

## How To Click and Clean Your Online Profiles

**If you're on MySpace or Facebook, so is your potential boss.**

### **Time to make some changes?**

By Andy Simmons

#### **A New Kind of Resumé**

Here's an interesting fact: Every American has, at some point, appeared naked, drunk, unconscious, rude, crude or felonious online. Okay, maybe not everyone, but surf the Net and that's the impression you'll get. On social networks like MySpace and Facebook, you can find pages only a hedonist would love: "Thirty Reasons Girls Should Call It a Night," "Beer Pong Dream Team," ... you get the idea.

There's a photo of a young man named Carl on yet another page. He's fast asleep -- passed out, actually -- and his friends have sketched scars, a mustache and graffiti on his face. (By the way, we deleted his last name, but it's right there on the site.) Katie is there too. She's wasted and naked and has her head resting on a toilet seat. Her photo comment? "Not my finest hour ... what a classy chick!"

This generation didn't invent stupidity, of course; it's just the first to post it online for all the world to see. And that's the rub: Employers are getting savvier about looking you up online. How? In some cases, just by Googling your name.

More and more companies -- 61 percent, says the Ponemon Institute, a privacy research organization -- are running online background checks of prospective hires. And 43 percent of those potential bosses nixed candidates based on what they found out about them. As one consultant told the New York Post, "Your Google results are your new resumé."

Hiring someone is risky business. Employers, after all, don't like surprises. They look at what people post and wonder, Is that new salesperson, the one who flashed her breasts on collegehumor.com, likely to do the same at a convention? Will the new guy in advertising turn off clients with endless chatter about his World of Warcraft score? No question, the easiest way to deal with a potential problem is before the hire.

Brad Karsh, president of JobBound, an online employment company, found a young man who was perfect for an open position there. Before he made the offer, he checked out the prospect's all-too-public Facebook page. The job seeker had listed his No. 1 interest as "smoking blunts with the homies."

"The guy was completely lacking in judgment and maturity," says Karsh. "He was not ready for prime time. Especially since our company advises people on how to get jobs."

Miscreants and college kids aren't the only ones running into trouble. Their parents are no better. One candidate for a position selling software was a shoo-in for the \$100,000-a-year job. Until the employer took a peek at his MySpace page and saw this:

"40 years old and like 'em younger!"

"He could have been talking about wine," says Tony Beshara, president of Babich and Associates, a job-placement firm in Dallas. But he wasn't, and that's not how it was interpreted.

Anyone applying for a job would be wise to review his or her online persona from an employer's perspective. "I had a candidate who wrote on a religious blog things like 'We're right and they're wrong and they're all going to hell,'" says Beshara. He didn't get the job, because the employer feared he'd spend his days preaching to co-workers. Then there's the guy who got passed over after bragging about how well he did in Vegas. To one potential boss, that screamed "Gambler!"

Yes, religious platitudes are protected speech, and gambling in Vegas is legal. But take note: If the boss has concerns, he probably won't hire you.

And it's not just about getting hired. Chris Skiles, 25, couldn't believe it when his former bosses at a Houston publishing company took exception to what he wrote on a friend's MySpace page. "I left in a very professional manner so I could get a good reference," says Skiles. "Then I wrote a two-line comment, a little ha-ha funny. But I guess if you read the post out of context, it wouldn't seem too funny."

What did his former employer take out of context? This: "Thank God this is my final day in this hellhole. May they all die a horrible, fiery death in the bowels of hell for the rest of eternity! Muah-hahahaha."

"I should have used common sense," Skiles admits, his chances of getting that reference now shot. "Anything that you put online is public information."

This should seem pretty obvious to the generation who grew up on these sites, right? Maybe not, says Bari Norman, PhD, director of Expert Admission, a Manhattan-based college counseling service. When it comes to the Net, she says, young people tend to fall for two traps. One: "Many of them believe it's truly private, and they'll determine who gets to see what, and it will stop there." Wrong! And two: "Their sense of what things will be like in the next stage of their life is not realistic."

In other words, they don't always grasp the fact that first impressions are often last impressions. They figure, I'm a good person, I'm a smart person, and eventually everyone will see that. "Teachers will give you the benefit of the doubt," Norman says. "But employers aren't rushing to do that."

We all make mistakes, but posting a picture of yourself in Power Rangers underwear isn't just a mistake. It shows bad judgment. And companies hate bad judgment.

## **Protecting Your Reputation**

So what do you do about that picture now that you're looking for a job? Take it down! And anything else that could possibly be construed as offensive.

