

No. 95. Get That Firewall, NOW!

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What is a firewall? Why do I need it? How much does it cost? PLEASE read the answers to these three questions. In the end, you will be convinced you need one. You absolutely do! Get one. I will suggest one that is free.

The name firewall came from the description of the sheet metal partition between an automobile's engine compartment and the driver's feet. It was named in early automotive days because it actually kept the driver's feet from being toasted if a fire occurred in the engine compartment, or even from just a heat buildup without an actual fire. Even today, that sheet metal partition in a car is still called a firewall.

In the computer world, it describes software, hardware or combination of software and hardware that protects a computer when connected to a network. The Internet is a network. However, here is a simpler definition that applies to we average home users of the Internet.

A firewall can be a single software package, that when installed in our home computer, can protect it from unwanted activity while we are on the Internet. That unwanted activity could be theft of any data in the computer, including financial data, social security numbers, passwords, credit card numbers, or any other personal data. Anything, in any kind of file in your computer, can be extracted and stolen, covertly (without your knowledge), while you are on the Internet. A firewall can prevent that. It can also prevent programs or other files from being moved from the Internet to your hard drive without your knowledge and consent. That includes virus-containing programs or any other kind of file. Very simply, a firewall is like a traffic cop that will not allow movement of anything into or out of your computer, unless you tell him that it is OK. That is good, is it not? Darn right it is. However, be advised, that if you tell him it is OK for a file to be downloaded, he will allow it even if it contains a virus. A firewall is not a virus checker, just a traffic cop.

You see, every computer has hidden ports ("doors") that can be accessed from outside, without any indication of that access showing on your screen. That is, nothing will indicate to you that one or more of your ports are being used. When connected to the Internet, lets say to get your email and send a few messages, outsiders with the right software can send stuff through those ports, either way, without your knowing about it, while you are getting or sending your email. A good firewall (the cop) will watch all those doors, and if someone tries to open one, will hold it shut and notify you of who is trying to access the door. If you tell him OK, he will let that door open. If you tell him NO, he will keep it shut and nothing can get through it either way.

Well, that should give you a feel for what a firewall is. It should also indicate why you need one. Even if you keep no personal data on your machine, the addition of a nefarious program or bit of executable code can modify or even destroy your operating system, thus making your computer unusable. Everyone who connects to the Internet, via modem or cable or any other way, needs a firewall. Everyone, without exception, needs one.

You can buy one. Symantec (Norton Utilities) makes a good one. However, why spend money when you do not need to? The very first firewall written for the average user, which also happens to be the very best firewall available anywhere (in my opinion), is free for personal use.

ZoneAlarm is its name, and you can get it from <http://www.zonelabs.com>. They make one which you can pay for (ZoneAlarm Pro, about \$40), which you will read about when you open their homepage at the address above. However, if you scroll down a bit, near the bottom of the page, the free version will be described. I have both – the free version on one computer, and the paid-for version on another. Except for some added bells and whistles in the paid-for version, they are identical. The “engine” (traffic cop) is identical.

My advice is to download the free version and install it, ASAP. Once you do, the “cop” will start watching your ports, and will notify you with a pop-up message whenever someone tries to get in a back door. Rest assured, a pop-up notice will appear in the first half hour you are connected to the net. Maybe even in the first 5 minutes! Maybe even in the first 10 seconds! Your ports are being probed all the time. However, without a firewall, you simply do not know it.

ZoneAlarm has some other nice touches. It will examine email messages as they come into your machine. If a message contains an attachment with potentially dangerous features (like a program that will run automatically), it will rename the attachment so that it cannot be run. If the attachment turns out to be bona fide, you can always rename it back, so nothing is lost. Otherwise, it will not run and you can delete it. This is a very nice safety feature, indeed.

The program has a nice control panel, in which you can tell the “cop” what your rules are. That is, you can tell ZoneAlarm that Netscape has permission to access the net, but that RealPlayer does not. That will allow you to use Netscape to get your mail or to send it, but it will prevent RealPlayer from covertly reporting to its parent company who you are and what kind of machine you have (which it will most certainly do, without your knowledge or consent, if you do not have a firewall). Finally, the nicest thing about ZoneAlarm is that it is configured correctly when you install it, and you do not need to alter stuff unless you want to. On occasion, it will pop up and ask you a question about a program, such as “Do you want Windows Critical Update to access the Internet”? Answer it yes or no (NO if you are not sure!). If you also click the “Do not ask this question in the future” box, it will assume your answer applies next time, as well, and it will not bother you again. Nicely done, indeed!

I hope I have answered your questions, and that you see the need for a firewall. Try ZoneAlarm and you will be convinced that you need it, merely from the number of covert probes it stops (covert probes that you do not know about, until you install it). Ask our Editor, Jim Romelfanger (K9ZZ) if it is worth installing. He will give you a resounding YES. Don’t forget, it is free, and you just cannot beat that. I think Zone Labs has done the computing public a real service by making its product available free for private, individual use. That’s why I bought the commercial version – to help support a company that has done us all a great favor. Go get the free version, NOW! Happy computing!