



Florida Public Service Commission

Consumer Bulletin

E. Leon Jacobs, Jr., Chairman



PRIVACY

Advances in computer technology have made it possible for detailed personal information about the public to be compiled and shared more easily and cheaply than ever. While technology offers benefits to society as a whole, your privacy in the electronic world requires your attention. For example, it is easier for law enforcement to track down criminals, for banks to prevent fraud, and for consumers to learn more about new products and services, allowing them to make better-informed purchasing decisions. At the same time, wider access to personal information requires all of us -- companies, associations, government agencies and consumers -- to take precautions to protect against the misuse of that information.

In a recent survey conducted by the National Consumers League, more Americans say they are very concerned about the loss of personal privacy (56 percent) than are concerned about health care (54 percent), crime (53 percent) or taxes (52 percent). Many consumers are worried about not having control of their personal information, and this keeps them from taking full advantage of everything the Internet offers.

The Florida Public Service Commission (PSC) wants to help you protect yourself and your family by informing you about privacy issues and the Internet. If you would like more information on Internet privacy, please contact the Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Response Center at **1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357)**, or write to **Consumer Response Center, Federal Trade Commission, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20580**. You may also contact the PSC at **1-800-342-3552** or by e-mail at **contact@psc.state.fl.us**. You may also visit the PSC's Web site at **<http://www.floridapsc.com>**.

The Internet is a great place to get information, communicate with others and shop. But do you know what happens to the personal information you send through the Internet? And how can you be sure your children are safe online? Here are some basic tips that will help you take control of your privacy and security while enjoying the benefits the Internet offers.

1. Keep your passwords secret. With your password, anyone can access your account and pretend to be you. Protect your passwords as you would the Personal Identification Number to your bank cards. Be especially suspicious if someone claiming to be with the company for which you have a password asks for it. They should already have it.

2. Email isn't private. Email is like a postcard -- it's possible for someone who has access to your computer system, other than the person it's addressed to, to read it. Don't discuss things you consider to be very sensitive or send information such as credit card numbers through email.

3. Know about "cookies." Cookies are bits of electronic information that can be placed on your computer when you visit Web sites. They show what you do at that site, and they also may track other Web sites that you visit. Cookies are used to identify visitors for customer service, customizing information, marketing and other purposes. You can set your browser or use special software to detect cookies and choose whether and when to allow them. Look at a Web site's privacy policy to see what it says about cookies.

4. Set rules for "chat room" chatter. Teach your children to treat strangers in a chat room -- an online area that allows users to communicate in real time by typing and posting messages that others can read and/or respond to -- just as they would treat them on the street. Since a chat room is open to everyone, it is not a good place for children or adults to provide their address, financial information that they wouldn't want strangers to see. Tell your children to inform you immediately if someone online makes them feel uncomfortable.

5. Check on your children when they're online. Put the computer in your living room, den or some other place where you can see what children are doing online. Spend time with children while they are surfing the Internet and explain to them that not all places on the Net are designed for younger users.

E. Leon Jacobs, Jr. is the Chairman of the Florida Public Service Commission. The PSC sets the rates utility companies charge for natural gas, electric and telephone service within the state. In 36 counties, it sets the price you pay for the water you drink, if your water company is privately-owned.