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Taking stock of computer locks

Today's models have become secure, but you still get what you pay for.

By Julio Ojeda-Zapata
Pioneer Press

Just two years ago, computer locks were all but worthless.

A lock expert proved this by cracking the supposedly tamper-resistant security devices with ordinary objects — a ballpoint-pen barrel, a thin piece of plastic, even a rolled-up cardboard tube.

So, are newer, redesigned locks any better?

The latest look much like the old ones, after all. They still consist of metal cables that lash computers to immovable objects, along with locking mechanisms that fit into security slots found in laptops, desktop computers and computer displays. So what's new?

We posed this question to Marc Tobias, a Sioux Falls, S.D., lock authority and author of "Locks, Safes and Security: An International Police Reference," after computer-lock vendor Kensington recently rolled out a new line.

It turns out Tobias consulted with Kensington and PC Guardian, another computer-lock company, on the new locks. The companies flew him to manufacturing facilities in the Far East and gave him free rein to find flaws in their devices, he says.

Tobias' verdict? Computer locks have come a long way, but they will never be impregnable. Given enough time, skill and effort, he says, any lock can be compromised. Not all of today's computer locks are created equal, he adds. "There's some real junk out there," he says. "You can't sell one of these locks for \$10 and provide any measure of security. You get what you pay for."

With that in mind, here are some of the latest developments in computer locks:

Kensington. It was a Kensington model that came under the most scrutiny in 2004. That lock was so simple to foil with a pen tube or cardboard cylinder inserted into its circular key slot, even a Pioneer Press writer could do it.

But the company (www.kensington.com) has debuted a revamped line of next-generation computer locks called MicroSaver Notebook Locks, which include versions that open with flat or cylindrical keys along with a combination lock. They range from \$40 to \$70.

It says the products share a key improvement that has nothing to do with their locking mechanisms — the metal cables are now much harder to cut. This has been older locks' Achilles heel, says Tobias, who agrees with Kensington that its cables are vastly improved. Kensington says its locks are much harder to pick now, too.

Tobias has high praise for a new MicroSaver model with a cylindrical lock that he tested. He says improvements make it far more resistant to attack with the tools that easily foiled the lock's predecessor.

Targus. A combination lock sold by Targus (www.targus.com) in 2004 was as flawed as its Kensington cousin, but for another reason: Its combination could be gleaned in minutes by using a thin piece of paper or plastic to probe the device's rotating thumbwheels.

Targus has modified its locking mechanism, and Tobias tentatively declares it to be an improvement. "They have changed the design so that you cannot decode it as the earlier model," he notes.

Targus' older locks also had the easy-to-cut cable problem. Tobias recently bought a \$35 Targus Defcon CL model and says, "I was able to cut the cable literally in two seconds (using ordinary bolt cutters) without any problem. That's not security."

But Targus has since released a Defcon CL Armor Combo Cable Lock with what it claims is "extreme cut-resistant steel-on-steel construction." The key, the company says, is a steel cable covered with steel ringlets that "are so strong that attempts to cut the cable typically result in damage to the cutters."

In Pioneer Press testing, the cable also appeared resistant to bending and squeezing, a method Tobias has used in the past to break or snap the links.

The Targus lock is heavier and bulkier than other computer locks, though. The four-digit combination lock costs \$55.

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PC Guardian. Older computer locks offered by PC Guardian (www.pcguardian.com) weren't flawed to the extent that the Kensington and Targus locks were. Still, PC Guardian has sought to improve its products.

Tobias was asked to consult on a tubular lock, now being marketed under the Ezolution brand. The \$60 lock has a push-button design that lets users install it on a laptop without the key. While that button design isn't entirely new, Tobias says, it's harder to crack.

PC Guardian's locks have reasonably cut-resistant cables, says Tobias, but he rates Kensington cables as better. PC Guardian also sells a \$40 combination-style Ezolution lock.

Other security concerns. A computer lock's mechanism is irrelevant, Tobias notes, if a computer's security slot is easy to compromise. These slots should be cut into a hardened-metal portion of a computer or, at least, reinforced somehow. But, as the Pioneer Press has found, ripping locks from too-fragile slots built into certain Windows laptops is all but effortless.



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