ITS Communications

What is Personally Identifiable Information (PII)?

Understanding that nothing on the Internet is truly private, and that your personal information is valuable, is your first line of defense from online predators. The question is, how much information is out there about me?

Your information is actively being collected. Your computer's technical configurations, the files you've downloaded, addresses of websites you've visited, your email address; owners of web sites can view all of these things and more. Information can be found anywhere – from social-network or website accounts, contest registration information, or online retailers. Clearly, there are a lot of ways for online criminals to out about you, if they are so inclined.

How is my information collected?

Even though you might not notice, you surrender much of your information voluntarily. Whether you're doing work, playing games, or just surfing around, you've likely input your personal information in a variety of places. Information is being collected every time you:

- Fill out a registration form to download a game, program, or plug-in
- Fill out an online-marketing survey
- Subscribe to a newsletter
- Join an online community
- Create a personal profile to meet others with similar interests
- Take an online personality or IQ test
- Enter an online contest
- Send an e-card
- Take advantage of a free item

Remember – many websites collect personal information, and some more transparent about it than others. In many cases, a website will require information before granting access, such as your full name, age, address, telephone number, and personal preferences. Others collect information in more subtle ways: for example, a website might make a record of your Internet Protocol, or IP, address. This address is unique to your computer or mobile device, and can be traced back to you.

How is my information used?

Once an organization has obtained your information, they can use, share, or even abuse it. For example, it might sell the information to a third party, who will then use that information to convince you to spend money, sign up for a service, or give up more information.

Employers can access social networking sites to find out about you, so think about what your posting. Depending on your privacy settings, friends of friends may have access to your online profile and can find out what you are doing every day. The Internet is so vast, with so many entry points, that it's impossible to truly determine whose hands your information has fallen into.

What Should You Do?
Here are some tips on how you can protect your personal information:
1. Make sure that you are dealing with a real company before providing your email address.
2. Always read website-privacy policies or statements before submitting personal information.
3. Reduce the amount of information you provide and don't provide information that is not required.
4. Consider making online profiles private so people you don't know can't access information.
5. Do not respond to spam in any way. Never assume that anything you post online is completely private.
6. Trust your instincts: Ultimately, you are responsible for the information, photos, and videos that you post.

Information Security & Privacy is Everybody's Business