

# Lifetouch Gets It Right on Kids' Privacy

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The constant drumbeat of news stories chronicling the security blunders of U.S. corporations makes it seem as if no business, no matter how trusted, is up to the task of protecting our personal information. So it's all the more noteworthy when companies do the right thing with personal privacy. I learned recently that Eden Prairie, Minn.-based [Lifetouch Inc.](#) got it right when the feds came knocking.

What is Lifetouch? The privately held company photographs over 24 million North American schoolchildren each fall, making it the market leader. It also takes pictures of millions of other people through J.C. Penney, Target and Flash Digital Portraits studios.

You might not think that photos are sensitive information, but any parent would disagree with you. Try this test with your co-workers: Ask them what data they consider most private. Is it their Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, salaries, health data or information about their children? Whenever I've posed this question to a U.S. audience, kids' information has always won, hands down.



Lifetouch distributes 20 million emergency cards like this to students each year.

Lifetouch gets this, and having been in business for 70 years, it got it long before the age of digital identity theft. Senior attorney Laurie Dechery, who advises on privacy law issues at Lifetouch, told me, "Given the nature of

our product, privacy has always been a core component of the culture here."

Lifetouch regularly received urgent calls from law enforcement agencies seeking a missing child's photo in cases where parents were unable to provide a high-quality one for reprinting. Lacking the means to immediately authenticate whether these requests were valid, Lifetouch's response was tough, but predictable: not without a subpoena or verifiable parental consent.

The story might have ended there, with a stalemate between privacy interests and personal safety. But in 2004, Lifetouch contacted the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), which helps attempts to find the 2,000 children reported missing in the U.S. each day, with a five-step proposal:

1. Lifetouch would enlist partner schools that would allow it to distribute to each student a set of wallet cards that include a unique retrieval code and crisis hot-line number for the center.
2. Lifetouch would provide round-the-clock staff for the center's hot line. If a child went missing, parents could call the hot line with the code.
3. The center would authenticate the case and the parents' consent with law enforcement and then contact Lifetouch with the image-retrieval code.
4. Lifetouch would immediately transmit to the center the image of the child, faster than many parents could get a high-quality, usable image to the center.
5. The center could then broadcast the image through Amber alerts, its Web site, posters and mail inserts.

The center liked the idea. By October 2004, the two organizations had launched the initiative as the SmileSafe Kids program, and Lifetouch offered the program to schools nationwide.

"Getting the picture is extremely valuable" to the search process, Bob O'Brien, senior director of the Missing Children Division at the center, told me. He explained that one in six recovered children is found as a result of a

poster, "and many parents are challenged finding a quality picture of their kids to use for the poster."

Since the launch, Lifetouch has spent more than \$2 million to keep the program running and has assisted in more than 400 searches. Lifetouch images directly led to the recovery of seven children, O'Brien said.

One was a 15-year-old girl from North Carolina who had run away from home. Someone who had seen her at a party recognized her picture on the center's Web site and called police; the girl was returned to her parents.

This program is a great example of how privacy doesn't have to compromise security and vice versa. Do you know of any stories like it? If you've seen examples of where public health, public safety or fraud prevention was improved in a new way while preserving privacy, drop me a note at [cwprivacy@computerworld.com](mailto:cwprivacy@computerworld.com). Be part of finding privacy solutions – there are already enough people pointing out our privacy problems.

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