

How to Remove Personal Info From The Web

According to Philadelphia based privacy expert John Featherman, the risks are only getting worse. More local governments are making their records available on the Internet-so it is even easier to steal people's identities-and data-harvesting companies are increasingly defending their rights.

John recommends finding out what information there is about you (and your loved ones) on the Internet. Each month, check in search engines such as Google.com, Whitepages.com, A9.com, Live.com, Yahoo.com, Private-Eye.com and Zabasearch.com. Search for variations of each person's name, and put the name in quotation marks ("Marjory Abrams," "Margie Abrams," etc.). Even better: Set up a Google Alert (at www.google.com/alerts), which will inform you whenever the "crawler" finds old or new pages with your name. You can choose to be updated weekly, daily or as soon as a page is found. (John prefers to get the information when it is found.)

To remove your personal information from the Web...

If you have your own Web site for friends or business clients-you can create a block against most search engines. John suggests blocking Google and other popular search sites. For example, type "Removing information from Google" into Google Search, and click on "Webmaster Help Center" for directions.

If your information appears on a public site say, in a phone directory see whether the site has a mechanism or opting out. If not, contact the site and request that your information be removed.

Some local governments are reviewing their on-line documents so that Social Security numbers and other sensitive information can be edited out, but John says that it is up to individuals to make sure this is done. If you find information that you want removed, ask the agency in writing to do so.

If any kind of fraud or illegal business practice is involved, the fastest way to get action is to contact the National Association of Attorneys General (202-326-6000, www.naag.org/ag/ful_table.php)...the Federal Trade Commission (877-FTCHELP, www.ftc.gov)...the Federal Communications Commission (www.fcc.gov)...and/or your state's consumer protection office (consumeraction.gov/state.shtml).

Most job-search and dating services allow users to remove resumes and personal "portraits," but this doesn't mean that they will disappear from the Internet-other Web sites may have made the information accessible. Similarly, you can delete all or part of your own blog, but material from it still may be floating around, and you can't remove postings you have put on others' sites. People have been fired from jobs due to personal postings, particularly on social networking sites.

Of course, says John, the safest thing is to not post personal information in the first place-but if you are going to do so, check privacy policies carefully.. .and post cautiously.