

Understanding Privacy Policies

EVERY WEBSITE HAS ONE. HERE, IN PLAIN LANGUAGE, IS WHAT THEY'RE TELLING YOU. BY RUSSELL SHAW

The instant you log onto the Web, you join the Internet-marketing industry's Most Wanted list and a bounty is placed on your head. What are you wanted for? Your personally identifiable information.

Many companies that do business online—and these days, what company *doesn't* do business online—pay for information about people such as you. The vast majority of these companies don't have malicious intentions; they're just looking for an effective way to market their products and services. In some cases, you might even *want* to be marketed to.

Let's say you're in the market for a new digital camera, so you visit a Website that reviews digital cameras. Days later, you find your email inbox

overflowing with ads from online retailers selling digital cameras and photo printers, online photo-sharing services, and companies selling timeshare vacations. Would you appreciate this information? Or would you feel that someone has violated your inalienable right to privacy?

If you didn't give your express permission for that Website to share your personal information, then your privacy *has* been violated. What's more, that Website has more than likely profited by selling your personally identifiable information. Fortunately, most ethical Websites have privacy policies in place to protect you. Let's take a look at some typical Website privacy policies, how they're regulated, and what you can do if you feel your privacy has been compromised.

TIPS

for Preserving Your Online Privacy

READ every Website's privacy policy before you provide any personally identifiable information.

LOOK for independent privacy certification, such as the BBBOnline or TRUSTe seals.

INFORM everyone in the family—kids in particular—of importance of keeping private information private.

COMPLAIN loudly about any company that compromises your privacy in violation of its posted privacy policy.



➔ Nearly every commercial Website has a privacy policy. Intuit's happens to be particularly strong.

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Some companies collect more personal information about you than others. Register with a site in order to gain information—the online edition of a major newspaper, for instance—and you might only need to provide your name and email address. Make an online purchase with a credit card, on the other hand, and you'll

likely need to provide at least your name; home, shipping, and email addresses; telephone number; and, of course, your credit card number and expiration date.

Some sites go as far as to collect your age, marital status, and even hobbies. If you're going to provide a level of detail, make sure there's a legitimate need for the site to have that information.

Visit a site that provides weather forecasts, for example, and you'll only need to provide your email address and a zip code in order to receive localized forecasts. Since you're an avid skier, you also request the forecast for your favorite mountain resort.

the next time you visit that site, you get notice ads for ski resorts, skiing equipment, and winter clothing. That's to be expected, right? But what if you start receiving unsolicited email and phone pitches from ski resorts?

WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW YOU

Every Website you visit should inform you in clear and unambiguous language just what information they are collecting from you, and how they intend to use this data. Do they intend to send you unsolicited email? Will they sell, lend or rent all or part of it to a third party? Strictly speaking, companies are not legally required to provide this degree of clarity, but any company interested in establishing an ongoing relationship with you certainly should give you this degree of honesty.

Scroll down to the bottom of most commercial Websites, and you'll find a link labeled "Privacy Policy" or something similar. Clicking on this link should take you to a page that spells out the details of the above. If you don't find such a link on a site collecting your personal information, you should seriously consider what information you share. Intuit—developer of the popular e-taken series of personal-finance programs—has an excellent privacy policy. Here's an excerpt: "We do not sell or rent your personal information to anyone. We do not share your personal information with anyone on the other side of Intuit for their promotional, advertising, marketing, use." Considering the sensitivity of the information that Intuit might collect, this language is quite reassuring.

THE OTHER SIDE

Every Website can claim to follow "appropriate" privacy policies, but in the absence of a legal definition, it's hard to say what's appropriate? Unfortunately, there are at least two non-governmental regulatory organizations looking out for consumers' interests: TRUSTe and the Better Business Bureau Online. Both groups offer

certification programs to companies doing business online who agree to adopt detailed privacy guidelines.

Companies participating in the TRUSTe Privacy Seal Program, for example, must agree to abide by the following principles:

- Adoption and implementation of a privacy policy that takes into account consumer anxiety over sharing personal information online.
- Notice and disclosure of information collection and use practices.
- Choice and consent, giving users the opportunity to exercise control over their information.
- Data security and quality and access measures to help protect the security and accuracy of personally identifiable information.

The Better Business Bureau Online also offers privacy programs. In their case, the participating company must first qualify for membership in the Better Business Bureau, and then abide by a privacy policy that, among other things, discloses "for each type of personally identifiable information or prospect information collected...how that information will be subsequently used and shared."

WHAT IF?

Should you be concerned if you visit a Website that collects personal information about you, and you don't see either of these organization's seals of approval on the company's privacy policy? As comforting as these imprimaturs might be, their absence doesn't automatically infer that you're



➔ If all else fails, file a complaint with the U.S. Federal Trade Commission.

faced with an unscrupulous operator. Online auction site Ebay, for example, is enrolled with TRUSTe, while online electronics retailer Newegg is enrolled with both TRUSTe and the BBBOnline. But the world's biggest online retailer—Amazon—isn't registered with either.

In the final analysis, you can do more to protect your privacy than any group or government agency. Before you provide personally identifiable information to any Website, spend a few minutes reading their privacy policy—or, if you have faith in TRUSTe or the BBBOnline—look for one of those organizations' seals. And if you ever suspect your trust has been violated, raise the roof! ■

CONTACT INFO

Here's where you can obtain additional information about the organizations and regulatory agencies discussed in this story:

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU ONLINE
www.bbbonline.org

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION
www.ftc.gov/privacy/

TRUSTE
www.truste.org