

S3 Key Opens Doors to Enhanced Security

Max Jarman Jul. 13, 2006



A Mesa start-up company has developed an alternative to using a user name and password as the first line of protection for secure networks and Internet sites.

It's a key that plugs into a computer's USB port to authenticate the user of a wired or wireless network and secure the data as it goes across. The authentication process takes about three seconds.

Sweet Spot Solutions Inc. tested its device with members of the press during the 2004 presidential debate in Tempe and launched its S3 Key in the first quarter of this year. The business has so far been funded by private investors who have contributed about \$3 million.

The S3 Key has attracted interest from large companies, including Lockheed Martin Corp., Boeing Co. and Cisco Systems Inc.

"We've been going crazy," said Chad Swensen, Sweet Spot's co-founder and president.

Because all the necessary software is contained on the key, it can be used on any computer.

"Instead of downloading special software and keeping track of user names and passwords, you just give the user a key," Swensen said.

That's particularly important for companies such as Boeing, which has more than 140,000 network users.

"Constantly programming and reprogramming users' computers is a time-consuming and costly process," Swensen said.

Lockheed Martin Corp. is using Sweet Spot's key on a trial basis at 11 locations and may expand it to its approximately 150 sites around the world.

Jason Pfeiffer, a Lockheed Martin information security team leader, heard about the key after the presidential debates and contacted the company about a trial.

Lockheed is giving the keys to vendors, subcontractors and consultants who need temporary access to the company's network. Previously, a technician had to load special software on the user's computer to allow access.

A Lockheed spokesman said the company's policy is not to comment on such products. But Bruce Miller, vice president and chief information officer of the Bank of American Fork in Utah, an early user of the S3 Key, said the key solved the bank's security and authentication needs and significantly improved the management of remote user access.

With data thieves getting more skillful, companies are looking for security beyond the user name and password, particularly companies that do a lot of business with the U.S. military.

"Data thieves are getting more proficient, and anything that provides additional protection to a secured network makes sense," said Kati Weingartner, director of information technology at Arizona State University's Polytechnic Campus.

With more stringent network-security requirements for medical, banking and other industries, Swensen believes there is a broad market for the product.

"Banks could provide keys to their online users, and medical practitioners could use them to guard the access to their patients' medical records," Swensen said.

He noted that a number of recent data thefts have involved former employees who continued to access secure company networks. Sweet Spot's key requires the user to enter an identification number for added security. That number can be changed or deactivated remotely.

Sweet Spot was founded three years ago in Seattle by Swensen and Justin Beck. They had backgrounds in the telecommunications industry and lived in the same neighborhood. Their goal was to make technology simple and use that as a mission for a new company.

Their first project was to simplify the wireless network-authentication process, which Swensen said was "non-intuitive, complex and took forever." He cited a study that showed it took some users up to 20 minutes to sign onto networks at certain wireless hot spots in San Francisco.

By putting the authentication software on a key, they were able to cut the authentication time down to three seconds, hence the name S3 Key.

The company moved to Mesa to be near its investors in California but not too near.

"We've been pleased with the decision," Swensen said. "There is a favorable business climate, and we have been able to hire the technical employees we need."

The business has four employees in addition to Swensen and Beck and expects to grow to 15 to 20 by the end of the year.

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