The home-brew security suite

Although all the suites we've reviewed here provide competent tools to protect your privacy, your data and your system, none of them have everything you need – or at least none of them have the best of everything you need. In order to achieve that, you have to mix and match, which has both advantages and disadvantages.

The biggest benefit is that you can be sure of having the 'best-of-breed' product for every task, and if a better breed comes along it's easy to change just that one component. It isn't so easy to make changes with a security suite due to the possibility of conflict between the existing module and new application, not to mention the doubling up of costs.

Which brings us nicely to the biggest downside: assembling a best-of-breed suite is by no means the same thing as assembling a best value one. By their very nature the best applications often command premium prices. Even where this isn't the case, by the time you add up the individual component cost you'll never get close to the kind of value offered by an off-the-shelf suite – it is, after all, their biggest selling point.

However, choosing wisely will ensure that your home-brew security suite not only provides better protection, tailored to match your exact requirements, but that it also won't break either your or your computer's resources.
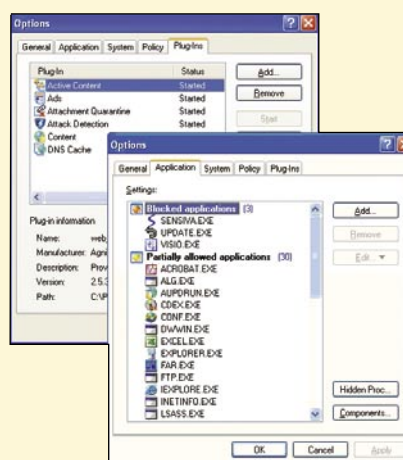
An often overlooked complication of the self-build approach is that of finding applications that can live happily together without conflict. This isn't as easy as you may think, and if you get it wrong you're looking at further expenditure both in terms of time and money. Not for nothing do the developers of the various tools we've tested this month give stark warnings about disabling or uninstalling other anti-virus programs before installing their own, or not running more than one firewall at a time. System conflicts are more common in this sector than just about any other. It makes sense to do a bit of homework using Google to ferret around not only the Web but also Usenet newsgroups to get tips on any possible incompatibility between the products you prefer.

So if we were to build a general-purpose security suite that would give the best protection across all threat categories, yet run happily on the biggest number of systems, what components would go into the shopping cart?

FIREWALL

We have to reveal that the best firewall actually isn't featured in our Labs at all. This isn't due to some administrative faux pas, but simply because it isn't a 'security suite', it's a firewall, period. Agnitum Outpost Pro 2.5 (£34 exc VAT from **www.agnitum.co.uk**) is a truly awesome

You won't find a better software firewall than Outpost for £34.

piece of software engineering, which pulls together all the functionality and flexibility of the competition but wraps it up in something that has an installed footprint of less than 10MB and is easy on system resources as well.

By adopting a plug-in approach, Agnitum has come up with a firewall that will suit your needs, whatever they may be. Just want barebones out-of-the-box efficiency? You've got it. Want web-content filtering or ad-blocking? No problem. This latest version combines increased flexibility with improved and increased control levels to create something that's nearly perfect (*see full review on p91*). This means it still isn't as secure as a hardware firewall, but for 99 per cent of home users it will be eminently suitable and for those small businesses on a budget it's as good as you'll get for the price.

ANTI-VIRUS

As with any kind of security, it never hurts to double-lock the doors. In computing terms this means adding anti-virus protection to your suite. And there's a lot of choice, all applications offering much the same protection with slight differences in interface and exact specification. What one vendor implements today the rest do tomorrow, or near enough. Therefore, you need to look beyond the obvious, which means trusting word of mouth when it comes to support and accuracy issues. Doing that, F-Prot (**www.f-prot.com**) comes out ahead of the pack.

You get real-time scanning, updates, technical support and extras such as command-line scanning when a virus has left Windows stuffed. It's a relatively straightforward product that just does what it needs to do, and we like that in a virus scanner. F-Prot Antivirus for Windows costs $29 (£15 exc VAT) for a single-user annual licence; corporate-use licences are $50 (£26 exc VAT) for up to ten, with reduced rates thereafter.

But if you're looking at corporate use then our best-of-breed suggestion has to change. For the support you get, which is second to none, there's only one choice and that's Sophos (**www.sophos.com**). It's sold via resellers and the price varies depending upon your exact system and volume requirements, but expect to pay three figures. Like F-Prot, don't expect bells and whistles, you just get rock-solid virus scanning for your network.

SPYWARE

When it comes to the spyware component, Ad-Aware SE Professional Edition (**www.lavasoft.de**) jumps out. It costs $40 (£22 exc VAT) and is virtually *the* original spyware scanner. In its freeware version it's a top home-user choice, but no longer best of breed. The top-of-the range SE Professional Edition, though, is a good business choice, with extended memory, Registry and disk scanning, a much improved GUI and lots of tweaking options.

