

# More than private concern

## Privacy activists share lessons of hot line, empower readers with handbook / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**L**A TEELY A LOT OF newspapers and magazines have been writing about the growing threats to personal privacy in our increasingly computerized world. More and more companies offer search services that help you track down people who don't want to be found. Shops, restaurants, and city streets sport more video cameras every day. Banks are fingerprinting people who want to cash checks and don't happen to be depositors. And powerful computers are recording more and more details of our daily lives.

Unfortunately, most of the reporting on privacy stops there. Our privacy is seeping away, writers say; it's the cost of living in modern society. If you want to buy your lunch with a credit card or shop by catalog, you'll have to accept systematic intrusions into your private life as a consequence.

Thankfully, a growing number of privacy activists do not accept the status quo. These people know that information is the most important weapon for consumers in their fight in the corporate war on privacy.

"The Privacy Rights Handbook: How to Take Control of Your Personal Information," by Beth Givens and the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, is a guide to protecting your privacy in the

modern world. Unlike the typical privacy scare story, this book contains page after page of detailed information on what you can do to maintain your privacy.

Based in California, the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse was set up in 1992 as a kind of penance for corporate greed. "Pacific Bell had been caught rec-handed in many acts of deceptive and abusive marketing," says Givens, PRC's project director. "Part of the fine went into a trust fund for consumer groups to reach out to the community."

The staff at the clearinghouse, located at the University of San Diego, produced six privacy fact sheets, set up a toll-free hot line for questions about privacy issues, and opened for business.

"While we thought we knew a thing or two about privacy, we weren't prepared for the flood of telephone calls that came into the hot line from all over the state," writes Givens in her introduction. "Our phones didn't stop ringing."

Based on those phone calls, the PRC developed a set of 20 pamphlets designed to answer consumer questions on everything from shutting off the junk-

mail juggernaut to protecting yourself if you are being stalked.

Last year, Givens got together with author Dale Fetherling and produced this unique handbook.

Privacy means different things to different people. Some think about the pounds of junk mail most Americans receive each year, or those annoying telemarketing calls during dinner. Others think privacy has to do with credit reports and the numerous errors they contain: Two days ago I received e-mail from a man whose 18-year-old son had been denied credit because of a bad loan from 1979 - which his son would have had to make before he took his first steps. Still others think privacy is about wiretapping and eavesdropping, or government surveillance, or employee monitoring.

What's great about "The Pri-

vacancy Rights Handbook" is that it covers all those topics and more. The book is divided into six parts: dealing with invasive commerce; safeguarding personal records; pitfalls of telecommunications; privacy on the job; personal safety; and activism.

It's that last section that really breaks new ground. One chapter is devoted to respecting others' privacy. Givens advises businesses to avoid using Social Security numbers for customer or employee numbers, to be cautious about faxing confidential information, and to watch what is left on answering machines. The last chapter gives advice on becoming your own privacy rights advocate.

For Givens, one of the most troubling trends in privacy rights is the large number of companies and government agencies demanding answers to invasive questions and refusing service without them. She cites cellular phone companies, who require a customer's Social Security number. Indeed, SSNs are increasingly being demanded by other businesses - from supermarkets to drug-

stores.

The problem with the increased use of SSNs is that it is aiding identity theft - a growing problem in American society. What makes this type of theft possible is that many credit card companies believe that if you know somebody's Social Security number, date of birth, and mother's maiden name, then you must be that per-

son. They will let you get a credit card in that person's name, and when you don't pay the bills, the outstanding debt will soil the victim's credit history.

"The number one topic of concern on our hot line for the last two years has been identity theft," says Givens. Last year, 25 percent of PRC's 9,000 calls were on the topic.

"The Privacy Rights Handbook" offers a large number of examples that have been drawn from the PRC's hot line.

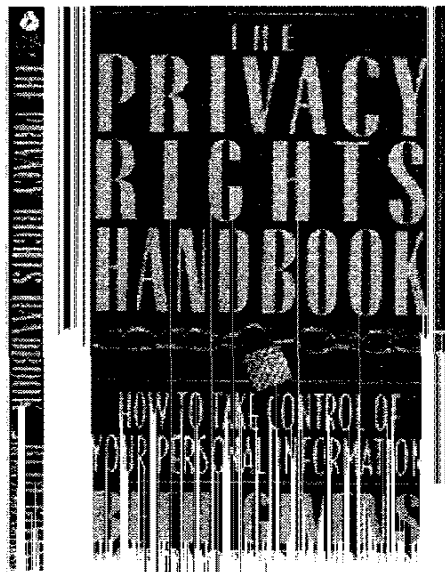
Some of the information in the book can be found on the PRC's Web site, at <http://www.privacyrights.org/>. Unlike the book, the fact sheets on the Web are in both English and Spanish.

Another useful Web site in the fight for privacy is JunkBusters, in which you fill out a consumer profile of the kinds of junk mail and telemarketing phone calls you don't wish to receive. It then creates self-addressed letters that you can print out and send to marketing companies so that you can be taken off their databases.

You can find this site at <http://www.junkbusters.com/>.

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