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Mobile Mac

Laptop Lockdown

by Jason Cook, Macworld.com Mar 18, 2004 4:00 am

Laptop owners adore PowerBooks and iBooks for their snazzy looks, light weight, and excellent resale value. Unfortunately, thieves like them for the very same reasons. And the person who steals your laptop not only nabs your hardware but also may gain access to financial records, corporate data, credit card numbers, and other sensitive information. There are ways to protect your computer and your data. Whether you lash down your laptop with steel cables or apply military-grade data encryption across your hard drive, protecting your laptop takes some effort -- but it may be easier than you expect.

Secure It

You spent a lot of money on your iBook or PowerBook, so you don't want to leave it lying around. Although fancy computer cases and bags are great for carrying and protecting your laptop from harm, they're also good at drawing attention to what's inside. When you're on the road, consider dressing down -- swap your flashy computer case for a protective notebook sleeve, which can be tucked into any nondescript bag or backpack. Other commonsense techniques provide security that's stronger than any gadget -- always lock your laptop in the trunk when you must leave it in a car, or stash it in a drawer when you leave it in a hotel room or an office cubicle.

Lock It Down All Apple portables include a Kensington Security Slot. It's usually located near the modem port, marked by a padlock icon. To physically secure your laptop computer, loop a steel security cable around room fixtures or hefty furniture, and then lock the cable into the slot.

Kensington markets its own MicroSaver brand of cables (\$57 to \$80; <http://www.microsaver.com>) made from aircraft-grade steel and Kevlar fiber. However, since the Kensington-size slot is a widely used standard in the PC world, too, you can often find third-party cables that cost less. Not all manufacturers boast the fancy materials or custom-key solutions that Kensington does, but let's face it -- to a grab-and-run thief, steel cables all look alike. If you'd like a thicker cable but don't want to fumble around for keys, check out the \$36 Universal Combo Notebook Lock, from AppleLocks.com, which features a combination lock.

A security cable's weak link is a lazy user -- tying up a computer is a hassle, and carrying steel cables can be a drag. For some users, Kensington's travel-size \$30 Retractable MicroSaver is a sensible compromise between convenience and security, since it uses a thin retractable cable that's more portable. (Note that cable locks are being confiscated from carry-on luggage in some airports, for security reasons.)

Make It Loud Sonic alarms are another way to tie down your laptop. The \$50 Targus Defcon 1 Ultra Notebook Computer Security System (<http://www.targus.com>) greets would-be thieves with a shrieking, 95-decibel wail. Kensington's \$45 SonicLock Motion-Detecting Alarm (<http://www.kensington.com>) offers similar protection. Both devices are motion-triggered alarms that also plug directly into the Security Slot; arming or disarming them requires a key combination.

Some alarms, such as the \$60 Trackit (<http://www.trackitcorp.com>), consist of a small radio transmitter and a receiver with a sonic alarm. Drop the alarm in your laptop bag, and if the signal between it and the transmitter is lost, the alarm sounds. (These devices punish thieves and absent-minded owners.)

Label It For laptops that can't always be hidden or secured (for example, iBooks in a classroom), easy-to-spot "asset recovery" stickers are an excellent way to discourage theft. These prominent identification labels consist of aluminum plates and superglue-strength adhesives; they leave a permanent tattoo on your machine if they're removed. The security plates (and the tattoo) explain that you've registered your laptop with a tracking and recovery agency, and they boldly feature toll-free retrieval numbers that any police department, pawnshop, or Good Samaritan can call.

STOP plates (\$26 per plate, includes lifetime recovery service, volume discounts available; <http://www.stoptheft.com>) were chosen for the 32,000 iBooks in Henrico County, Virginia, schools. And when you purchase Securitrac tags (\$20 per three-plate pack, includes lifetime recovery service; <http://www.securitrac.com>), the company pays for shipping and offers cash rewards for the return of lost laptops.

If you can't spring for these expensive stickers, put at least some kind of label on your computer, with a phone number or an e-mail address. Not all missing laptops are stolen -- some are just lost.

Protect Your Data

Guarding your data is just as important as securing your machine. After all, buying a new PowerBook is usually easier than fighting a wicked bout of identity theft or corporate extortion.

