

We Are All Security Consumers

Computer security is vital, and the IEEE Computer Society has launched this new magazine devoted to the topic. But there's more to security than what this publication is going to focus on. If security engineers don't help educate average computer users about how to be good security consumers, little of what we do will matter.

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Dozens of times a day, we are security consumers. Every time we cross the street, we're buying security. When we brush our teeth in the morning, we're buying security. We buy security when we lock our front doors or our cars. When you reach down at a checkout counter to buy a candy bar and notice that the package has been opened, why do you reach for another? It's because for the price of the candy bar, you want to buy as much security as you can.

Security is a consideration when we decide where to vacation. Cell phone companies advertise security as one of the features of their cellular system versus another. When we choose a neighborhood to live in, or where we park when we go shopping, one of the considerations in that choice is security.

As consumers, sometimes we have choices in what we buy, and sometimes we don't. Airplane security is what it is; we can't choose to buy more or less of it. Banking security is largely dictated by government regulations; banks don't compete with each other on security. On the other hand, we can choose between different brands of door locks or wall

safes based on security. We can purchase a home alarm system or not. We can choose to fly, or decide to drive instead.

As security engineers, our goal is to design systems with better technical security. *IEEE Security & Privacy* is devoted to the technical aspects of security engineering, but none of it will matter if we don't educate people in how to be smart security consumers. We need to teach people how to get involved in the security around them. We need to teach people how to shop for security, how to make comparisons, and how not to get taken. We need to provide people with a good BS detector so that they can spot ineffectual security and explain why.

This means that people will be able to get more security—and be safer—for the same trade-offs. Any consumer can get more by spending more, but smart consumers can get more without spending more. One of our profession's goals is to help people maximize the amount of security they get for what they pay, but if we don't teach them how to make the right trade-offs, our work will be in vain.

Security always involves trade-

offs. It costs money, convenience, functionality, and freedoms like liberty or privacy. We need to teach people how to assess what kinds of security are good investments and which aren't. We can't tell people what they personally need, or what security policies to support, but we can give them the tools to make those decisions for themselves. We are all security consumers, and the smarter consumers we are, the more we can make security into something that better our lives instead of worsens it.

Governments want to tell their citizens what security they need. They want people to be passive security consumers, and accept what they are offered. They want people not to worry when they demand new police powers or pass laws reducing civil liberties. Technology companies have their own agenda: for people to simply buy the cell phone or operating system or router. Neither will provide real security choices unless we as citizens and consumers demand it.

We must show people how to actively take charge of their own security. We need to help people make smart decisions. We need to help people improve their judgment. That, more than any technology, will make us all safer. □

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