

Is Your Smart-Home Really Protecting You

August 23, 2016 - In higher end new homes, the term "smart-home" is all the rage. It isn't uncommon to see new homes that have smart thermostats, garage door openers, door locks, security systems, door bells and even refrigerators that are "smart." This means that these features can be accessed via the internet; usually from your smart phone. In homes that are decked out with all the bells and whistles, you can be on a beach in Cancun while setting your thermostat and letting in your handy-man 1,500 miles away. All this convenience is becoming less expensive and more mainstream. But is it really "smart" or are you actually making yourself less safe by using these technologies?

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For several years we've talked about the "smart grid." In short it provides internet access and control to utility companies, allowing both you and them to monitor your usage of electricity, gas and water. The smart grid has essentially been forced down the throats of consumers nationwide under the guise that it will allow utility companies to hold their costs in check. No longer will they have to run out and read the meter. Now they can download that information from the internet. Sounds great until you realize that this allows them to tell when you are home or away because of the patterns in your usage. Or that with more and more smart appliances on the market, they can also tell when you are watching TV or if you are setting your thermostat lower than they would like it set. Once you know that, it gets a little creepy.

But it isn't just utility companies that want this information. Marketers and crooks - yes, there is a difference - also want access to it. And at least with regard to marketing, there are precious few privacy laws to protect consumers.

As far as we know, there is no law that would prevent the company that supply's your smart thermostat from selling usage pattern information on you to a third party. In all likelihood, that would be controlled by the company's privacy policy. Anyone gaining access to this data could learn when you are usually home. So if they are sending a salesman to your door or planning to call you on the phone, they can determine ahead of time when you are most likely to be available.

Now think of this information in the hands of a home burglar. What could he do with it?

There is a pretty good chance that even if you don't have a smart home, you have some smart appliances already. You could very easily have a smart TV; meaning that it has a camera and a microphone embedded in it. You may also have a smart doorbell or garage door opener.

All of these devices store information on you. And many of them are connected to larger databases of information. These databases are prime targets for hackers. There is absolutely no doubt that as smart devices become more prevalent, the computer networks of the companies that make and service them will become the targets of criminals.

We aren't advising our readers to steer clear of all smart devices. Some of the devices on the market provide significant benefits to consumers. But you do need to educate yourself before making the purchase of any smart device. Don't simply rely on a marketing pitch that gives you no information about the downside of the equipment you are purchasing. Before you make a purchase, ask yourself "Could I be harmed if the "smart" information associated with the device fell into the wrong hands?" If the answer is yes, then read the privacy policy of the manufacturer before you buy or look for another alternative. It is up to you to be a "smart consumer" and to protect yourself.

byJim Malmberg

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