



Susan-Says® Your Customers May be Zooming You.

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What's zooming? It's a background check of sorts on the Internet. The problem is you may not want everyone to see what's out there.

About once a month, I enter my name in one of the Internet search engines to see what pops up. Why? In part, because of the frequent articles I write such as this one. I want to make sure someone isn't using my work without my permission. But also, I want to know what information about my company and me is readily available on the Internet.

Why is that important? More and more people are turning to the Internet to do quick background checks on potential clients, suppliers, applicants and competitors. According to a recent Harris Interactive poll, 23 percent of respondents said they search the names of a business associate or company on the Internet before an initial meeting.

"It is your reputation. You need to know what is out on the Internet about you or your firm," advises Laura Faulkner, a human resources consultant. "With more blogs and personal web sites, you don't know where your name and likeness may be on the Internet."

Imagine walking into a meeting with a prospect who has stumbled onto some photos of you dancing on the table at your cousin's wedding? Even though he or she may not say anything, your credibility may be compromised. It's potentially embarrassing to say the least, but it may also have a dramatic impact on your business success.

Take the time to see what pops up about you on the Internet. If you discover material you don't want business associates to see, take action. Contact the site's creator or web master and ask for the objectionable material to be removed. Keep in mind, in many cases there is no legal obligation for the web site to do anything. But if you are persistent and explain your situation, most will agree.

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What can you do to protect yourself? There are some search engines such as ZoomInfo which collects information about you from the web and then allows you to correct your profile. But if the information is still available on the web, most likely it will be picked up again. Additionally, there are some social-networking type sites which allow you to build your own Internet profile, but most people realize that these types of sites are not objective.

The bottom line is in today's world where information is easily accessible; you must diligently work to protect your reputation. Keep in mind, always be careful about what you willingly share on the Internet. Think twice before you trash a competitor in a chat room or share personal details about your life. And remember, the best defense is often a good offense. Knowing what's out there allows you to be prepared.

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