

Take Control of Your Social Networking

By Tamara Thompson

Do you really want strangers around the world to know all that? Your social networking activity can be quite revealing – a kind of informal resume and kitchen table chat, not tailored to a specific event or situation and very likely full of unintended personal disclosures. I'm a private investigator and this chatter is the very information I cull on the Internet. Working for attorneys and financial service providers involved in litigation, or conducting due diligence business research for companies, I find background on people. Much of that is uncovered through public records and Internet digging.

Maybe you want to reach people outside your immediate network - to promote a business, as I do through my blog, Web site and LinkedIn profile or to connect to old and new friends. In that case, you may want to be found when someone Googles your name. But I'm also uncovering self-generated content that you posted on MySpace, Facebook, Craigslist and dozens of other social media, or statements, images and documents that other participants contributed that may reflect on you and furthers my research goals.

If you're an amateur cybersleuth, checking out a potential boyfriend, business partner or court witness, start to educate yourself about these sites.

People participate in interactive Web sites with their friends, co-workers, school and professional colleagues, as well as internet-only acquaintances. Most people mention past education and employers, as well as other people in their network, interest organizations and leisure activities. But here's a catch. Unlike the social networking sites Facebook and LinkedIn, - where people list their full names - the participants at MySpace, Blackplanet or Twitter tend to rely on partial names or pseudonyms. Academic studies found that only 8.8% of MySpace users revealed both a first and last name, 57% included a picture and 27.8% listed their school. Other studies have noted that more than 90% of My Space posters included their hometowns. When you're searching for someone's site keep these facts in mind.

If you want to find your footprints (or someone else's) in cyberspace don't just formulate a search query with a full name. Scour the Internet by usernames, current and former e-mail addresses, cell phone numbers, nicknames, business associations and cities of residence. Search within selective Web sites and forums based on known personal and professional interests to find information that may not be found out at a general search engine.

Think about the long term effect when you're participating in online forums. Once your personal information is floating on the Internet you can't reel it back to shore. If you want to be anonymous, use an email address, userid and name that are unique to that site. Otherwise, links can be made between the comments you make at a newspaper Web site on a story and your posting at a blog. Also, you can set privacy restrictions on your social networking profile that's a locked door except to those

you admit. Just remember, anyone in your network that has an open Internet portal could expose your comments, images and other personally identifiable information to strangers.

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