

THE GEEK CORNER

By Dan Law

This month, I have suffered from a form of writer's block. It's not that I have nothing to say or new technology to write about, but rather there are too many interesting technology news items that interest me, and trying to decide which topic to discuss can sometimes overwhelm the process. So, this month I have chosen to write about friends.

In this busy, crazy world, too many of us turn to our computers to help us save time, money and to find friends without having to leave our home or work. Some of us are trying to find long lost friends whom we lost contact with. Some are trying to find dates or just someone nice to talk to. Most people turn to the many social networking companies like Facebook, which can be found on the Internet. Facebook can be a wonderful tool to use.

Over the years, I have located long-lost Navy buddies, old classmates and other friends I used to socialize with. The most convenient way to find them has been through Facebook's search engine. My treasured finds have included cousins, nephews, nieces and even relatives I've never met who live in the old country. But, are all these people who they claim to be, and even if they are, should I trust them?

I opened my Facebook account about six or seven years ago, and according to statistics, I belong to the fastest growing age group joining these days, grandparents. Joining Facebook can seem to be a very simple, easy task; just fill in a few blocks of information, and wham, you are a member.

Initially, you don't have to give any information, but doing so can help you find your friends and start talking. Step one of the sign-up invites you to enter an e-mail address or Skype contact name. Facebook tries to dig out your contacts automatically. You can enter information about your school, university or employer to find people who match up. You can insert a picture of yourself, either an existing photo (even one that is many years old) or one taken with your webcam. It's a good idea to add a photo, especially if you have a common name. Someone trying to pick between all the people with the same name will want to be sure they find you.

I could write a couple thousand words, easily, about how to deal with the sign-up process, but what I really want to discuss is what not to do or what to think about when you are placing information and photos on this social network. First, remember that any photo you add to your online photo book will suddenly belong to the Internet, and even though you choose later to delete one or more, the photo actually never completely disappears. You may not be able to see it anymore without some serious digging, but it will forever exist in someone's database, so be sure it won't embarrass you later on.

How much information should you provide? This can be answered by another question: How much personal info would you give a total stranger you just met on the street? You should never provide any information your bank, credit card company, mortgage broker or any other financial institution would ask to aid them in identifying you as being the person you claim to be. You should give your birth date, but not the year. It's okay to list schools you attended, but avoid giving your birth place, your mother's maiden name, your grandfather's occupation, the name of your first pet, etc., just as you should never publish your social security number, the name of your banks or their account numbers. Very often you will see institutions you do business with offering incentives to their customers if they will hit the "LIKE" button, which will give them access to and the opportunity to advertise on your page, but *Do Not Do It!* By letting your bank

or credit union advertise on your page, you send out a big red flag saying here's where to start looking to steal my money! You should avoid any information that would make it easy for a total stranger to steal your identity or your life's savings.

By default, Facebook shares quite a lot about you. If you fill in loads of personal information, anyone browsing your account could come across it. At the top right hand corner of the interface page, click the little downward pointing arrow, and select privacy settings. Click "Edit" settings next to "How you connect" and select whom you want to be able to see information about your account. I recommend you do not select "Public" but rather select "Friends." The only part of my page that's public is my name, which anyone can find when they are searching, but all my information, postings and photos are restricted to my friends only.

Be selective about what you post. Social networks like Facebook can create a false sense of intimacy because you're communicating with friends. Even with a private profile, your friends' accounts could still get hacked or someone could be peeking over their shoulders, so it's smart to err on the side of privacy.

In general, Facebook is quite safe. It's great for keeping in touch with friends and family. But, once in awhile, you'll see a post that looks a little out of the ordinary. Maybe someone you know is offering you a great deal, such as a free iPad. Maybe they're posting something that doesn't seem like them. It pays to be wary since it's possible, though not common, that people will exploit security holes in Facebook to promote sketchy services. These are usually sorted fairly quickly by Facebook, but to be sure, don't click on anything that looks suspicious.

On another note, Facebook is also a great place to open a free account for your neighborhood or church social club, such as a golfing or gardening club. Once it is set up, you get all your members to "friend request" your club page, and thereafter, every time you post some club news or upcoming event, Facebook will automatically notify all of your members who are accepted friends, and they can all communicate with each other on this club page.

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