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More people become Internet gumshoes, checking lovers, caregivers -- even themselves

CHICAGO (MarketWatch) -- 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. [Visit Siciliano's site.](#)

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. [Visit MyBackgroundCheck.com](http://MyBackgroundCheck.com).

"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. Visit Intelius.com.

"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 LexusNexis 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. Visit Sittercity.com.

"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. Visit True.com.

"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."

