I received an impressive-sounding alert one morning that announced that someone had posted information about me anonymously at <http://www.word-of-mouth.org>: “Our automated system has sent this email to you because someone just submitted a "Word-of-Mouth Report" at our website regarding the person or persons that use this email address: mkabay@norwich.edu.”

The site simply reported that some anonymous person who has “known me well” “for ten years or more” posted some unspecified information about me. The FAQ at the site went into much detail about how no defamatory material about anyone is stored on their servers. The trick is, though, that to obtain the gossip about you (or anyone else) from the anonymous person who is supposedly waiting to divulge all, you have to pay the owners (oh sorry, to “HELP SUPPORT WORD-OF-MOUTH.ORG”) $19.97 a year to contact the anonymous gossip.

Something’s not kosher here.

* Any system that provides anonymous information is inevitably going to spread misinformation, either because of incompetence or because of malice. Rumors are usually wrong in substance or in detail, whether they’re spread through conversation at the water-cooler, through phone calls, via e-mail, or through a for-profit system using anonymized e-mail. Anonymity breeds irresponsibility.

* This site is registered as an ORG (reserved for non-profit organizations) and yet it charges money to users to find out what rumors are being circulated about them through its auspices. According to the FAQ, “The purpose of this site is to spread the valuable information source known as ‘word-of-mouth’ on a level never before known in the history of mankind, as a result helping the people of our world to make better decisions about the people they meet and know.” Wouldn’t one expect such an ostensibly laudable site to make the rumors available to their subjects free of charge for verification?

* Mitch Ratcliffe points out that in the USA, at least, privacy principles generally establish that a data subject should have access to information about themselves; he writes, “This is reprehensible abuse of identity and I’d like to find a lawyer to help take the guy behind it to court.”

* Why would anyone want to post positive information anonymously? Well, as Michael Pugliese points out in a discussion thread, it’s a perfect opportunity to post anonymous puffery about oneself for business purposes. So if anyone is stupid enough to rely on anonymous testimonials, they may deserve what they get. But who among friends and colleagues who “know the subject well” would ever post anything to such a site in the first place without communicating with the subject first?

* There is no way for a victim of defamation to force removal of an entry in the database. The
entry simply lists the anonymized contact point for someone who is spreading defamation, but there’s no way to locate that defamer and no mechanism for forcing the company running the rumor mill to remove the contact point for that person.

* As pointed out by a blogger named Chris (I was unable to find his or her full name), it’s very peculiar that anyone would be willing to respond time after time to individual requests for the information supposedly available through the anonymized e-mail. What kind of person wants to respond to dozens, hundreds or thousands of requests for gossip? What’s the motive?

* Larry Seltzer at the Security Supersite wrote about this site at the end of May 2003. He provides links to discussions of the people who have been running this scam for several years under a variety of domain names; several correspondents stated that when some victims pay their fees and ask for the anonymous rumors, they receive no reports at all—they’re “lost” or “unavailable.”

* The Urban Legends Reference Pages have an entry for this site <http://66.165.133.65/computer/internet/wordofmouth.asp> where the author warns, “...Word-of-Mouth.Org... attempts to lure the gullible into joining their ‘service’ by spamming Internet users with ominous-sounding exhortations.... But only a sucker would pay to find out what anonymous people are saying about him, since anybody (including the people operating the service) could be generating the gossip.”

Bottom line: ignore the alerts, add the domain to your spam-blocking list, warn your employees about the scam in your next security newsletter, and be prepared to calm down Aunt Bertha when she comes to you in alarm with one of the “reports.”

And for those with some free time on your hands, see if you can interest Internet-fraud investigators into looking into these people’s activities.

* ***

For further reading:


Stieffel, K. (2003). Avoid getting worked up by anonymous ‘reports.”

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