

Privacy AWOL in 2002 elections

Jay Cline

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As voters go to the polls this week, privacy will be a forgotten topic. At least a dozen other priorities will overshadow candidate positions on the defining issue of the information age. Despite poll after poll that says Americans are highly concerned about identity theft and the security of their online shopping, voters and consumers fail to follow through in any significant way on these fears. Until they do, companies will continue to pursue defensive strategies on privacy, taking only the minimum steps necessary to avoid headlines and legal action.

Privacy is not on the national radar. Four major polling organizations say the top issues on voters' minds are the economy, the war, schools and health care. Privacy is a no-show, somewhere below global warming and mad-cow disease. My home state, Minnesota, is routinely ranked as one of the most hawkish states on privacy, yet none of the candidates for governor here lists privacy on his agenda.

Data privacy is a nonissue in America despite years of intense press coverage. Lexis sends me 40 privacy articles a day, the same as it has since 2000. Google's hits on "privacy" have doubled to 89 million in the past two years. As a result, consumers regularly tell pollsters that the overwhelming reason they don't buy more things online is they fear for their personal data.

Customers don't seem to be following through on these fears, however. Less than 5% of financial consumers opted out of information sharing last year. Under 5% of visitors to any particular Web site even views its privacy policy. Similarly low proportions of people register for "do-not-call" lists.

Sales of personal-privacy software, such as browser anonymizers, have never taken off. Americans say they fear for their privacy, but they aren't taking even the smallest steps to start protecting it.

Consumer apathy for privacy is telling businesses that privacy doesn't pay - that it's no more than an overhead expense to be minimized. According to an Ernst & Young survey, companies are holding back further deployment of Platform for Privacy Preferences (P3P) technology on their Web sites. From August to September, only four new sites among the top 500 Web domains became P3P-enabled, inching the total P3P-enabled share to 17% of this group. Only 8% of Web sites have made the small investment in a privacy seal.

Congress may pass comprehensive privacy legislation next year, but not because voters are demanding it. It's large corporations that want the federal government to preempt states from unilaterally setting strict and conflicting privacy standards for the whole country. But if voters are apathetic at the state level as well, the privacy bill sponsored by Sen. Fritz Hollings will languish.

With market signals like this, most companies will shelve data-privacy initiatives and focus on the short-term realities of the slow economy. The visionary companies -- the leaders of the next bull market -- will solve the answer to this riddle today. The answer goes something like this: People really do want their privacy, but they want an easier way to take care of it all.

And that could be good news for Microsoft, whose Passport technology is starting to blaze that trail.

Cline manages data privacy at [Carlson Companies Inc.](#), a Minneapolis-based group of businesses in the travel, hospitality and marketing industries. Contact him at privacy@computerworld.com.