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Savvy Consumer: Services Raise Concerns About Privacy Issues

By Teresa McUSIC

The next time you give out your phone number, be aware – you're also giving easy access to directions to your house via the Internet.

A new service provided by the search engine Google allows consumers to plug a telephone number (minus the parentheses and hyphens) directly into its search box.

The next screen shows the owner of the phone number's name and address with city, state and ZIP code.

While this information can be found with a phone number on several Web sites, Google has gone one step further – providing two links to instant maps to your house from Yahoo! Maps and Mapquest.

While the service may be a convenience to some, others view it as an alarming invasion of privacy.

"The information is out there," said Ari Schwartz, associate director of the Center for Democracy and Technology in Washington D.C. "We've discussed reverse lookups in the past. But this will make it so much more widely available."

More vulnerable members of society, including children, the elderly, domestic violence victims and anyone else wanting to remain more anonymous on the Web should get online and opt out of these Web sites, Schwartz advised.

Google, the largest Internet search engine in terms of market share, did not return phone calls or e-mails to its press hotline. The company does offer an "opt out" form online for consumers to get their personal information taken out of its phone book database. After entering your phone number in its search box and getting the search page, click on "phonebook results," then look for a link to a "phone book removal form."

Residential listings can fill out a form with their name, city, state and phone number that will take the number off the list within 48 hours, according to the Web page.

Apparently the company is interested in feedback on the service; it asks at the end of the form whether you are requesting removal because of an inaccurate phone number, privacy concerns or “other.”

The company states that filling out the form will mean your residential listing will not appear in Google for any phonebook search, even those using your name instead of your phone number.

It adds that filling out the form will not keep you off of six other Web sites that offer reverse lookups, however. Those include the Anywho, Switchboard.com, Whitepages.com, Reverse Phone Directory, PhoneNumber.com and Smartpages.com.

Removal from those directories can be more complicated.

Anywho, for instance, requires you to call a phone number it provides from the phone with the number you wish to remove or write your request and mail it. Switchboard.com didn't have any “opt out” information available.

And at most of these sites, the information doesn't stop with your address and a map to your house. Many of these sites also offer background checks and searches for public records for a fee on the person identified through a telephone number, name or address. Through these searches, everything from criminal and civil records to property and licensing records can disclose further personal information.

If you are concerned about giving out your home phone number, an alternative would be to give out a cell phone number, which is not included in these databases.

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