Login Security For desktop Macs running OS X, automatic login is usually safe. But with laptops, it's better to turn off this option. In OS X 10.3, open the Accounts preference pane, click on Login Options in the lower left corner, and deselect the Automatically Log In As option. To allow for a benevolent individual finding your PowerBook if you lose it, have your Mac log in to a harmless guest account that contains recovery notes but little else. OS 9 users can use the Security control panel for a similar effect. Also, consider enabling a wake-from-sleep or screen-saver password as well.

Unfortunately, a savvy crook can eventually bypass screen savers and login passwords. Real privacy,

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therefore, demands data encryption, which scrambles your files so that only the correct passkey can unscramble them.

FileVault Apple touts FileVault as one of Panther's best features -- it can encrypt your drive using a hefty 128-bit AES encryption scheme. Once you enable FileVault, you probably won't see a difference in day-to-day interaction with your computer -- the continuous encryption and decryption of your working files is handled by Mac OS. In theory, it would take a thief a few trillion years to crack into your user folder without the right password. (Some users have experienced data loss when using FileVault. Apple recommends updating to the latest version of Panther to avoid problems, but we suggest using FileVault with caution.)

Disk Image If you're hesitant about encrypting your entire Home directory but need to safeguard a few sensitive files, store them in an encrypted disk image instead. To make one, launch Disk Utility (found in Applications: Utilities), click on New Image, and then choose AES-128 from the Encryption pull-down menu.

Track It Down

Even if someone steals your iBook, it may not be gone for good, thanks to tracking software. Hidden tracking software works like this: If your laptop moves to a new network, and then reconnects to the Internet, a terse message describing the technical details of its new location is secretly broadcast via the Internet. The hapless thief who steals a laptop from your workplace and then test-drives it by logging in to his AOL account at home is in for a surprise -- he has unwittingly handed over information that law enforcement and ISPs can use to pinpoint his location.

Some examples of Mac tracking software are SweetCocoa's \$25 LapCop 2.0 (<http://homepage.mac.com/sweetcocoa/>), for Jaguar and Panther, and Stealth Signal's XTool Computer Tracker (\$49 for one year, discounts for longer contracts available; <http://www.stealthsignal.com>), for OS 9 and OS X. Both apps communicate via a client-server method that's more reliable than other SMTP-based solutions. XTool includes an additional feature that speeds up the tracking process. If possible, it uses the modem to dial a toll-free number daily, thereby initiating a billing process that identifies the phone number being used -- even if it's a blocked or unlisted number.

None of these programs will work unless a thief plays around with your computer. To encourage this, set up a guest account on your system, as suggested previously.

Tracking programs aren't fail-safe protection. But if you're keeping guard at a school or a workplace -- places where laptops are commonly stolen -- the right software can help.

Pump You Up!

Next time you need some motivation to exercise, don't call your personal trainer -- just reach for your iPod. Judging by the popularity of Arnold "The Governator" Schwarzenegger's Total Body Workout on the iTunes Music Store, fitness and the iPod can go hand in hand. If you're really serious about your workout, check out Personalized Workout Systems' \$20 MP3 Gym (<http://www.mp3gym.com>).

MP3 Gym gives you 192 different MP3 files covering more than 60 exercises -- a personal trainer instructs and motivates you through three levels of workout intensity during eight preset routines. You can also customize your own routines from more than 100,00 workout-routine combinations, and MP3 Gym even includes illustrated PDF routine sheets for following along and taking notes. -- jonathan seff

Portable Projection

Tired of lugging around a bulky projector when you're traveling for business? Check out Olympus's new VP-1 Data Projector (<http://www.olympusamerica.com>). This \$2,495 compact digital projector produces 1,000 lumens of brightness with a contrast ratio of 2,000:1 -- in a 2.4-pound package that measures just 1.85 inches high, 7.1 inches wide, and 6.4 inches deep.

The VP-1's Digital Micromirror Device chip and Olympus Zuiko Digital Lens work together to produce an image with tons of detail, and four-way digital keystone correction makes sure your images look good even when they're projected from an uneven surface. -- jonathan seff

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