However, for a real best-of-breed solution, we have no hesitation in suggesting you buck the trend and use the excellent Webroot Spy Sweeper (**www.webroot.com**), which, in its version 3 guise, is a remarkably well-rounded product. For an annual subscription of $30 (£17 exc VAT) you not only get real-time protection against spyware running in memory, regular updating of spyware definitions and the best scanner in the business, but also

Spyware searching should be a part of every security solution these days, and nothing does it better than Webroot SpySweeper.

prevention against unwanted changes to browser bookmarks and home-page settings. It will also alert you when any application wants to change your settings and run itself at system start up, giving you the power over whether it does or not.

SPAM FILTERING
This leaves filtering, where the world really is your Viagra-fuelled oyster. However, it's all too easy to spend too much time evaluating the various options without ever giving any one the chance to do its stuff properly. All need training and fettling to some degree, which is why we've been at pains to point out that our labs testing of the spam modules in our security suites can only be a metric of how good they are out of the box.

However, we have a lot of experience of standalone solutions here at *PC Pro* and have used them extensively over a period of time – in fact, running into years in the case of our best-of-breed recommendation, InBoxer (**www.inboxer.com**). This Bayesian anti-spam filter for Microsoft Outlook recently achieved the highest ever rating for a desktop anti-spam product in the independent 'Spamotomy' tests – removing 96.5 per cent of spam and showing only a false-positive rate of just 0.07 per cent after a week of learning. Give it another couple of weeks and it's easy to take the filtering rate up to 98 per cent, which really is about as good as it gets.

With version 2 just about to hit the market, now is a good time to get on top of your junk mail problem. InBoxer costs $30 (£17 exc VAT) with a set of premium plug-ins adding another $20 (£11 exc VAT). The Redirector plug-in keeps an eye on the email flow within Outlook and

copies all good messages (as in not identified as being either spam or requiring review) into a named folder that is then used to synchronise with a BlackBerry device. 'PopBoxer' enables anyone with a PDA or smartphone to also get a clean email feed by either forwarding good messages to a specified address or deleting the rubbish. If you choose the latter you can set the delay before the messages are vapped from ten seconds to two minutes.

For more information on InBoxer, see the RWC Online column on p209.

WEB-CONTENT FILTERING
Family users should consider adding web-content filtering software. Although it's always going to be a subjective decision. The parents at *PC Pro* recommend sticking with CyberPatrol (**www.cyberpatrol.com**). Your £22 exc VAT annual subscription gives you total control over the PC, the Internet and your kids' relationship with both.

CyberPatrol uses word blocking, implementing its CyberPatterns technology to detect keyword and URL patterns to trap and filter both websites and search description items, and implements a regularly updated CyberList. CyberPatrol also has another trick up its sleeve: intelligent automatic web-page analysis categorises sites that are unknown to the server databases and adds them to relevant CyberLists at the heart of the application. The parent then chooses from categories such as sexual content, violence, drug culture, racism and even gambling to best suit their definition of parental control.

CyberPatrol also fulfils the privacy protection requirement of our suite, by preventing names, addresses, telephone numbers and similar being passed in chatrooms, through IM servers, or by website cookie request. Just remember the best solution to not giving personal financial information to anyone who asks
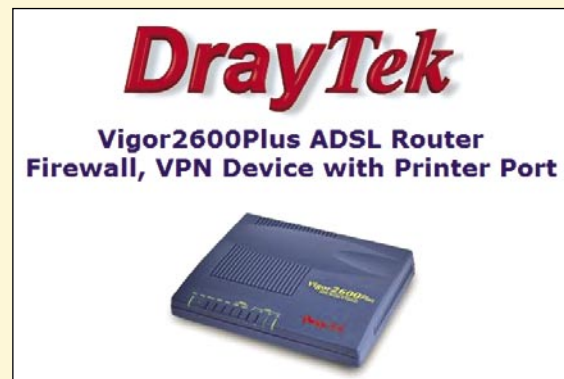
for it is available free of charge to the majority of the population: it's called common sense.

THE HARDWARE OPTION
If you're connecting to the outside world via broadband, we recommend you take the hardware router path rather than a software firewall for the best protection.

A router, in effect, is a simple computer whose job is to connect one network to another. It distributes a single IP address among multiple devices, and it will do this by way of Network Address Translation (NAT). Since the real IP address of your computer is hidden behind that NAT router, it's also hidden from the outside world, which only sees the NAT address. It's a start, but if we're talking best-of-breed without going down the four-figure enterprise route then you need to think about an ADSL router with a proper firewall built-in.

These are becoming a lot more

All-in-one router/firewall combos don't come much more feature-packed than this top-of-the-range DrayTek Vigor.

common as popular broadband floods the market, so you'll need to choose wisely. We recommend the DrayTek Vigor2600Plus, which adds a USB printer port, VLAN and bandwidth throttling support for £149 exc VAT if ordered online (**www.seg.co.uk**). It also keeps stateful packet filtering, automatic DDoS attack protection and built-in web-content filtering.

If you're on a tight budget but are happy to combine your technical skills with our helpful instructions, you could always build your own firewall (*see issue 122, p184*). Using an old PC or laptop and SmoothWall, you can build a cheap firewall that certainly covers the home-brew requirement, and is as best-of-breed as you can get for the money.