GUEST EDITORIAL

The Update on Updates

'Our product will protect against all known and unknown viruses. Thanks to our unique technology, you too can enter an eternal state of security nirvana with no need to update your anti-virus protection'. Does this ring a bell? This kind of over-enthusiastic marketing-speak, often seen in the last few years, would rarely engender genuine concern for confused users. Now, an ironic smile is enough to 'comment' such statements. Flames are thrown only when someone tries to back the advertising stunts with 'technical proof'.

Until there is a radical change in the most commonly-used operating systems, the anti-virus industry cannot stand still. Anti-virus technology remains bound to its estranged partner, virus-writing technology – almost a classic love/hate relationship. It can stay in step with, or even anticipate, the enemy's moves, but as long as new virus-writing methods are developed, and new opportunities arise, anti-virus products must constantly be revised to fit into an ever-changing reality.

What if the anti-virus industry becomes obsolete? – a scary thought indeed. And if all virus writers find other ways of leaving their mark in life? Changes and upgrades to operating systems would probably be enough to induce changes in anti-virus products, but as long as virus writing is 'cool' or a challenging thing about which to boast, the industry has busy days ahead.

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Can we re-educate virus writers, and convince operating system producers to stop developing new versions? (For this to happen, developers must first believe users are happy with what they have been given…) Until then, updating is a must! If you don't like updates, you have to put up with upgrades. Because your dreams about a once-installed, everlasting protection are shattered by reality, you accept the necessity of updating your anti-virus programs.

If you want to control the way the product you use is updated, and the time this takes, then you want all updates to be available at any time you decide to install them. These days, easy access means one thing: the Internet. Web pages or FTP sites provide the most common electronic method of obtaining the latest versions of software products and the latest information. If you think you have more important things to do than organizing regular updates, you may want to rely on your supplier to send them to you. Traditionally recognized as a standard and secure way of distributing updates, sending diskettes through the post has served customers well. These days, more and more users prefer upgrades to be sent by email (usually as self-extracting archives of programs or disk images).

It is understandable that, in the era of a network communication, having permanently write-protected floppies piling up on your desk can be annoying. On the other hand, having your anti-virus program (or the latest update) sitting on a machine which has crashed after a 'simple' infection and is now inaccessible is not much help either. Having a hard copy of an anti-virus program is still a good idea, even if reserved for less frequent updates (e.g. quarterly).

Unfortunately, posting regular updates to users no longer suffices. With the number of viruses still growing (in the case of macro viruses, at an exorbitant speed), giving users access to daily updates is becoming a necessity for those who want to stay in business.

Most anti-virus companies currently use a mixture of distribution methods. The favoured ones are largely due to existing business practice, cost-effectiveness, and the perception of users' needs and security requirements. Today, all vendors obey the rule 'the customer is always right' – now, customers are telling producers how they want their updates to be delivered, and how often. Even the offering of the latest 'still-hot' version is not enough to satisfy all expectations.

When choosing a product, a user must be satisfied by the manner in which it can be kept reliably up to date. Soon, those programs which are able to find the relevant developer's site, download their own upgrades, and distribute and install themselves through users' networks will be the clear winners.

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