Tips for Preventing Laptop Computer Theft

Laptop computer theft has been described as a 'high-growth' industry both in the United States and abroad. It is estimated that over 300,000 laptop computers were stolen in the US in 1999 alone.

Why do crooks steal laptops?

Laptop computers have become a target of choice for thieves all over the country. Why? Because they are small, valuable, can be removed quickly, are easily hidden, and there is a market for them. A good laptop can be worth up to $5,000 or more. A thief can sell a stolen laptop to an unsuspecting used computer store or pawnshop, and easily receive up to half its value in cash. Another reason criminals find the laptop such an attractive item to steal is the legal consequence - most criminals know that the penalties for a property crime (theft) are less severe than those of a crime against a person (robbery).

The real cost of a stolen computer.

The cost of a stolen laptop is not just its replacement cost, but also the cost of peripherals such as modems and network cards, the installed software, the cost of configuring and loading replacement software, and the cost of lost time for the laptop owner while the computer is being replaced. An even greater cost (especially if your employer issued your laptop) is the potential exposure and liability that results from lost confidential corporate and client information.

What can you do to reduce the risk of having your laptop stolen?

- Don't leave a laptop in an unlocked vehicle, even if the vehicle is in your driveway or garage, and never leave it in plain sight, even if the vehicle is locked—that's just inviting trouble. If you must leave your laptop in a vehicle, the best place is in a locked trunk. If you don't have a trunk, cover it up and lock the doors.
- Parking garages and parking lots are likely areas for thefts from vehicles, as they provide numerous choices and cover for thieves. Again, never leave your laptop in plain sight; cover it or put it in the trunk.
- Carry your laptop in a nondescript carrying case, briefcase, or bag when moving about. Placing it in a case designed for computers is an immediate alert to thieves that you have a laptop.
- Going to lunch, or taking a break? Don't leave a meeting or conference room without your laptop. Take it with you, or you run the risk that it won't be there when you return.
- Lock the laptop in your office during off-hours.

- Don't have your own office? Use a cable-locking device that secures to a desk/table or put the laptop in a locked closet or cabinet.
- Don't let unaccompanied strangers wander around in your workplace. Offer assistance and deliver the visitors to their destinations.
- Make and engrave your laptop with your driver's license number or company name and inventory number. Use a permanent marker or electric engraver.
- Consider purchasing one of the new theft alarm systems specially made for laptops.
- Be aware that if your computer is stolen, automatic log-ins can make it easy for a thief to send inappropriate messages with your account.
- Back up your information on disks today, and store the disks at home or the office.

What about when you are flying with your laptop?

Flying to a conference? Never check laptops as luggage at the airport because they can disappear. The Federal Aviation Administration has issued a warning about an increasingly common scam—stealing laptops from the conveyor belts of metal detectors. At the X-ray scanner two thieves get in line. The first one passes through the scanner quickly. The second person moves slowly, being delayed by pockets full of change, keys, or other items. Meanwhile, the travelers stuck behind the thief have already placed their belongings, including laptops, on the conveyor belt. The first thief picks up the laptop as if it were his or her own and walks away while the other thief continues to hold up the line. Only put your laptop on the conveyer belt when you are next to line. Keep your eye on your laptop as it comes off the conveyor belt. And alert security personnel right away if you think someone is attempting to steal your computer.

How do theft prevention technologies work?

There are a variety of technologies that exist that can assist you in protecting your laptop computer. Here are two ways these new systems work:

- Two-way wireless security alarms for laptops consist of an alarm installed on the computer itself and a remote key-chain device. If the alarm detects movement, it first checks whether you're nearby. If not, your key-chain remote is alerted, emitting a "chirp." You can then choose to trigger the 110-decibel alarm on your laptop. The alarm can also be set to trigger solely on detecting motion.

- Another type of alarm works by setting up a security perimeter for the laptop. Moving the laptop beyond the perimeter sets off an alarm, locks keys to encrypted files, and disables the computer, making it useless to unauthorized users.

File a police report!

If a theft does occur, you must report it to the police department promptly. Users should have the make, model, and serial number available so police can file a complete report and enter the stolen laptop information immediately on the national crime information computer. If you have backed up all your data, all will not be lost for you. If you have sensitive and confidential information in your data, consider using encryption software.