But what if the picture is now on other sites? After all, a friend can post your photo on his Facebook page or someplace less secure. And from there, it can be posted on another site, maybe one run by underwear fetishists. In other words, you're no longer in control of your photo.

This problem is so pervasive that a new industry has cropped up: identity management. "Complete transparency is great for the Internet, but not when it comes to your personal life," says Michael Fertik, CEO of [ReputationDefender](#), a company that is essentially in the Internet sleuthing business.

For \$9.95 a month, it will track down embarrassing material about clients, then organize and analyze the dubious data. Using something called recursive searching, Fertik and his company scour cyberspace for all your pertinent information -- various permutations of your name, job, birthplace, college, friends, hobbies -- until they're convinced they've caught all the troublesome bits. Removing that photo will set you back \$29.95 for every site on which you star.

To remove an item, ReputationDefender tries a novel tactic: It goes to the person running the site or discussion board and asks politely. "It works a lot," says Fertik, sounding surprised himself. When it doesn't, the company works its way up the food chain, asking that person's boss and so on.

And if that doesn't work? "We can get less polite," he says. He means hitting them below the belt -- as in the wallet -- by taking complaints to their advertisers.

This pocketbook warfare tends to seal the deal, but not always. While a student at Yale Law School, for example, one young woman applied to 16 firms for a summer associate position but didn't field a single offer. It turned out that students had spread vicious rumors on a law-school discussion forum. In graphic terms, they claimed she slept around, had STDs and cheated her way into and through law school.

The woman hired Fertik, and ReputationDefender went to work, identifying and removing the offensive material. **AutoAdmit**, home site of the discussion board, wouldn't cooperate. Fertik and his client are suing those who went on the attack. In the meantime, AutoAdmit has lost advertising, and a law firm rescinded a job offer to the former site administrator after hearing about the controversy.

You may think walking the straight and narrow is the solution. Think again. "Half the stuff we deal with is totally unexpected," says Fertik. "Your name can be attached to a photo of some naked girl, usually posted by a jilted lover or former friend, and it will show up in searches of your name."

Defendmyname.com, another identity management company, doesn't remove negative items; it suppresses them. The company floods the Internet with positive information about you until the negative write-ups no longer show up in the top 20 search results. "Most people don't look past the third page," says spokesman Jason Allen.

These new business models serve to remind us that the World Wide Web is still the Wild, Wild West. You've got to be careful out there. Before you shut down your Facebook profile, though, meet Beth Murphy.

After graduating from Notre Dame in 2005, the 25-year-old landed a position in the ad-sales department of an upscale magazine. Her future employers checked out her Facebook profile and saw pictures of her scuba diving, traveling through Italy and helping introduce computers to a small African village. On the flip side, there were photos of her at a tailgate party with a beer in hand and a guy playfully planting a kiss on her cheek. But those pictures didn't bother the employer, who offered her the job anyway. "They were looking for someone who would mesh with their community," she says. "My profile showed I'm a well-rounded person."

Let's face it, most of us have tied one on or done something we regret. It's called being human. But tossing it online is another matter. And for some, it's even become an

addiction, one with a nickname: Crackspace. Young or old, students and execs alike turn into exhibitionists, putting every aspect of their lives on public display.

Yes, it can be freeing, a little naughty -- and totally misunderstood. But should those of us posting pictures of ourselves prancing around in our undies be given a mulligan?

"In a forgiving, kindly environment, yes," says Tony Beshara. "But in a business environment?"

Well, you decide.

### **Cyber-Skeletons and How to Hide Them**

Hiring managers checked out job candidates online and discovered these cyber-skeletons:

- 31% lied about qualifications.
- 24% were linked to criminal behavior.
- 19% bad-mouthed their former company.
- 19% boasted about drinking and doing drugs.
- 15% shared confidential information from former employers.
- 11% posted provocative photographs.
- 8% used an unprofessional screen name.

*Source: CareerBuilder.com*

### **Protect Your Virtual Résumé**

- Don't post anything obnoxious, lewd or risqué, and don't trash former employers.
- Switch your Facebook or MySpace profile to "private."
- Edit what friends write on your "wall." You'll be held accountable for their idiocy.
- Don't write anything on someone else's profile that can come back to haunt you.
- Avoid crazy e-mail addresses. Brad Karsh from JobBound knows of people turned down for jobs because of e-mail addresses like *spicychica2*, *thedirthead* and *imsotired*.
- Google yourself regularly. Better yet, sign up for a Google Alert, which will tell you when your name is mentioned online.

Think of your profile as your public relations tool. Use it to present your accomplishments and creativity, not to settle scores and attack others.