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CyberSpeak
Kim Komando

Keep your laptop from straying from your grasp

You just spent big money on a laptop. You've loaded your important files on it. Before you take it on the road, remember to take some precautions to make sure it comes home with you.

Hundreds of thousands of laptops are stolen or simply forgotten in cabs and airports each year. Your best protection is to keep the laptop in sight. When traveling, stay alert at airport security checkpoints because they present a prime opportunity for thieves. Or someone with a similar laptop might mistakenly take yours.

Don't leave your laptop in a hotel room. Instead, leave it in the hotel safe. If you must leave the laptop in the car, put it in the trunk. Never leave it in plain sight.

A computer bag announces to thieves that you're carrying a laptop. Instead, buy a computer sleeve to protect the computer and put it in a backpack or briefcase.

Of course, you can't watch your laptop 24 hours a day. That's why anti-theft tools are wise investments.

The simplest tool is a cable lock, which wraps a cable around a stationary object and locks to the laptop. Prices start around \$30 and some include anti-theft guarantees.

You can also go high-tech with a laptop alarm. Targus' DEFCON MDP (www.targus.com) plugs into your laptop's PC Card slot. Its motion detector sets off an alarm when the laptop is moved. It sells for \$100 and also includes file encryption tools.

For the best of both worlds, try Kensington's MicroSaver Alarmed Lock (www.kensington.com). It's a combination alarm and cable lock. If the cable is cut, an alarm sounds. It sells for \$55.

You also need tools to help recover a stolen laptop. Clearly marking the laptop will discourage thieves. Security Tracking of Office Property, or STOP, tags (www.stoptheft.com) are difficult to remove and make resale of the laptop more difficult. If the stolen laptop is recovered, STOP returns it to you. STOP tags sell for as little as \$9.

Specialized software can help recover a stolen laptop. Tracking software sends a signal to the publisher's Web site when connected to the Internet. If the laptop is stolen, the company helps police locate it. The software is undetectable and can't be disabled without authorization. Some programs include encryption tools and support remote deletion of files.

Computrace (www.absolute.com) and CyberAngel (www.sentryinc.com) are tracking

KIM KOMANDO

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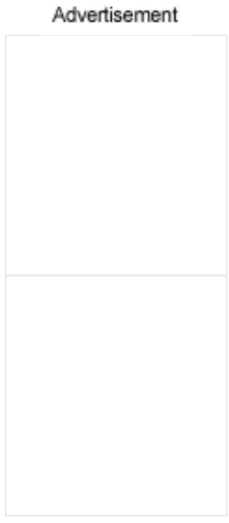
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programs that sell for \$60 per year. XTool Computer Tracker (www.stealthsignal.com) is \$50 per year.

Don't forget about the information on your laptop. If your laptop is stolen, data could be your biggest loss. Financial records and stored passwords could result in identity theft. If it's a company laptop, the theft can lead to a network breach.

So protect your computer with strong passwords containing numbers, letters and special keyboard characters instead of using default user names such as "admin." Thieves know admin accounts have full control of the computer. Create a few dummy accounts that contain "admin" in the user name. Thieves will focus on these when trying to crack passwords.

If you install tracking software, leave a guest account that doesn't require a password. The thief can use that to reach the Web. The computer must connect to the Internet for tracking software to work.

Take time to encrypt sensitive files. Windows XP Professional includes Cipher, so no additional software is needed. Windows XP Home users need to buy additional software. BestCrypt (www.jetico.com), PGP Desktop Home (www.pgp.com) and PC-Encrypt (www.pc-encrypt.com) are popular encryption programs. They range from \$50 to \$70.

You can also purchase hardware that blocks access to the hard drive. Lindy (www.lindy.com) makes a \$30 lock that connects to the USB port. You carry a transmitter that unlocks the hard drive.

No matter how you protect your laptop, back up your data. You can recover from a stolen computer, but the cost of lost data can be immeasurable. Back up to your server or an office computer, or use an external hard drive, tape drive or optical disk for home backups.

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