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Spyware killer displays its own ads

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Software entrepreneur Rick Carlson thinks consumers will welcome free software for purging their computers of annoying "spyware" advertisements — even if the free software includes ads of its own.

Carlson, president of Aluria Software in Lake Mary, Fla., has struck a controversial alliance with WhenU.com Inc. of New York, a major pro-

vider of programs that display ads on personal computers. For years, Aluria's Spyware Eliminator program would target WhenU software for deletion. But Aluria says that WhenU is no longer spyware, because the company has agreed to modify its business practices in compliance with standards drawn up by Aluria.

In addition, WhenU will start distributing a free advertising-supported version of the Aluria software lat-

er this month. The program will wipe out other spyware programs but display its own advertisements. Aluria will receive a portion of the revenues WhenU receives for displaying the ads.

The idea has dismayed other antispyware experts. "There are companies out there saying Aluria is getting in bed with the devil," Carlson said. But he said he wants to

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fight intrusive computer advertisements while leaving room for legitimate ads.

"We absolutely, 100 percent are not contradicting our business model," Carlson said.

Spyware got its name because many of these ad programs keep track of a user's Internet habits and relay the information to the advertising company. WhenU president Avi Naider said his company's software has never done this. "What WhenU does is deliver advertising that is relevant but is also privacy protected," he said.

WhenU software is usually bundled along with some other attractive piece of free software. For

instance, the program WeatherCast automatically displays a local weather forecast, constantly updated from the Internet.

But it also causes WhenU ads to occasionally appear on the user's screen. Revenue generated by the ads pays for the software, and also provides a profit for WhenU.

When Aluria unveiled a certification program for Internet advertisers, WhenU decided to comply, by changing its installation process to insure that users understood what the software did, so they could choose to reject it. Now Aluria considers WhenU a legitimate advertising company — so legitimate that it's combining its anti-spyware scanner with WhenU's ads. "We're giving out the absolute best scanner on the Web

for free, with advertising support," Naider said.

Ed English, chief executive of Intermute Inc., an anti-spyware vendor in Braintree, said the WhenU-Aluria alliance is a big mistake. "You can do it, but do you still have credibility at the end of the day?" asked English. "I don't see how you can play two sides of the fence like that." Besides, said English, people who use anti-spyware products want to stop ads from popping up on their computers, not add more of them. "I can't imagine them getting consumers to buy in to that kind of model," English said.

But Carlson said Aluria's deal with WhenU will encourage other

spyware companies to reform. He noted that his company lobbied for the anti-spyware bill that the US House of Representatives passed last month. If the Senate follows suit, today's spyware vendors will have a strong incentive to change their business practices, and companies like Aluria should help them. "If there's a company that is changing their methodology and is going to move toward being a responsible citizen," Carlson said, "we need to find an avenue for that."

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