Search engines hold onto information for years. Here's how to make sure your company's private data stays off the Web.

Google Me Not

By Shabnam Mogharabi It's a new year — time to start from scratch and leave past mistakes behind you and your company, right? Think again.

The Internet seems to never forget. Search engines such as Google and Yahoo! can store "snapshots" of Web sites in their cache memory for years, even after the page has been removed from the original server. And Internet archive services store information from Web sites, even defunct ones, dating back to 1995.

With more than 1 billion new Web pages being posted each year, the Internet has become a boon for growth-minded businesses, but also poses a danger to corporate privacy. You *can* protect your company's information from getting lost in cyberspace, though.

"There are two issues here," said Ramnath Chellappa, Ph.D., an assistant professor of information systems at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business in Los Angeles. "There's the information you meant to protect and it was not protected well, and the other case is that you did not know you needed to protect the information.

"It's very difficult to get information back in the private domain once it's published," he noted.

Most experts agree. "The first rule of thumb is to not put anything on a Web site that you wouldn't want a competitor to see," said Ann Westerheim, Ph.D., president of Ekaru, LLC, a network consulting firm based in Westford, Mass.

To protect your company, Westerheim and other technology experts recommend hiring a part-time IT developer to implement the following security measures:

■ Develop a secure Intranet with password-protected folders to store and share vital data

■ Use SHTTP if you conduct online transactions or sales

■ Secure files that you frequently transfer with password-protected upload protocols or virtual private networks, aka VPNs

■ Make sure your Internet connection is protected by a firewall

■ Create a robots.txt file for your server to keep search engines from archiving data on your Web site.

Finally, it's important to communicate. "Be clear about copyright protection and mark things as confidential," Westerheim said. "If someone does violate confidentiality or copyright infringements, always contact the search engine and let them know."

For example, if you type "remove" into Google's search bar, you can find directions on how to remove information that should not be posted online — but only if you have access to the server hosting the Web site. You have to repeat that step with every search engine, too. If the misinformation is on a Web page that you don't operate, it's a little trickier.

"Most people will register a name publicly," said Pedro Sostre, principal and creative director at Sostre & Associates, a technology consulting firm in Miami. "You have to do a 'WhoIs' directory search through NetworkSolutions.com or a similar site, which lists the owner and contact information of many domains.

"Then, whether they respond to you is a whole other issue. They might have an old e-mail address that doesn't work, or they might not be interested in helping you. You may have to hire a lawyer if there is no other solution," he said.

Whether you're protecting your company's pricing information or your customer's credit card data, security is a big issue, one that sometimes seems hopeless. "Some information you can't keep private even if you want to," said Dave Allen, general manager of Erickson Custom Pools & Spas Inc. in Clermont, Fla. "I know my pricing is all over town because you turn salespeople over all the time and they take it with them. You try to get it back, but what good is it when it's on their home computer and their e-mail?

"Keeping this stuff secure is pretty hard," Allen noted. "But I don't think you can run scared from it." ■