

Internet Data and Privacy

Young people should understand that their personal information has value and it belongs to them. Online activity reveals a great deal of personal information about a person. While lots of personal information is collected without our knowledge while we are online, young internet users tend to feel very comfortable sharing information about themselves when asked to do so (i.e. surveys, age, grade, likes & dislikes) by a website they are visiting – a trait that online marketers are eager to cultivate!

The Internet makes the job of marketing professionals much easier. Children begin visiting commercial sites at early ages. While participating in activities in these online playgrounds, young players are often rewarded with points, prizes and perks when they give away personal information. On the Web, young people voluntarily provide information that advertisers once had to pay for. Popular sites like *Formspring*, *Neopets*, *Barbie* and *Webkinz* use a variety of techniques to gather information about online activity and to persuade users to give out information which can then be used to create promotional campaigns that specifically target young people. It seems fairly harmless, but there are commercial and safety implications that need to be considered – especially when young people begin interacting on sites where personal information is accessible not only to advertisers, but to other Internet users as well.

Social networking sites and virtual worlds often ask users to fill out a detailed profile that may include their name, address and various personal details. For example, *Facebook* includes options for “Political Views”, “Religious Views” and “Relationship Status” as part of its user profiles.

There are a number of industry guidelines that address online privacy and while they are only voluntary, it is possible to contact sites your children use and make sure they follow them. The Canadian Marketing Association's *Code of Ethics for Marketing to Children*, for instance, forbids collecting any data at all from children under 13 without consent from a parent or guardian.

The best way for parents to determine what information is being collected on sites their children visit is to review their privacy policies – which are usually linked at the bottom of each page.

Media Awareness Network has prepared a list of questions parents should ask:

- What kind of information about your child is collected and how will this information be used?
- Can you change or erase any of the information that has been collected about your child?
- What steps are suggested to ensure your child's safety when he or she participates in activities on the site?
- Does this conform to industry guidelines on online marketing to children and collection of information from children on the Internet?
- What methods are used to ensure parents have given their consent before a child provides personal information online?
- How can you contact or obtain more information about the company hosting the Web site?
- Is the language in the privacy policy clear and easy to understand?