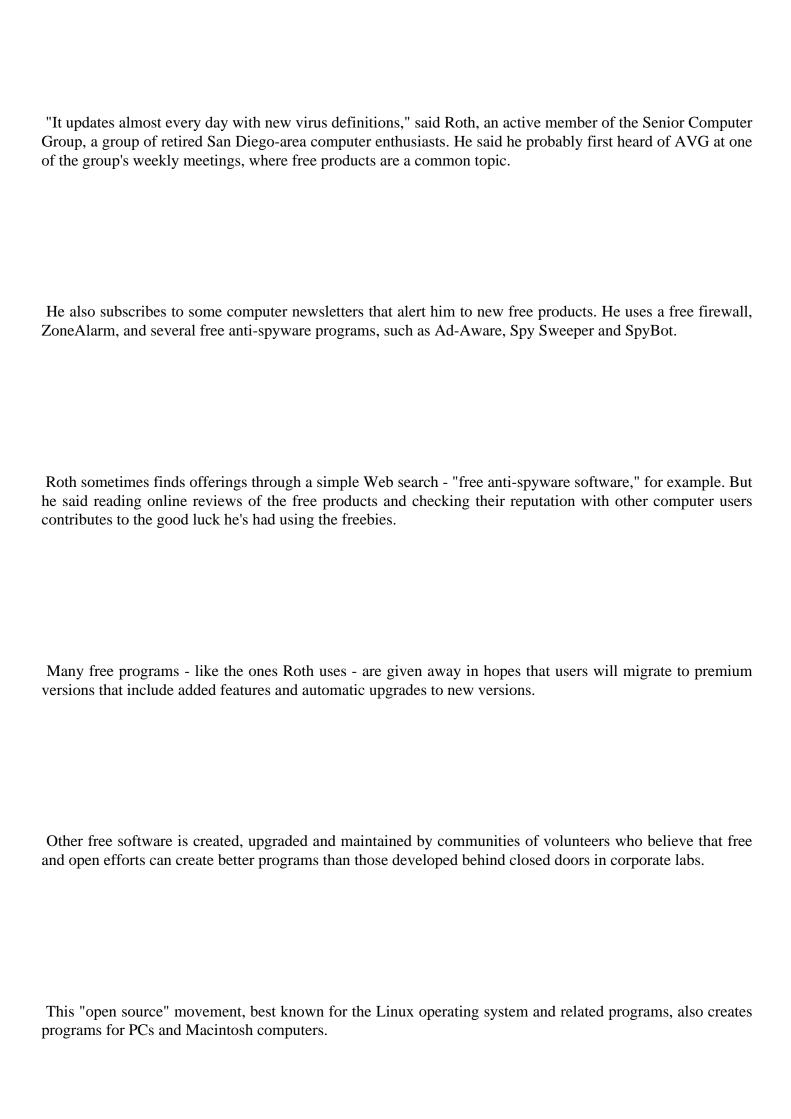## Outfitting A New Computer Can Cost Less Than You Think

*by Jonathan Sidener*

The price of computers has fallen to the point where it's possible to get a respectable Windows PC for around $500.

But the cost of aftercare keeps going up. Norton Internet Security Suite will cost you $69 per year to keep your virus and spyware defenses current. If you keep your computer four years, that adds up to $276.

Maybe you want a second line of defense against spyware, so you add Spyware Doctor at $30 a year - that's $120 over the life of the computer.

If you want to bring work home or access the most common forms of documents, you'll probably spend $125 for Microsoft Office.

FABULOUS FREEBIES - Outfitting a new computer can cost less than you think. CNS Illustration. Most computer users have made the switch to digital photography, and many will buy a photo-editing program such as Adobe's Photoshop Elements, at $90.

The addition of a few basic programs and services has quickly doubled the cost of the computer in this example.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. There are free alternatives.

Antiviral and anti-spyware programs, suites of office software and photo-editing tools can all be found online at no cost.

To a growing number of savvy computer users, this is not a news flash.

But a surprising number of computer owners have no idea. Symantec, which markets the Norton line of Internet security and anti-virus services, expects consumer sales of about $1.3 billion this year, primarily from its security products.

Though quality free products are available, there are other programs that are ineffective or contain spyware. Consumers should exercise caution before downloading free products:

-- Check to see if mainstream technology sites have reviewed and endorsed a free program.

-- Download only from reputable sites such as www.tucows.com or www.download.com, or from reputable companies that make the software.

-- Read the license agreement before installing free programs. Don't install it if it mentions "third-party software," a red flag for a type of spyware.

Retiree Herb Roth, a longtime computer user, is a big fan of the leading free alternative to paid anti-virus products.

Roth uses AVG from Grisoft (www.free.grisoft.com). The popular free program has received strong reviews from several computing publications.

"I'm living on a limited income," Roth said. "I'm a big fan of everything free."

He has been using the free alternative for about 1 1/2 years and is pleased with the results.

"It updates almost every day with new virus definitions," said Roth, an active member of the Senior Computer Group, a group of retired San Diego-area computer enthusiasts. He said he probably first heard of AVG at one of the group's weekly meetings, where free products are a common topic.

He also subscribes to some computer newsletters that alert him to new free products. He uses a free firewall, ZoneAlarm, and several free anti-spyware programs, such as Ad-Aware, Spy Sweeper and SpyBot.

Roth sometimes finds offerings through a simple Web search - "free anti-spyware software," for example. But he said reading online reviews of the free products and checking their reputation with other computer users contributes to the good luck he's had using the freebies.

Many free programs - like the ones Roth uses - are given away in hopes that users will migrate to premium versions that include added features and automatic upgrades to new versions.

Other free software is created, upgraded and maintained by communities of volunteers who believe that free and open efforts can create better programs than those developed behind closed doors in corporate labs.

This "open source" movement, best known for the Linux operating system and related programs, also creates programs for PCs and Macintosh computers.

Navy civilian computer consultant Steve Holden is a fan of these open-source programs. He doesn't use free security products, because the Navy allows him to install a copy of its firewall, virus and spyware software at home.

When he built his latest computer, at the end of 2004, he loaded it with free software. Using a suite of products called OpenOffice (www.openoffice.org), he can create documents at home and work on them at the office, using Microsoft Word and Excel.

"I've used OpenOffice for a while," Holden said. "Version 1.0 was good, but version 2.0 really fills the gap. The user interface keeps getting easier and easier. A lot of the icons are the same or in the same location as the Microsoft version."

Holden said he has no problems moving documents back and forth between the two programs.

In a workplace that uses advanced features in Microsoft Office, there could be problems in using OpenOffice on a Word document, he said.

"For what I do, it's fine," Holden said. "In a very Microsoft-centric office, where there's a lot of collaboration and tracking of comments, revisions and changes, there could be a problem."

There are many other free computing accessories. Serious amateur photographers may want all the features of Photoshop Elements, a slightly scaled-down version of the professional Photoshop. But many digital photographers will be content with the tools available in Picasa, a photo-editing and management program from Google (http://picasa.google.com).

If you want to build a Web site, create free ring tones for your phone or customize your screen saver, there are free programs to do it.

Sites such as www.tucows.com, www.download.com and www.shareware.com list both freeware and shareware. Shareware typically comes with a free trial period, but it ultimately must be bought to keep it working.

Holden said he had little trouble finding free software for his computer.

"My Web browser was free," he said. "I do a lot of podcasting. I use Audacity, a free audio-editing program. The only software I paid for on my computer was Windows XP."

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