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Some allege Geek Squad agents copy your files

Best Buy's computer trouble-shooters face claims that some technicians copied porn, photos and music from customers.

By [Chris Serres](#), Star Tribune

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When Best Buy Co. Inc. bought the Geek Squad five years ago, the two companies pledged to "protect the world from the assault of computerized technology." Geek Squad "agents" even wore badges and drove vehicles resembling police cars.

But as this squadron of techno-nerds has mushroomed into the largest collection of computer troubleshooters in the world, it has become increasingly difficult for the firm to police its own employees.

In recent months, allegations of agents copying pornography, music and alluring photos from customers' computers have circulated on the Internet. Some bloggers now call it the "Peek Squad." "Any attractive young woman who drops off her computer with the Geek Squad should assume that her photos will be looked at," said Brett Haddock, a former Geek Squad technician.

Best Buy says that any problems are caused by rogue employees and are not systemic. But in light of allegations, the company will increase its monitoring of technicians.

It insists customers' personal photos and other files are safer with the Geek Squad than with most independent computer repair services. The company has rigorous privacy and security measures in place, including checking workers' bags before and after work.

But some current and former Geek Squad agents say the intrusions into customer privacy are symptomatic of a larger problem: that Geek Squad's rapid growth has compromised its service quality and consistency. Some agents said they are graded more on the number of services sold than on the quality of their repairs.

Geek Squad is critical to Best Buy's efforts to provide more higher-margin services. Driving this change is competition from discount chains such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and falling prices on many consumer electronic items, particularly big-screen televisions.

In 1994, Robert Stephens started Geek Squad with \$200 and a bicycle to take him from job to job. Eight years later, Stephens sold the firm to Best Buy for \$3 million. At the time, the firm had just 50 employees; there are now about 11,000.

More than fixing?

The firm claims that it can "fix any PC problem anytime, anywhere," no matter where it was purchased. The agents also make house calls.

But that service has caused problems recently. In May, a Geek Squad agent from California, Hao Kuo Chi, pleaded no contest to one count of invasion of privacy after a woman charged that he secretly used a camera phone to make a video of her taking a shower while he was on a house call.

In May, a consumer blog known as the Consumerist ran a lengthy "confession" from an anonymous blogger claiming to be a former Geek Squad agent. "If you have any interesting pictures of yourself or others on your computer, then they -- will -- be -- found," the person wrote.

Since then, others have come forward with similar allegations. Four current and former Geek Squad technicians in three Best Buy stores who were interviewed by the Star Tribune said that they witnessed co-workers pulling up customers' personal photos and urging others to look. Three of the four recall colleagues copying customers' photos onto DVDs and USB drives.

"They're testosterone-driven geeks, and they're going to look around," said Haddock, who worked at a Best Buy store in Santa Clarita, Calif., northwest of Los Angeles. "It's the male prerogative. The temptation is always there."

David O'Hare, a former Geek Squad agent who worked at the Best Buy store in Santa Clarita, said his colleagues illegally copied "thousands of songs," which are protected by copyrights, from customers' computers and stored them on a store computer.

"We probably had 50 to 100 [gigabytes] of music just sitting there for anyone to listen to or copy," said O'Hare, who left Geek Squad a month ago.

Ben Popken, editor of the Consumerist, tried his own experiment. In June, he and a writer at the Consumerist installed software on a desktop computer that tracks every mouse click made by the user. Then they loaded onto the computer photos of attractive young women -- including some wearing bikinis.

The Consumerist writer took the computer to Best Buy stores. On the fifth visit, Popken said, the software captured a Geek Squad agent opening the folder and copying the photos to a flash drive, which the Consumerist made into a video.

What Best Buy is doing

Stephens, Geek Squad's founder and "chief inspector," is convinced that these are rare occurrences, but nevertheless he is taking them seriously.

"If I were to verify these ... employees, they would be gone -- in a minute," he said.

In addition to stringent policies and procedures for guarding customer data, Best Buy has held at least three mandatory training sessions on customer privacy since last fall.

Andrew Coombs, a former Geek Squad agent who lives in Chattanooga, Tenn., said that stealing customer data would have been "unthinkable" at the store where he worked in Winston-Salem, N.C.

"Number one, you don't poke around because it's wrong, and it was made very clear to us that was grounds for immediate termination," Coombs said, noting that Best Buy constantly updated the privacy policy. "Number two, you don't have the time."

The company said that oversight is particularly stringent at "Geek Squad City," a 165,000-square-foot computer repair facility near Louisville, Ky., where most laptop computers are sent for repairs. Cameras are focused on technicians at all times, and security guards walk the aisles.

Robert Willett, Best Buy's chief information officer, said that the company is exploring ways to bring an increased level of oversight to Geek Squad's in-store work areas, though he declined to be specific.

"Let's just say there are ways of monitoring the tech bench," he said.

But Geek Squad's reputation has already taken a hit, as reports of the privacy intrusions - and Popken's video -- circulate online.

Some agents wonder whether the company expanded too quickly. Many of the newer hires are college students who have little or no experience fixing computers, they say. Starting pay in many stores ranges from \$10 to \$12 an hour -- not enough to retain quality technicians, some agents say.

What's more, some agents complain that their mandate has shifted from fixing computers to providing a wide array of services -- such as hardware installation and virus removals. And Best Buy makes more doing a data backup and reinstalling Windows (\$129), a process known as restoring, than actually doing a diagnostic to uncover a problem (\$69).

"It used to be that the problem had to be really, really bad before you would 'restore' a computer," said O'Hare, the former agent. "Then it became, if it gets things done quicker, then do a restore."

Stephens said Geek Squad technicians will occasionally restore hard drives but only in cases where they can't fix a problem. To discourage that, the firm last year created an in-house group of highly experienced technicians, known as "Secret Weapon," who can answer agents' questions.

"We're really battling it and saying, 'Don't restore,' " he said.

Even so, Holly Petersen, a former Geek Squad agent from Minneapolis, said the recent turmoil was in part why she just sold her Geek Squad badge on eBay for \$300.

She got the badge four years ago during a ceremony at a Minneapolis nightclub. A waitress brought it on a platter.

"I feel like the caliber of customer service is not what it once was," Petersen said.

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