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**By: Amy Hoak**

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## **Getting to Know Online Background Checks**

CHICAGO — It's the modern-day boy-meets-girl story: chatting online turns into chatting on the phone which turns into an in-person date over coffee. But before a relationship has time to blossom, some online daters are taking an extra step to make sure their possible soul mate isn't hiding anything — including a felony conviction.

In these days of connecting through the Internet, more Americans are turning to background screenings to make sure they're not getting involved with a bad egg. After all, checking someone out by typing his or her name in a search engine will only reveal so much.

And it's not only daters who are doing a little digging into the past. Parents are taking a microscope to the records of babysitters and coaches. Housekeepers, too, are getting a closer look before they're allowed in.

Individuals are even conducting background checks on their own histories, correcting inaccuracies before an employer pulls a report or adding extra assurance to parents before being trusted with their children.

"It's up to you as the parent, as the consumer, as the citizen to do your homework," said Robert Siciliano, a personal security consultant and CEO of IDTheftSecurity.com. While gut instincts are one part of the puzzle when meeting an individual, "anyone who you bring into your personal or professional life, that you're going to be put in a trusted position" should probably be given a background screening."

Screening services range in price according to their scope, and companies that offer them online have grown in number over the past few years, Siciliano said. A few of the biggies are Abika, Intelius and MyPublicInfo.

But the industry is still largely unregulated and there isn't any standardization on how screenings are conducted, Siciliano said, putting the responsibility on consumers to make sure that they know what they're paying for when they request a report. Plus, due to the

unavailability of some criminal records — as well as human error — omissions and inaccuracies can pop up when companies scour national public and private databases.

Even Robert Mather, CEO of MyBackgroundCheck.com, a service that has been in business since 1994, said that mistakes — although perhaps rare — aren't unheard of.

"We do close to 10,000 of them (background checks) a day and I would say 99% of them are accurate," he said. "But still, that's a lot of inaccurate ones."

### **Not just for CEOs anymore**

The volume of screenings done by individuals started to take off in 2003 or 2004, said Ed Petersen, executive vice president, sales and marketing at Intelius, a firm that does checks.

"People really thought that background checks were reserved for the CEO of the company," he said. But as consumers become more aware that a background check could be conducted for \$50 or so more of them began requesting the service, he said.

"Awareness has not only risen, but people buy more than once," he said, adding that repeat customers investigate the backgrounds of other individuals in their lives. "Our pitch has never been 'the sky is falling' ... I think it's certainly a confirm-your-gut type of thing."

Some online meeting places are doing the legwork before people ever make a connection.

For example, Sittercity, a Web site that helps parents connect with babysitters, allows sitters to provide the site with information for a background screening. A LexusNexus search is then done on that sitter, and the results are made available to parents looking for a match, said Genevieve Thiers, Sittercity's founder and CEO, in an e-mail interview.

"Trust is what we sell," Thiers said. "Being able to allow our sitters to run checks on themselves did so much in terms of helping parents to trust finding sitters over the Internet."

But there's a caveat: "The only trouble with our system, ironically, is that our checks are 'too good.' We search for traffic violations in addition to ID checks, criminal violations and sexual abuse, and we have some excellent sitters that have one small mark on their record due to running a red light, or something similar," she said. "Our site is quarantining them, and that's not necessarily what we want."

The online dating site True.com also is known for doing criminal and marriage checks on applicants; the site goes after those who misrepresent themselves, sometimes taking legal action, said Herb Vest, True.com's CEO.

"We reject about 5% of the applicants because they are married or criminals," he said.

A warning on the site reads: "We can't guarantee that criminals can't get on our site, but we can guarantee that they'll be sorry they did."

The layer of security is what draws many to the site, Vest said. And it's not surprising: According to a report released by the Pew Internet & American Life Project last year, most Internet users believe that many online daters lie about their marital status.

And then there are people who are doing screenings on themselves as a way to know what an employer will see if such a check is performed, Mather said. Volunteers, including those who work with children, are also having them done.

"They're so worried, rightfully so, about one bad apple around the kids that volunteers are running their own background checks," he said. American Red Cross volunteers, for example, use his service for background screenings.

In fact, the burden of doing a check should be on the individual seeking employment as a sitter, for example, or the person who wants a chance as a romantic partner, he believes. Mather thinks background checks should resemble credit checks, in that no one should be able to do a screening without permission of the individual.

### **Before you buy**

Not all background screenings are created equally, and before plunking down money for a glimpse at the background of an individual, or yourself, it's wise to do some research.

While none of the services are without flaws, Siciliano still recommends doing screenings for strangers who will be put in a sensitive position.

"Asking a security professional if he recommends a background check is like asking an auto mechanic if he recommends oil changes every 3,000 miles," he said.

But before hiring someone to start digging, do some homework. Below are some factors to consider while choosing a firm for a background check:

Ask for recommendations. As with many services, it's probably a good idea to get the name of a company from someone you know and trust, Siciliano said. In this case, it might be an employer or human-resources professional who works with screening companies in the hiring of employees.

Think business. In fact, it might not be a bad idea to hire a company that tends to target the corporate world than the "snoop type sites that are set up for the general public," Siciliano said. If corporate America is using these firms, you can probably assume that it's an established agency that does decent work, he said.

Know exactly what you're buying. "There's such a huge variety of checks that you can do now: statewide checks, driving checks, identity checks, national checks. It's important to

ask when someone says that they do a national check exactly what that check includes," Thiers said.

Know the limits. Even then, understand that information about individuals is usually unavailable until they hit the age of 18, and even then some states will only keep information at the county or state level, Thiers added. To get at information that doesn't surface in national searches, Intelius offers a "court runner network," Petersen said.

Get proper identification. While a name and date of birth will suffice to get a background check rolling, it's best to have an individual's Social Security number to submit to the company doing the screening, Siciliano said. That helps prevent screening the wrong person.

Test it out. Mather recommends looking for a Better Business Bureau seal on the company's Web site. He also suggests calling and/or e-mailing the company to make sure it's possible to get a quick response.

Watch the price. It's probably not necessary to spend more than \$100 for a background check; some companies offer them for as little as \$29, Siciliano said. For a thorough check, it might not be a bad idea to do a few checks from different companies, as an "investment to your personal security," he added.