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**Joe O'Connor**

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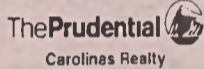
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We all agree, Joe is the one to call for your real estate needs.



## ePlay

### Trust Me

by Rachel Gold  
Special to Q-Notes

If you're an active Internet participant, it's likely that you get a lot of advertising mail and a number of action alerts on a regular basis. How do you determine what to get involved in and what to pass over? For example, after the Vermont same-sex marriage case, an alert went out via email asking people to call the state's government and voice their support of same-sex marriage for Vermont. A few days later, a Vermont-based gay and lesbian civil rights group sent out another alert asking people from outside of the state to please stop calling because their input not only wouldn't make a difference, but the volume of out-of-state calls was annoying government officials.

On top of deciding what mail to respond to, when you're "out" on the web looking for information, how can you tell what to trust? Many universities' libraries offer guidelines about Internet credibility. To find an extensive list, search Yahoo using the phrase "evaluating Internet sources." But don't worry, I'm not going to make you do all that work, here are my top picks: The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire offers a basic and easy-to-remember list of the "Ten C's" at [www.uwec.edu/Admin/Library/Guides/tencs.html](http://www.uwec.edu/Admin/Library/Guides/tencs.html).

If you want to get your hands around Internet credibility, play with the "Internet Detective," a program written by the staff at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology at the University of Bristol ([sosig.esrc.bris.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html](http://sosig.esrc.bris.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html)). Another extensive site is "The Virtual Chase: A Research Site for Legal Professionals" which offers an information quality page at [www.virtualchase.com/quality](http://www.virtualchase.com/quality).

*My own system is a quick three-point list: Credentials, Filters and Sources.*

**Credentials:** Examine the author of the piece and the site. Who is the author? Understand that on the Internet it's easy for people to make up their credentials. Anyone can bill themselves as a webmaster, an expert, or a consultant. It's harder to come up with a Ph.D., but even that doesn't guarantee that you're getting great information. Look for people with solid credentials from respectable institutions. (Quick tip: it's like reading food labels in the grocery store—if you can't tell what it is, it's probably not good for you.) When looking at the site, pay attention to whether it's a .com (a for-profit company) a .org (usually non-profit), .edu (an educational institution), .gov (governmental). This will tell you how the information is being filtered.

**Filters:** Everything we read is filtered, first through the mind of the author and then usually through an editor. If you understand the perspective of that editor, you will understand how the information was selected. Don't ask "was this filtered?" ask "how was this filtered?"

Most sites offer information about themselves. The quickest way to find this is to scroll to the bottom of the first page of the site and look for copyright notices and for a link to an "about us" section. If the site doesn't offer this information, you may want to leave it for one that does. (Advanced tip: if you're really curious about the origin of a site that doesn't identify itself, you can look up the person who registered the domain name. Network Solutions, the company that runs Internet registry, offers a directory at [www.networksolutions.com](http://www.networksolutions.com) called "whois." It will give you a name, address and telephone number.)

**Sources:** Sites that provide you with information that isn't original should tell you where that information came from. If you can't tell where the information came from, disregard it. Even if it sounds plausible, you have no reason to trust it and no reason to waste your time on it with all the good information out there. (In this way, it's like dating: set your standards high and don't waste time on anything or anyone who falls below them.)

When exploring Internet credibility, especially where sales and profits are concerned, it's important to understand another set of rules: those that run the gray matter in our heads. Often Internet sites (in addition to television, radio and print advertisers) use manipulative techniques to provoke specific responses in us. Psychology Professor Robert Cialdini describes these as "weapons of influence" in his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. There are three in particular that can disrupt our Internet use:

1. **Authority and Liking:** We automatically tend to lend more weight to people with long strings of titles, fancy credentials, and impressive-sounding biographies. We also tend to trust people that we like, people who are attractive and who seem like us. Trust your gut, and don't believe someone just because they sound important or friendly.

2. **Social Proof:** Especially when we're uncertain, we tend to do what other people are doing. This is one of the strengths of Internet counters that show you how many thousands of other people have visited a particular site; you'll tend to think that many people can't be wrong.

3. **Scarcity:** We give more weight to information that is hard to get to and items that are hard to find. Don't purchase something because time is running out, and don't believe something because it was censored or because someone (allegedly) didn't want you to hear it or because you're (possibly) one of few people privileged enough to get it. The bottom line: take time with information but don't waste time. Practice sifting through information using the standards above or some of your own making. Very soon you'll find yourself speeding up and automatically discarding information that doesn't fit your criteria and your surfing will be faster and more powerful. ▼

[This is our final installment of ePlay, a column devoted to the enjoyment of technology and the empowerment of its users. Rachel Gold is no longer writing the column and is pursuing new career directions. Send comments about this column to [editor@q-notes.com](mailto:editor@q-notes.com). email Rachel at [MailePlay@aol.com](mailto:MailePlay@aol.com).]



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Q-Notes wishes to thank its guest writers for their contributions.