WI-FI MADE EASY, REALLY

Three routers provide dramatically different ways of making home networking as simple as it should be. We put them through their paces.

by John Brandon

A home wireless network is a blessing, allowing users to grab e-mail, surf the Web, or listen to streaming audio on a notebook virtually anywhere around the house. Having Wi-Fi at home opens up a world of possibilities, from network-attached storage drives for file sharing to wireless cameras that keep an eye on things while you're away. However, setting up the very backbone of that network (the router) causes the most headaches.

To keep unhappy customers from bringing their routers back to the store and to lower tech support costs, wireless networking companies are releasing new products with better setup wizards, push-button security features, and a more streamlined approach to configuration. To find out if these latest efforts really help, we put three new easy-setup routers to the test, and had an "average Joe" without any previous wireless experience try to install them. Here's our take (and his).

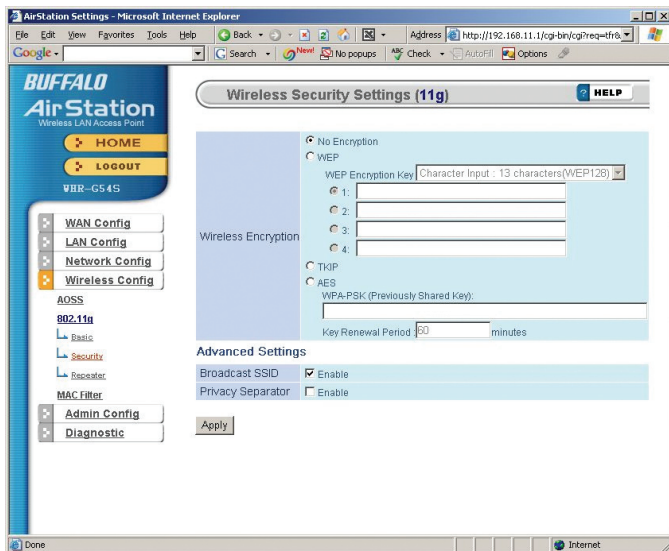## Buffalo 125 High-Speed Mode Wireless Smart Router (WHR-G54S)
$79
Rating: ★★★★☆
www.buffalotech.com

LAPTOP EDITORS' CHOICE

WHAT MAKES IT EASIER The Buffalo Smart Router (WHR-G54S) is a top pick because it senses whether you have a cable or DSL modem and automatically configures Internet access, so that you never have to use a configuration screen. In tests, the router presented a configuration screen only when our cable modem connection was unplugged. Otherwise, the Smart Router worked flawlessly out of the box. Buffalo's AirStation One-Touch Secure System enables

the highest level of security (TKIP-AES) by simply pressing a button on the router and clicking a button on your notebook's screen.

PROS The main benefit to this compact router is in avoiding configuration screens entirely. A complex setup process can't confuse users if they never even have to enter a setup mode. AOSS worked flawlessly, but we would like to see a larger, easier to spot button on the router. The Buffalo adjusts the security level for all attached clients, even if Centrino-based laptops are present. This is a great overall approach, because security is configured relative to the environment rather than forcing each laptop to use a specific PC Card. The Smart Router delivered constant throughput of 33 to 35 Mbps even when security was enabled on several attached clients, making it an excellent high-speed choice at a great price.

CONS One pitfall occurs when the cable or DSL modem is not connected. Immediately, you'll see the admin login, which means taking a trip to the user manual to find the default password. Once you get into the configuration screen, there are too many options and not enough on-screen aids. Even when the Smart Router feature works, anyone who wants to configure the router, for performance reasons or to disable certain security settings, will have a hard time understanding the more cryptic settings.

ROOKIE PERSPECTIVE Our rookie had this router up and running in less than ten minutes. He tried to run the Buffalo install CD, but it's not required. The installer kept referencing older Buffalo products and uses unfamiliar phrases like "attach product."

VERDICT By combining automatic Internet connection discovery with one-touch security, Buffalo Technology is the plug-and-play holy grail of wireless networking. Consider the fast performance a very nice bonus.

Linksys Wireless-G Broadband Router with SpeedBooster (WRT54GS v4)
$99
Rating: ★★★★☆
www.linksys.com

WHAT MAKES IT EASIER This Linksys router uses SecureEasySetup (SES), a technology developed by Broadcom that allows you to press a button on the router, and then click another button on the PC Card control panel to enable WPA security. The WRT54GS uses easy-to-understand install wizards that walk you through exactly what to connect and how,