Family Website: Warm and Fuzzy or Downright Scary

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INTRODUCTION

Sophie had just finished another upsetting phone call with her cousin Abigail. Abigail lived 600 miles away but lived much closer than many of Sophie's other relatives, in fact the entire family lived all over the US and a few relatives lived in Europe and Asia. Abigail was very excited about her newest attempt to re-unite the family ties and 'bring us all closer'.

Abigail was definitely the cheerleader and chief organizer for family events and was in regular contact with everyone. She kept everyone up-to-date on new family members, promotions, anniversaries and other mile-stone events. Her efforts were very much appreciated by the entire family.

Her newest project was an online family site. This would include posting of family photos of the extended family members on a website along with historical and background information such as date of birth, the city, state and country they were born in and where they currently resided. She also wanted to highlight monthly milestones such as new births, engagements, anniversaries (especially the big ones), job changes and promotions. The website would be through a facebook account and would be secured with Secure Socket Layer (SSL). Abigail also felt that this site could also serve to track the family history and that eventually a family tree could be developed. Some family members did not agree with the idea, some favored it and some were very opposed to the idea.

BACKGROUND FOR THE SITE ACCORDING TO ABIGAIL

In the past Abigail had made CDs with family photos, short stories and information on what members were up to and had mailed them out to family members. This had taken a lot of time and expense on Abigail's part and there were always updates so Abigail had stopped doing this. Abigail felt that a website would be much easier to update and everyone would have immediate access. Family members could also post their own updates.

Abigail did not have a technical background but insisted that the Secure Socket Layer approach, which is a protocol for encrypting information over the Internet was, according to a friend of hers with a 'very technical background' absolutely 100% secure.

Abigail was very adept at using Facebook and had had a Facebook account of her own since 2006.

SOPHIE'S CONCERNS ABOUT THE ONLINE SITE

Sophie had had extended conversations with family members who were either concerned about the security of the site, and some of who were downright against the idea. Some were lukewarm to the idea and thought that Sophie could oversee the technical side of it to make sure it was secure. Sophie would have been happy to do this but she was in her senior year at college with several major projects due for her classes. She was also working 25 hours per week to bring in some income to support herself and supplement her student loans. In addition she was also starting a job search and interviews with companies in pursuit of a career in information technology. Also computer networks and internet security was not an area that she had studied in depth and would be in a bit over her head.

Later that day Sophie, who was pursuing an undergraduate degree in Information Technology at a technical college, approached one of her professors with questions on Internet safety. She was told that no matter how secure a site was it would always be possible to hack into it. And that establishing a high level of security would not only be costly but would require a fair amount of work and would have to be consistently monitored. Sophie and her professor also discussed the issue of identity theft and how the information on this family website could be used for identity theft.

SOPHIE'S CHOICES

1. Enlist the family members who opposed the online site to all talk to Abigail and tell her they were too concerned about the security and privacy issues to support her idea.
2. Develop a plan for increased security, which would probably fall on Sophie's shoulders as she was the one pursuing a technical degree. And if security issues did arise Sophie would then be the one to blame.
3. Find an alternative that would be secure and still reflect the spirit of Abigail's idea of 'bringing us all closer'.

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL (Forthcoming)

The Instructor's Manual will focus on:

1. The Ethics issues involved with posting personal information for family members on the Internet.
2. Identity theft and how the posted information could be used for identity theft
3. The issues and techniques involved in securing a website.