

OPEN LETTER

Social networkers: Take note, follow precautions

By Suzy Weinland, Rinksider Editor

In this fast-growing era of internet marketing and social media networking, not only is it difficult to keep up with the newest trend of the week, but it also takes some work to protect your software, private information and now, email address books.

While searching sites for social networking related information, I came across a few Web articles about phishing, scamming and the newest trend: contact scraping. While phishing refers to fake Web sites masquerading as true sites to glean personal information, contact scraping is done by Web sites that actually exist, according to Peter Cassidy, secretary general of the Anti-Phishing Working Group, a nonprofit organization with representatives from law enforcement, industry and government. "They're using your good name to establish a connection."

How does this happen? Well, one online writer, Alena Tugend, shared in June, 2009 that she had received separate e-mail messages from two people she knew, both asking her to "click and see their photos on a social networking site called Tagged."

After typing in her e-mail address and password to see the photos, she realized the photos didn't actually exist and that she had just "unwittingly given the site 'permission'

to go through my entire e-mail contact list and send a message to everyone, inviting them to see my 'photos.'"

Next, she started receiving e-mails back from people agreeing to be her friend. As she sent around apologies, several contacts told her they'd received similar e-mails from other Web sites, such as MyLife.com (formerly Reunion.com) and desktopdating.com.

What happened? Tugend contacted Michael Argast, a security analyst with Sophos, an Internet security company based in Boston, and found out that this has been going on for some time — perhaps a year at this point.

According to Argast, once you enter your credentials, like your user name or password, the company sweeps through your contact list and sends everyone an invitation to join the site. Argast explained that it's a chain mail psychology.

Argast said that companies benefit because this helps them expand their user population, which they can use to attract potential investors or advertisers. "Whether those users are willing participants, or people like me, is another question," wrote Tugend.

Fortunately, top-ranked social networking sites, such as Facebook, are straightforward and ask if you want to share information about your friends. But "others are far less scrupulous," said Argast, adding that

contact scraping can take many forms.

In the case of Tagged, Tugend's friends "received a perky e-mail saying: 'Alina has added you as a friend on Tagged. Is Alina your friend?' Then you click on yes or no.

Even more insidiously, it adds, 'Please respond or Alina may think you said no,' with a sad-face icon next to it."

"It's easier for these sites to get information from Web-based e-mail accounts, like Hotmail and Gmail, than from local Internet provider services, like Verizon or Comcast, but nothing is absolutely secure," Argast stated.

Tugend contacted Tagged, and was told by Greg Tseng, founder and chief executive officer, that it was a "software glitch" and had been taken care of. "This business lives and dies by the good will of people," he acknowledged, adding, "We took immediate steps to rectify this problem and improve the user experience on Tagged."

Tseng also told Tugend that Tagged is the third largest social networking site after Facebook and MySpace, with 16 million active users and 80 million registered users.

A colleague of Tugend's received a similar "invitation" from an acquaintance inviting him to join MyLife.com about a



month after her experience with Tagged. "He clicked on 'yes,' and started receiving e-mail from people on his contact list thanking him for inviting them," Tugend said.

Argast offered this advice: "First, don't supply your user name and password from one site — say Yahoo or Gmail — to a third-party site. And don't use the same user names and passwords for different sites."

Can't remember all those different usernames and passwords? Tugend shared, "There are programs or tools that provide an easy way to remember multiple passwords, like 1Password, Sxipper, Keychain or Firefox Password Manager. You can also set up a separate email account for registrations, which won't have your contact list."

"Second, be alert," warned Argast. "Look closely at the invitation. Are there misspellings, for example? Does something just not feel right? If so, e-mail your friend asking to if he meant to send you the query."

WOULD YOU WANT YOUR CHILDREN TO WEAR THEM?

A good way to do a quick check of your rental fleet is to ask yourself, "Would I want my children to wear them?"

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Are they good enough and safe enough for your children?



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