

CONNECTION PLUS TECHNOLOGY

Ann Arbor, MI

News

Ann Arbor
Met Area

Thursday

D 57,315

MAR 21, 2002



Arm your laptop

Security systems protect against losing it to theft

By DAVID POGUE
THE NEW YORK TIMES

There's a lot to like about laptops lately. They're small and light, they have big, brilliant screens, and they let you get work done without being bolted down to one spot. Unfortunately, you, the up-standing citizen, aren't the only one who finds them attractive. About 480,000 times a year, bad guys find them desirable, too - and laughably easy to steal.

But if modern technology makes laptops juicy targets, modern technology can protect them. The high-tech world has rushed to the aid of worried laptopers with some fascinating anti-theft technologies that make it much less likely that you'll lose your laptop - and, perhaps more important, the files on it.

For \$100, for example, the Caveo Anti-Theft card (www.caveo.com) gives your machine what amounts to a miniature car alarm. It's a PC card that you slip into your laptop's card socket. Inside the card, which looks like an aluminum MasterCard, is a sophisticated motion sensor.

When you intend to leave your laptop unattended, if only for a moment, you can "arm" it in any of several ways: by clicking a button, by using a taskbar menu or, if the lid is closed, by tilting it to three particular angles in a specific sequence (for example, left, right and then backward) - a peculiar little high-tech motion password that only you know. A chirp lets you know that your laptop-tilting was successful.

If anybody tries to carry the machine beyond a "security perimeter" that you've specified using the Caveo software, the card begins to chirp even if the machine is turned off.



NEW YORK TIMES PHOTO

About 480,000 times a year, thieves find laptops laughably easy to steal.

If the robber continues to sneak away, the chirping gets louder. Finally, if the laptop gets beyond the security perimeter, it emits an alarm: a continuous, high-pitched beep that sounds like one of those "this is only a test" tones on television. Even removing the laptop's battery doesn't shut off the sound (amazingly, given its size, the card contains a rechargeable battery with enough power to keep the alarm going for 30 minutes). You, the rightful owner, can silence the alarm by tilting the laptop to those three predetermined angles, no matter how peculiar it may make you look in public.

This card's alarm isn't anywhere near as loud as Caveo describes it. If you were stealing the laptop, people would think you were not so much a hardened criminal as someone whose hearing aid needed adjustment.

Fortunately, when the alarm goes off, the Caveo software also shuts down your machine and won't permit it to be turned on again until somebody types in a 16-character password.

The Caveo card's execution is superb, but its concept isn't foolproof. For example, a thief (perhaps knowing how the card works) could simply eject the whining card and toss it into the Hudson. True, that 16-character password business would render the machine useless, but only until its hard drive was reformatted. (Caveo says that "reconfiguring the BIOS" can eliminate this loophole, but that technical task is not among most people's basic computer skills.)

Furthermore, the system is intended for deterrence in public. If someone swipes your machine from your home office while you're on vacation, a few dozen decibels won't make the least bit of difference. Nor does the Caveo card work in Macintosh laptops, like the popular Titanium PowerBook G4 - an unfortunate twist, considering how attractive those sleek machines must look to thieves.

Even so, the card offers some real psychological

comfort when you're traveling. You can set down your laptop in an airport, on a Starbucks table or on the waiting-lounge seat next to you, confident that no thug can snatch it and run without giving you a sonic trail to follow.

The Caveo alarm isn't the only anti-theft idea you can borrow from the automotive world. You can also equip your laptop with the Windows equivalent of a LoJack: a system that invisibly "phones home" to a tracking agency after the theft, so that the police know exactly where to find the perpetrator. Several companies provide this service, including Absolute Software, Lucira, zTrace, Laptrak and PC Phone-Home (the only company with both Windows and Mac versions, although Lucira has Mac, Palm and Pocket PC versions in development).

This kind of coverage works like insurance: You pay an annual fee to the tracking agency, usually \$50. (Traditional laptop insurance from, for example, Safeware.com costs about \$130 per year. It covers theft, but unlike the laptop-tracking services reviewed here, doesn't offer any mechanisms for finding and retrieving your machine.) If your laptop is stolen, you must notify both the police and (via the Web or a toll-free number) the tracking company about your loss. That's when the going gets interesting.

The next time the thief tries to go online - by dial-up modem, corporate network, cable modem, wireless modem or whatever - a morsel of invisible software kicks into action. By piggybacking invisibly onto the Internet connection, it sends a critical piece of information to the tracking company: the laptop's Internet protocol (IP) address, the unique, multidigit number that identifies each computer on the Internet. Once the authorities are armed with that address, it's a piece of cake to subpoena the baddie's account records from the Internet service provider.

Some tracking companies, including Absolute, Lucira and zTrace, offer the police a second clue, too. If the laptop is connected to a phone line, it begins dialing the tracking agency's toll-free number every few minutes - silently and invisibly, of course, with various outside-line prefixes (9 and 8, for example) until it gets through. At that point, the tracking agency captures the thief's phone number, using an unblockable variant of Caller ID.

Then the police can ask the phone company for the address of the laptop's new owner - to whom they pay a visit shortly thereafter. As one tracking company representative puts it, "We hand over the perp on a silver platter."

I tested the services of the two biggest tracking companies: Absolute Software (www.absolute.com) and Lucira (www.lucira.com). In effect, I stole my own laptop and challenged the companies to find me.

Sure enough, within about five minutes, an agent from each company was able to tell me the number my laptop was calling from. And when I tried to connect using a cable modem, they instantly knew the cable company's name, address and phone number - and the name and number of its security officer. I was so startled, I almost turned myself in.

All these tracking services, however, have an Achilles' heel the size of Minnesota: As many as 30 percent of the stolen laptops are gone for good because they are never used to go online after being stolen. Maybe they're sitting in a warehouse, maybe the thug (or the eBay customer he sold your machine to) just uses it to play CDs all day, or maybe you just left your laptop on the roof of the car and drove off, sending it into a weedy ditch.

Still, when the system works, it works frighteningly well; for laptops that do hit the Net, the tracking agencies claim 95 percent recovery rates. It's enough to make you wish they'd branch out - to cell phones, wallets and car keys.