

## **Online Safety**

Social sites such as Facebook, My Space, Twitter, ect. are becoming more and more popular. They are a great way to reconnect, keep in touch and meet new people. But how do you protect yourself when on these largely open social sites? Don't post information about yourself online that you don't want the whole world to know. The Internet is the world's biggest information exchange: many more people could see your information than you intend, including your employer, the police and strangers, some of whom could be dangerous. Social networking sites have added a new factor to the "friends of friends" equation. By providing information about yourself and using blogs, chat rooms, email, or instant messaging, you can communicate, either within a limited community, or with the world at large. But while the sites can increase your circle of friends, they also can increase your exposure to people who have less-than-friendly intentions. You've heard the stories about people who were stalked by someone they met online, had their identity stolen, or had their computer hacked. Here are some general tips on how to stay safe when socializing on public websites.

- 👤 Think about how different sites work before deciding to join a site. Some sites will allow only a defined community of users to access posted content; others allow anyone and everyone to view postings.
- 👤 Think about keeping some control over the information you post. Consider restricting access to your page to a select group of people, for example, your friends, your team, your community groups, or your family.
- 👤 Keep your personal information to yourself. Don't post your Social Security number, address, home phone number, or bank and credit card account numbers — and don't post other people's information, either. Be cautious about posting information that could be used to locate you offline.
- 👤 In dating sites make sure your screen name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your full name, your age, or your part of town where you live. Even if you think your screen name makes you anonymous, it doesn't take a genius to combine clues to figure out who you are and where you can be found.

- 👤 Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing, and knowing, about you. Many people can see your page.
- 👤 Remember that once you post information online, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.
- 👤 Consider your photo. It can be altered and broadcast in ways you may not be happy about. If you do post one, ask yourself whether it's one you would display in the living room.
- 👤 Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you're dealing with.
- 👤 Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person, even if it's for a business transaction. Before you decide to meet someone, do your research! See what background you can dig up through online search engines. If you decide to meet them, be smart about it! Meet in a public place, during the day, with friends you trust. Tell someone where you're going, and when you expect to be back.

☛ Trust your gut if you have suspicions. If you feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, tell someone you trust and report it to the police and the social networking site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.

Andrew Wooten is the president of S.A.F.E. (Safety Awareness Firearms Education), and has been in the safety and security industry for the past 24 years. Visit the S.A.F.E. website, [www.justbesafe.com](http://www.justbesafe.com), for more information.