

Change of Allegiance - Does the Antivirus Software You Use Really Matter?

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I just switched to a new antivirus program. I'd been a loyal user of my previous program for over five years, which seems like an eternity in the ever-changing computer software business. I've wondered for some time if it mattered which brand I used. Although there are probably dozens of antivirus programs available, some of which are even free, I have only ever used four. Am I using the best one? Is there a best one? Would I be wasting my time trying to determine the best one? And is what is best relative to my needs anyway?

I was surprised at the results of an informal survey taken at one of our recent general meetings. Our membership appears to use a wide variety of the available antivirus offerings. Around a dozen different vendors were being used by our members, with no one source having more than 10% of the market in our group. With the market apparently so fragmented, can one brand really be that much better than the others?

I don't deny the importance of computer security. It is a common tenant of cyber security that every computer should run an antivirus program to protect against those threats. Microsoft believes this so much that every version of Windows since XP performs checks to see that an antivirus program is installed and that the virus signatures are not out of date. I'd just like to see proof that the antivirus software is doing its job.

One of my problems with antivirus software is that, at least in my experience, it seldom finds any viruses. I've tried to be diligent in my regular computer maintenance, running antivirus and anti-malware software once each week and keeping the signatures updated. My anti-malware software will often find some kind of spyware or malware on one of my computers to quarantine or delete, but from all the probably hundreds of hours I've spent running antivirus scans, I've yet to find a virus. I do know viruses still exist out there in the cyber world, as I have seen others have them. My daughter had a virus on her laptop last year, and this month we found the Conficker worm on some network servers at the company I work for. Since I've not found any, could I be running just a placebo antivirus program?

I guess the effectiveness of antivirus software is something we may have to take on faith. I've never seen comparisons or reviews of antivirus software that evaluated the ability to detect or remove particular threats.

Usually the software's rating is based on less essential but more measurable parameters like ease of use, cost or manufacturer's reputation. With new virus threats appearing constantly (or so we are led to believe), how can a program's ability to quickly recognize something new be evaluated in advance? Selecting an antivirus program might be similar to choosing a religion, in that all you have initially is your faith in your choice, and you won't likely find out until much later whether you chose correctly.

I originally started out (over a decade ago) using Norton Antivirus, as it was one of the first and few of this type of program on the market. They also offered a lot of rebates on their products, so I could usually get my antivirus every year for free. I really liked the Norton Utilities, and so it was not long before I was using Symantec's Norton SystemWorks suite. I also really liked the ZoneAlarm firewall, and so used their free version for many years alongside the Norton suite. Eventually, however, Symantec came out with their own firewall program, and they made a decision that has me soured on their products to this day. Symantec made their Antivirus product incompatible with the ZoneAlarm firewall, probably to promote their own Norton firewall. This made me have to choose between them, and ZoneAlarm won. I don't think I've purchased a Symantec product since.

Around this time, ZoneAlarm came out with their own security suite, ZoneAlarm Internet Security Suite. It combined my favorite firewall with antivirus and anti-spyware. It was also usually available periodically for free after rebate (my favorite kind of software), so I used their suite on all my computers for at least five years. The ZoneAlarm antivirus never really impressed me, but at least it worked well with their firewall, and so I had faith that it was protecting me.

In the last year, however, the ZoneAlarm antivirus turned into a real nuisance. It became a drag on my computer's resources, slowing it down considerably while updating and while scanning. Every time my computer was started, the suite tried to check for updated antivirus signatures. This process took minutes to complete, and occupied the computer to such an extent that it was not possible to use it until the update was completed. This became very annoying, as it slowed my computer just as I was most interested in using it. If I wanted to boot my computer quickly to look up something on the Internet, it added additional minutes to my search time. It also suddenly went from a few hours to overnight and more to run an antivirus scan. I even tried (unsuccessfully) to disable the antivirus updates. Finally I had enough and decided to look for a new antivirus program. This also coincided with the end of my ZoneAlarm ISS subscription and the apparent end of their rebate deals.

During this time I had also used McAfee's antivirus briefly on a new computer that came with a free trial, and used it on the computers provided by my employer. I didn't think it was anything special.

A trusted reference was the deciding factor in my selection of a new antivirus program. Our group's webmaster has been using ESET's NOD32 antivirus software for many

years, and had nothing but good to say about it. He claimed it used little hard drive space and ran quickly with little impact on computer performance. I considered using it in conjunction with the free version of the ZoneAlarm firewall, but a rebate deal on ESET Smart Security persuaded me to try another firewall program as well. I bought two of the three-user packs, and figured I was set for all my computers for the next year.

I soon found out why the ESET Smart Security 4 suite was offered at a discount, as within a month Smart Security 5 was released. I was allowed a free upgrade to version 5, but found upgrading from 4 to 5 had issues. It was much better to install version 5 from the web (using my normal activation information), as it allowed the installation on a drive other than the boot drive. The firewall also seemed to work better this way. I'm still learning about ESET's firewall, but their antivirus seems to live up to its reputation as easy on resources. I guess I have something new to have faith in.