Hello, I’m Roger Safian. Today’s a special Shopping for the Holidays podcast, brought to you by Northwestern University Information Technology. If you’re going to be shopping online for the holidays, you’ll want to be extra careful. There are an endless supply of grinches out there who would love to ruin your holiday by scamming you.

Make sure you shop only online using your credit card so you get maximum consumer protection, and please be careful when searching for bargains. It’s really easy to Google “Low price HDTV” for example, and find all sorts of places that are selling TV’s. Some of these places, though, may not actually have TV’s to sell. They may just be interested in collecting money from you and ripping you off for the holidays, so just be careful. Go to reputable vendors. Make sure to check what other people say about a vendor. In other words, if you’re going to buy from a place for the first time, Google their website and see if other people have had issues with them so you know what you’re getting into.

Then while you’re shopping, why not consider getting yourself the gift of improved security? There’s a lot of items that you can buy for yourself out there that are not that expensive that could help you improve your own security posture, or make great gifts for your friends and family. The first item I want to talk to you about is pretty inexpensive. It’s a USB flash drive, and what’s special about these drives are write protect switches. Now it used to be that flash drives had these switches pretty commonly. Almost all the flash drives I bought early on had a little switch where you could set it so that you could write to it or you couldn’t write to it, and where this really comes in handy is viruses that pass via USB flash drives. What you don’t want to do is have some holiday photos and you maybe want to share them with your family, and so you take them over to the holiday party on a flash drive, you put it in somebody’s machine, and they infect your flash drive, and now you take that infection home with you. What you want to do is copy your photos to the flash drive, flip the little switch so now it can’t be written to, and now you cannot infect that flash drive with a virus that’s on that computer that you’re going to share the photos with. It’s a great little thing. The other thing that you might want to consider when you’re looking at these flash drives is buy an extra one. Buy an extra one for yourself, take a bunch of photos of your house and your belongings and maybe some of your financial records, put it on it, and go store it in your safety deposit box or some other place that’s extra safe, so that you’ve got a nice record for yourself in case disaster strikes.

The other thing you might want to consider is a security suite. If you’re using the free antiviral software that’s out there, they’re great packages, or maybe you’re using the antiviral software that Northwestern provides. You might want to look into getting one of these consumer-based
antiviral suites. All of the manufacturers, Trend, Symantec, McAfee, you know, whoever, make these things, and they’ve got information and utilities that are more geared towards the consumer, so websites that get checked to see if they’re secure and safe, spyware and phishing filters and things of this nature all built into it, and they’re a little more user-friendly to the average computer user, not expecting somebody to be on a network that’s managed by corporate America. So consider these here. These vary in cost from 20 maybe to 60-70 dollars. You can certainly look around, and for sales, I find that I can often get pretty good sale prices on this software if I’m just willing to wait, so if your antiviral packages do, certainly consider that.

How about a new wireless router for your home? If you’ve been using the same wireless router for years, maybe you’re still using Wireless B, and this would be a great time to upgrade, you know, get a Wireless N router, and make sure it’s got the latest security features that are built in to it. It used to be WEP was the security feature built into a router, now there’s WPA and WPA2. Definitely new things that you want to do for your wireless router, so if you’ve got an old wireless router, you could probably improve your security by upgrading it, and don’t forget to choose good strong passwords for that router. You don’t want to stick with the default like “linksys” or something like that. That’s not good.

And then how about backup? You could do this inexpensively, you can do this more expensively, depending on what your budget is like. What you want to be able to do is have some sort of USB device or maybe a network-attached storage device that you backup all your files to automatically. Because, inevitably, the computer you’re using is going to have some problems, and when it does, you don’t want to lose all of your data. All of those pictures that you’ve been taking over the years and the videos that you’ve collected of the family and friends, you don’t want to lose those things, so you want to store them on another device so that you’re sure that you can get back to it when you need to. Now you can go with network-attached storage. That’s usually a little more expensive, but the real advantage there is, potentially, you can use that same device on multiple computers in your home, so if you’ve got lots of different computers, go to network-attached storage. It’s probably less expensive for multiple computers. If you’ve got just a single computer, you can probably save yourself some money just by getting a USB external hard drive or maybe even a large USB flash drive would work depending on what it is that you want to backup. Definitely look into this because you don’t want disaster to strike you.

If you’re interested in other ideas for the holidays, NUIT is running a Tech Talk, IT for the Holidays. This will be on December 1 from 11-11:45 PM. I’ll put a link in the show notes for that so you can tune in and listen to other ideas. And lastly, don’t forget: there may be people out there who are less fortunate than you. Please consider making a donation to your favorite charity for the holidays.
Anyway, thanks for listening. If you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to send them to r-safian@northwestern.edu, and as always you’ll find additional security information as well as the notes that contain the links for today’s podcast at our website www.it.northwestern.edu/security/.

- Information Security News Podcasts Archive
- NUIT Home