

Appalling Vista for security software manufacturers?

As more and more details are released on the software components and features that are going to be included in the new versions of the Windows Operating System from Microsoft, security software manufacturers are taking note.

Some observers have opined that this list is ringing the Death Knell for the independent security software manufacturer.

In the public statements to date, and the various Beta software releases, Microsoft has been making reference to the new tools that will be included in Vista. The main focus will be on an improved firewall and also anti-SpyWare tools. There had been a suggestion at one time that Microsoft would also include anti-virus software in this set of tools, but now this is being released as part of the Windows Live OneCare subscription service in mid-late 2006. This subscription service is designed to be a one stop shop for maintenance and protection. It includes online backup facilities, anti-SpyWare and anti-virus software. The anti-virus software is a result of its purchase in 2002 of the Romanian anti-virus firm GeCad.

With the delay in shipping of Vista until spring 2007, and recommendations from the Yankee Group that corporate customers target sometime in 2008 for widespread deployments of Vista, the end is not exactly nigh. The Yankee Group recommendation is to allow cutting-edge users a chance to find and fix bugs in the platform in the meantime. There is also a certain amount of confusion in the market place regarding the number of different versions of Vista that will ship. One of the more recent counts was that there were going to be up to eight different versions, each one more specifically focused on the needs of the customer. This sounds laudable, but makes the process of selecting the correct version a daunting task.

The firms that appear to be most at risk from Microsoft's approach to bundling the security tools within the Operating System would be those that have limited product ranges. Many observers have suggested that Mal-Ware specialists such as WebRoot (developer of the Spy Sweeper products) are most at risk.

This would be particularly true of the home-user and SME (Small – Medium size Enterprise) as the convenience of packaging would be very attractive and most times these customers do not have the same sort of extensive requirements that the larger corporate does. It is in this large corporate network that the likes of Sophos, McAfee, Trend Micro, and Symantec are found deployed for security technologies.

These companies realise that they will have a fight on their hands, but are confident in their abilities. They point to the specialised areas of malware research, the round-the-clock anti-virus research labs and extensive testing facilities as the points that will differentiate them from the Microsoft solution. John Thompson (Symantec CEO) vowed that it would put more resources into research and development over the coming year, speaking to reporters at the Symantec's annual Vision conference here. "Our strategy is to out-innovate Microsoft. We know more about security than they ever will," and "The Microsoft brand is synonymous with a lot of things; Security is not one of them" Thompson said.

These companies are already fighting for market share in a mal-ware market place that was worth more than \$3.6 Billion in 2005, and more specifically, the anti-virus market place that was worth more than \$2.5 Billion.

Many organisations have deployed a “defence in depth” strategy based on multiple anti-virus solutions to ensure that they have the highest chance of catching all viruses attempting to break their defences’. This will also help to ensure that there will continue to be a market place for security technologies such as anti-virus after the entry of Microsoft to the market.

On a humorous note, one of the most popular Internet sites for news of what is happening on all things technical is www.slashdot.org and it uses an icon of Bill Gates as a “Borg” from the Star Trek-First Contact film. The famous by-line of the Borg was “resistance is futile; you will be assimilated”.



In summary, the introduction of these anti-SpyWare tools and an improved firewall as part of the Vista Operating System can only be a good thing. Less PCs infected and distributing MalWare on the Internet is a better thing for all Internet users. It will surely impact many companies that make their living on the sale of security technologies, but they should surely have been looking at this threat and coming up with innovative ways to compete. The corporate networked environment will still look to the organisations who have been well established in this area and are continuing to invest in their research and labs. I don't believe the end is nigh for security technology manufacturers, but there is a new kid on the block, and they better beware.

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