

Discounted Software Often Comes With Hidden Costs Buying Genuine Software Can Mean One Less Headache This Holiday Season



(NAPSA)—It's that time of year again, when friends and family give you long lists of desired presents. Maybe there is a designer handbag or music CD or upgrade to the latest software somewhere on those lists. Of course, you want to get the most value for your money, so you decide to scour the Internet for the best bargain. If you're thinking about using an online auction site or discount download source to purchase games or other software this holiday season, you may want to think twice about what you're giving your loved ones.

A new Microsoft Corp.-sponsored study from IDC reviewed data from the company's legal team, which examined 115 software CDs purchased at online auctions in 2005 and found that just over half of them were either counterfeit or contained tampered code. All the discs were presented as being genuine.

On Web sites where counterfeiters trade software openly, the problems intensified, with a large percentage of the software containing malicious code or "extras" that introduced known security vulnerabilities.

IDC also re-examined a sample taken by Microsoft Corp. earlier this year of hundreds of counterfeit CDs that were touted as being Windows software obtained from countries around the world. It was found that more than a third of those discs could not be installed on a PC. Many more were unable to get past Microsoft's security mechanisms once installation was complete. Of the 228 CDs that were successfully installed, nearly 70 percent contained some form of additional or tampered code.

"People think that counterfeit product is simply a copy of the software, like a music CD, but it doesn't work that way," says Cori Hartje, Microsoft's anti-piracy lead. "These sellers must change the code to bypass licensing and security mechanisms, or the software will not install on the computer. If you have a copy of software that is not original product, you can bet it has been tampered

with, and who knows what goodies these criminals have put in there for you—or taken out."

The extra code may include "malware" or "spyware" that can be used to infect a PC with viruses, change settings or even track how someone uses the computer—such as Web sites visited or even keystrokes. At its worst, this malicious software can steal personal information such as usernames, passwords and credit card numbers, ultimately creating headaches for computer users this holiday season.

Apart from frightening scenarios involving identity theft, computer takeovers and spying, the ramifications of this superfluous software can also include the ridiculous, says Laura DiDio of research and consulting firm Yankee Group.

"An employee at one company downloaded what he thought was a 'turbo-charged' version of Windows," DiDio said. "This was in fact a pirated Windows XP code containing a virus that caused computers in the company's network to begin playing a badly written, off-key version of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' every afternoon for about 20 minutes."

In the end, the only solution is often a complete system wipe and reinstall, which may take valuable files such as pictures, music, letters and creative works along with it. Not much of a Christmas gift.

So how can you help protect yourself and your loved ones from all this? The best way is to purchase genuine software products from an authorized dealer. It may cost a little more, but you'll know you're getting a quality product if it's from a reliable source.

If you've already purchased software and want to know whether it's genuine, many software makers also offer verification services such as the Genuine Microsoft Software Web site at <http://www.microsoft.com/genuine>. If you have questions about your software being genuine or not, you should contact the software maker.