Protecting and Leveraging Your Online Identity
by Eugene Loj

The information that follows contains simple yet powerful concepts that can help you protect and leverage your personal identity online. Since there isn't enough room to cover everything, I've decided to stick with the most important concepts.

If the information isn't applicable to you, it might be useful to your friends and family. Feel free to pass it along.

Please note, when I refer to people "Googling You," that means anyone using any online search engine to look up information about you. "Googling" is the most popular term people use to describe this practice.

Do you "Try to Hide" or take Advantage of People Looking you Up Online?

Let me start by stating, I respect and understand anyone who wants to protect their privacy. Unfortunately, keeping your information private could go beyond your personal control. You no longer have 100% control over what others are going to post about you online. This can be anyone from family and friends to people you don't even know. In addition, some states in the US are making certain public records available online. It's becoming increasingly more difficult to stay private.

Be Proactive about Protecting Your Personal Identity Online

The single best thing you can do is check your own name in search engines. Try searching for your first and last name with and without quotes. Using "quotes" will give you more specific results as it applies to your name. Because it's your personal information, take the time to look through at least the first five pages of results. Is there anything that could present you in a poor light?

Check Your Personal Search Engine Results on a Regular Basis

Search Engine results are constantly being updated. In some cases it happens multiple times a day. Get yourself into the routine of checking at least once a month.

Get emailed when you show up in Google - Setup a Google Alert

What's a Google Alert? Google will send you an automatic email each time the words you enter, in this case your name, show up as a new posting in the Google search engine. You can customize the options to your preference. Go to http://www.google.com/alerts for more information. Yahoo and MSN also have similar services.

How Most People Search for Information Online

Most Internet users click on the first few results in any given search engine. A small percentage of people go past the first page. If someone really wants to get information about you they'll go at least a few pages into the search results.

The Biggest Search Engines – Where People Look for You

Google represents the largest amount of searches on the Internet. Some of the others, in order of size, are Yahoo.com, MSN.com, Ask.com, and AOL.com. Each search engine will have different results. Consider taking a few minutes to search each of the top search engines.

Be Careful About What You Post on MySpace, Facebook, any Blogs, etc.

If you're posting anything (text, photos, videos, etc.) ask yourself, "What would an employer or close friend think of this?" Different people might misconstrue what you're doing in a photograph. If you post comments to blogs or forums, those comments could get indexed into the search engine. Once something is listed in a search engine it could stay in the search results for years.

Companies Are "Googling" You Right Now

A few friends in the job recruiting field have told me that a number of companies are using the process of "Googling You" to conduct inexpensive and informal background checks. What happens if they find something on your MySpace or Facebook account that doesn't represent you well?

I'm not a lawyer and don't know the legalities. But one senior recruiter I know summed it up this way "If they're doing it they'll never tell you, but it will impact you, guaranteed!" That goes for current and prospective employers.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLE:
How Facebook Can Get You Fired!

http://valleywag.com/tech/your-privacy-is-an-illusion/bank-intern-busted-by-facebook-321802.php

The Dating Scene

Have you ever looked up a potential date in the search engines? It happens all the time. There are a number of friends I know who have openly admitted to looking up their dates in the search engines. It's like an instant background check. In some cases it can be a dating deal breaker or score you a few points.

What if There is Something Bad About Me Online?

There is a slight chance that something you don't want people to see can be found online.

Step #1 - Try to Remove It

First step is to try to remove the content if you have control to do so. Maybe a friend posted a picture of you doing something precarious. Ask them to take it down.

Step #2 – Acknowledge It

If you can't remove the information, at least acknowledge it. If someone finds the information and asks you about it, be honest with them. We've all had fun in the past and probably have done things we now regret. People are more likely to cut you some slack if you acknowledge what you were doing.

Leveraging the Situation to Your Advantage

My suggestion is to embrace what's already happening and use it to your advantage. You can either try to stay super private or go public. When I say go public, I specifically mean putting your best foot forward. If you're going to have information public about you, make sure it represents you in a positive way. Services like MySpace and Facebook are free and can be used to your advantage. Another free resource is LinkedIn.

Taking Your Online Identity Protection to the Next Level

If you implement some of the above suggestions you should be in good shape. A number of people have asked me "What else can I do to protect myself online?" There are a few more things you can do to secure your online identity for the future.

Secure Your Online Identity

One of my strongest recommendations, regardless of whether you decide to have a web site or not, is to register your own name as a domain name. Even if you aren't going to setup a web site, consider registering your name before someone else does, especially if you have a common first and last name. This will probably cost you about $10 USD a year. You might consider your own web site in the future.

How do I register a domain name?

Go to your favorite search engine and type in "domain registration." I highly recommend you go with a reputable domain registration company. Ask a friend familiar with the Internet for their recommendations. Some companies offer inexpensive packages that allow you to register and post your web site.

When Registering Your Own Domain

In some cases, your name might already be registered. You may want to consider using the diminutive (short) form of your first name and last name. As an example, if your name was Thomas Edison and the domain is already registered, consider using "TomEdison.com" or "TommyEdison.com" If that doesn't work, throw in a middle initial or middle name, "ThomasAEdison.com" Always try to register with the .com version. Search engines tend to give .com's a little more importance.

If the .com option isn't available consider .net or even .name. The overall idea is to secure your online identity.

The Internet isn't going away any time soon. Do what it takes to protect your online identity. Hopefully the information above helps you better secure your online identity and create advantageous opportunities for you in the future.

Additional Resources

Here are some links to articles expanding on a number of concepts from above.

Watch Out People Are Googling You!

www.**eugeneloj**.com/2007/01/watch_out_peopl.html

Leveraging People Googling You to Your Advantage

www.**eugeneloj**.com/2007/12/leveraging-peop.html

About the Eugene

Eugene Loj (Loj pronounced Loy, like Joy) is an Online Entrepreneur and Internet Consultant. His writing at http://www.EugeneLoj.com is based on proven real world experience, not theoretical ideas. Over the last 15 years he has spent 11,500+ hours of discovering what works and doesn't on the Internet. His primary goal is to share valuable information with business owners and companies dedicated to getting the most out of their business online.

Because of the litigious world we live in, I have to include the following . . .

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