Shop smart

"USING ENCRYPTION on the Internet is the equivalent of arranging for an armoured car to deliver credit-card information from someone living in a cardboard box to someone living on a park bench" – Gene Spafford

When buying products and services on the Internet, often the only thing that you have to have to judge a company by is its Web site. Unfortunately, appearances can be deceptive. Anyone with an HTML editor and a measure of artistic flair can create a professional-looking Web site these days. This makes it difficult to judge if the company you're about to send your credit card details to is a reputable business or some garage operation that will vanish back into the ether as soon as it has your money. The following are some simple measures that will help you pick the difference.

add to basket

How popular is the Web site?

This is particularly important if what you're buying is advertising space. If you are listing an item for sale, for example, you want to be confident that the site you have chosen will be attracting more traffic than alternative Web sites. If you visit the Alexa site (**www.alexa.com**), you can enter a Web site address and see how it ranks compared to others.

The search engine Google (**www.google.com**) rates Web sites with a "PageRank" score from 0 to 10 depending on how many other sites link to them. This is an indicator of how well regarded they are as a source of information by other Web site owners. To see the PageRank score for each Web site you visit, you can download the Google Toolbar plug-in for Internet Explorer from toolbar.google.com.

As a general rule of thumb, a PageRank of 2-4 is acceptable, a PageRank of 5 or higher should be regarded as a respectable resource and a PageRank of 8+ is a leading source of information. As a guide, at the time of writing www.microsoft.com has a PageRank of 10.

Has anyone had bad experiences with this company?

Google also maintains an archive of Usenet discussion forums from the past 20 years (over 700 million messages in all). Searching groups.google.com for a company name may reveal customer accounts of both positive and negative experiences with that company and any allegations of spamming or other unethical practices.

News archives

For Australian companies in particular, interesting snippets from the print media may be revealed with a search through the archives of News Ltd (**www.news.com.au**) or Fairfax (**www.f2.com.au**). Although payment is required to access the full text of articles, if you see headlines appearing such as "<company x> Directors Charged With Fraud" it may be a fair indication to steer clear. If you are a member of the Australian Institute of Management, your membership includes access to **www.aimnet.com.au** – which has a large archive of news items and press releases from a variety of local and international sources.

Financial reports

Financial data, risk assessment and other details of both Australian and overseas companies can be obtained (for a fee) from information providers such as Dun & Bradstreet (**www.dnb.com.au**). Of all of the methods described in this article, this is the most expensive way to obtain information about a company – and would certainly be an excessive precaution for a simple retail purchase. However, it would be a prudent measure if you are considering a more long-term supply arrangement (such as outsourcing the hosting of your corporate Web site).

Who really owns the Web site?

As mentioned in last month's Netsmarts column, a number of successful Internet cons have involved setting up phony Web sites to trade on the good name of established and reputable businesses. So before you entrust your credit card details to a Web site that you don't know, make sure to check that it is the genuine article using the domain name register through a site such as **www.betterwhois.com**. If the Web site ownership details look suspicious, give the company a ring to check that you are at the correct Web site address – or keep your credit card firmly in your pocket.

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