

Why I Miss The '90s

by Gene Marks

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I really miss the 1990's.

Grunge rock. The fall of Communism. A booming stock market. O.J. Slick Presidents, special prosecutors, pretty interns. Yes, good times. Good times.

In the '90's the biggest security risk was that one of my employees would click on an unknown email attachment and spread a virus throughout my network. But that fear is as old as Madonna. Things today have gotten a lot more complicated than that.

And frankly, as a business owner, I'm starting to freak out.

Especially after what happened to my friend Alan last week. A malicious virus infected and then crashed his company's server. Did it come in through email? Nope - it turned out that one of his employees had just inadvertently clicked on a bad link on a popular website. Completely innocent. The poor guy is still digging himself out of this mess.

I've never been a big proponent of security software for my ten person company. I've always thought of this stuff as just something else to slow down my employees and my computers. But things have changed. The software has gotten better. And the network security concerns in 2009 are a lot different than those carefree days of the 1990's.

Like Alan's experience, I've discovered that any employee can inadvertently infect my network just by clicking on a bad link. In fact, a recent study showed that there were over 800,000 sites with this problem. See why I'm freaking out?

Have things gotten that much complicated? Frankly...yes. I'm told that a web page isn't just a web page any more. Nowadays the typical web page is made up of a bunch of potentially exposable fields, other domains, widgets and who-knows-what all coming together in one spot. This gives the bad guys more openings to insert their nefarious links. So I'm freaking out.

But it gets worse. In the '90's all we had to worry about was a sporadic drive by shooting or an occasional race riot. Now we've got so much more to concern us. For example, I'm told that just by visiting a website, a virus or worm can be downloaded automatically. This is called a "drive by download." Cute. In fact, It's estimated that there were 18 million of these 'drive by' download attempts just last year. Yikes!

And it's not just bad websites either. Most of us aren't buying into that thing where the Prime Minister of Ejekeforistant has \$47 million waiting in a bank account and all we have to do is send over some private info to retrieve it. There are other, more trickier schemes. Like those legitimate looking emails from what appear to be credit card companies and banks that appear in my employees' inboxes demanding that they update information, only to give away their (and potentially my company's) confidential data. Shutting down a network for a few days is bad enough. But now we also have to be concerned about giving away our private information. There's even software that gets secretly downloaded that keeps track of our keystrokes on sites we visit in order to figure out credit card numbers. See why I'm freaking out?

Alan got away lucky. His network only crashed for a few days causing lost revenues and productivity. I know other business owners who unsuspectingly had their servers hijacked overnight by

spammers who used them to blast out millions of emails... and as a result wound up blacklisting their websites.

And it's only getting worse. The current economic downturn's giving birth to a lot of smart (and now unemployed) people. No, I don't mean bankers and financial professionals. We figured out that those guys weren't so smart after all.

I'm talking about laid off computer geeks who are creating ways to make some easy cash by stealing private information. And they don't even have to be programming geniuses either – a lot of the tools they need are available on the cheap from underground websites. Alan's computer guy could've helped him avert his problem...except he made him redundant just two weeks before.

But can't I have my employees rely on their internet browsers to protect my network? Apparently not. In fact, a security company estimated that over 600 million browsers are currently unsecure and unprotective of outside intrusions. If that's the case then just bring back Netscape Navigator already.

So, as a business owner, what can I possibly do?

Bite the bullet. Accept reality. There's no way in this environment I can run my company without a good security application in place. The risks are just too great. And it's not just security I need but a good backup. Poor Alan's biggest problem was not just recovering from the virus, but restoring his crashed server. It turned out what he thought was being backed up wasn't. I need to make sure my security software is also backing up my files too in case I have to restore.

Websites downloaded worms just by visiting them? E-mails from my bank that steal personal information? Give me the Y2K scare any day. I miss the '90's!

Gene Marks is a columnist, author, and business owner. He writes monthly online small business management and technology columns for both Forbes and Business Week as well as a bi-weekly column that appears nationally in American City Business Journals. Gene has appeared as a guest on numerous radio and TV talk shows, authored dozens of articles for many major media publications such as the Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune, and The New York Times. Gene also speaks at conferences across the country to small business owners. To learn more, visit his website at www.quickerbetterwiser.com.