Stop Preaching to the Choir

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We security experts and network specialists do a lot of talking to each other about security. We natter on at conferences about the latest vulnerabilities and exploits; we make *tsking* noises about how awful the latest case of Web vandalism or Phishing is. Faced with a rising tide of criminal hacking, we raise the dikes ever higher. Our conception of improving security is focused entirely on resisting attacks.

This attitude seems to take for granted that criminal hackers will continue to increase the frequency, sophistication, and effectiveness of their penetration attempts. Here is very much the same attitude that we reasonably adopt with regard to earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes and snow storms. Basically, we treat a computer crime as if it were an act of G-d.

We don’t know all the details of the criminal hacker underground. However, we know for sure that there are children being seduced by hacker propaganda right now. Children live in a child’s subculture; for many kids, the adult world to impinge is very little on their daily picture of the world. In many families, children care more about their peer group’s approval then about their parents’ opinions. It’s not surprising, then, that there are kids who are playing with powerful hacking tools – maybe kids in your neighborhood or even your family who are launching denial of service attacks, vandalizing Website said, and using stolen credit cards.

Back in the last century, a there was a pre-teen kid did whose family thought that there was nothing unusual about his having several phone lines in his bedroom that he paid for. The child had convinced them that running half a dozen modems concurrently 24 hours a day was just something that computer geeks had to do. The parents never asked where the child obtained the money to pay for extra phone lines. It turned out that their “computer genius” was trolling for fax numbers using war dialers and was selling the fax numbers he identified; junk fax operators were paying him several dollars per number for his harvest.

In 1996, a 16-year-old Australian, Drew Henry Madden, of Brisbane started defrauding businesses using stolen and forged credit-card numbers just after leaving school. By 1997, he had stolen $100,000 in goods and services. In October, he pleaded guilty to 294 counts of fraud and was given a suspended sentence. His defense attorney blamed his victims’ poor security for the losses. Despite the youngster’s unusual revenue stream, his mother appeared to have accepted his globe-trotting ways and massive purchases of lottery tickets without comment.

Yes, we all know about the script kiddies; we’ve seen it or read about the prepubescent geeks attending criminal hacker conferences. Some people make the mistake of stereotyping criminal hackers, describing them incorrectly as pimply adolescents who can’t get a date. But very few of us in the networking and security professions seem to go out of our way to talk about security and criminal hacking to anyone outside our field. We seem to be content to talk to each other and agree on how unfortunate it is that parents or the schools or TV cartoon shows don’t teach kids about the ethical use of computer technology.
So why aren’t we out there talking to kids and teachers and parents ourselves? We know how tough it is for network operations when someone has breached our perimeter. We have gone through all night sessions checking our software and data because some creep has broken through a vulnerability we ought to have patched. We need to speak up about our point of view. We need to go out into our own communities and spread the word about what really happens when there’s unauthorized access to our systems. We should be speaking about our concerns in schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, community centers, Co-op stores, teen-ager centers and anywhere we can reach adults and children in an effort to stem the tide of criminal hacking.

Stop preaching to the choir. Get out into the real world and make a difference.