily installed box (a hardware firewall) that goes between your cable or ADSL modem and before your computer or your router, if you have a home network.

Once connected -- as easy as snapping ethernet cable into place -- the operating-system-independent device, which requires no software and no set-up from your computer, blocks access to every one of your 65,536 ports.

Even so, it allows you to venture out on to the Internet to visit Web sites, do online banking and the like.

(If you need to run something that needs direct Net access, like a voice over IP phone, you can do it through an auxiliary port on the device. Also, if you need to get a direct line to your ISP during a trouble call, you can simply switch the connection to your computer to the auxiliary port.)

"When we were designing AlphaShield we said, well, let's keep the non-technical people in mind," said Sami. "Let's achieve a set-up simplicity where this device can be hooked up in less than one minute."

One of the major features of AlphaShield, said Sami, is that it allows you to disconnect totally from the Internet either automatically after 15 minutes of non-use or by clicking the grey button on the top of the box. Punch the blue button and you're back surfing.

AlphaShield's IPStealth technology, said Sami, makes users invisible to others on the Net.

"We were able to flip the logic of a conventional firewall," said Sami. "With a conventional firewall you choose what's allowed in and what isn't allowed in. With this one absolutely nothing is allowed in to your computer unless you request it."

The AlphaShield has 50 per cent of its sales in Europe and is sold in Canada by London Drugs and Future Shop. It's now being introduced into Radio Shack stores in the United States.

"It took us a year to get into Radio Shack, it's almost impossible to get into Radio Shack USA," said Sami. "We started with 10 stores as a test and we've just been rolled out to 1,000 stores."

AlphaShield is designing a new product that would combine a router with the firewall technology.

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