



*The Harris Poll*<sup>®</sup> #40, April 10, 2008

# Majority Uncomfortable with Websites Customizing Content Based Visitors Personal Profiles

*Level of Comfort Increases When Privacy Safeguards Introduced*

A majority of U.S. adults are skeptical about the practice of websites using information about a person's online activity to customize website content. However, after being introduced to four potential recommendations for improving websites privacy and security polices, U.S. adults become somewhat more comfortable with the websites use of personal information.

These are some of the results of a nationwide survey of 2,513 U.S. adults surveyed online between March 11 and 18, 2008 by Harris Interactive<sup>®</sup>. This survey was designed in collaboration with Dr. Alan F. Westin, Professor of Public Law and Government Emeritus at Columbia University, Principal of the Privacy Consulting Group, and a noted authority on privacy issues.

Specifically, the survey found:

- A six in ten majority (59%) are not comfortable when websites like Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft (MSN) use information about a person's online activity to tailor advertisements or content based on a person's hobbies or interests. A quarter (25%) is not at all comfortable and 34 percent are not very comfortable;
- The remaining 41 percent who say that are comfortable with websites tailoring content is split between 7 percent who are very comfortable and 34 percent who are somewhat comfortable.

Dr. Westin observed: "Websites pursuing customized or behavioral marketing maintain that the benefits to online users that advertising revenues make possible – such as free emails or free searches and potential lessening of irrelevant ads – should persuade most online users that this is a good tradeoff. Though our question flagged this position, 59 percent of current online users clearly do not accept it."

After exploring the adult public's level of comfort of websites directing content to website visitors' hobbies and interests, we probed as to whether the U.S. adults would alter their views *after seeing a series of potential policy and security policies*. These were based on the Federal Trade Commission's current publication about the adoption of

possible self-regulatory principles for online behavioral advertising. (<http://www.ftc.gov/os/2007/12/P859900stmt.pdf>).

After four privacy/security policies were introduced, U.S. adults did change their opinions:

- By 55 to 45 percent, a majority of U.S. adults indicates that they would be more comfortable with companies using information about a person's online activities to provide customized advertising or content;
- Interestingly, once the privacy/security policies were presented the percentages of those who are very comfortable increases only very slightly to 9 percent from 7 percent. The percentage who are somewhat comfortable given the privacy/security policies increases more significantly to 46 percent from 34 percent;
- Similarly, those who are not at all comfortable decline to 19 percent from 25 percent, and those who are not very comfortable decline to 26 percent from 34 percent.

### **By Generation**

Analysis of these results more closely by age indicates a difference in views by generations. Those who are younger Echo Boomers (aged 18-31) and Gen Xers (aged 32-43) are initially more comfortable with the notion of websites customizing content than older Baby Boomers (aged 44-62) and Matures (aged 63 or older).

- After being presented with the privacy/security policies, all generations level of comfort increase. Echo Boomers increase to 62 percent from 49 percent. Gen X'ers increase to 56 percent from 45 percent. Baby Boomers' comfort increases to a majority (52%) from 34 percent;
- Only Matures remain uncomfortable with the websites customizing advertising and content though the level of support rises to 46 percent from 31 percent.

This survey measured reaction to hypothetical policy recommendations with which the adult public is likely to not be familiar. Therefore, it may not be a surprise that the public's indication that their level of comfort with websites would increase after being told that websites would introduce privacy and security policies designed to insure user trust. However, what may be surprising is that the level of comfort did not increase more.

Dr. Alan Westin commented: "The failure of a larger percentage of respondents to express comfort after four privacy policies were specified may have two bases – concerns that web companies would actually follow voluntary guidelines, even if they espoused them, and the absence of any regulatory or enforcement mechanism in the privacy policy steps outlined in the question."

**TABLE 1**

**COMFORTABLE WITH WEBSITES THAT TAILOR CONTENT TO PERSONAL INTERESTS**

"On another topic, as you may know, websites like Google, Yahoo!, and Microsoft (MSN) are able to provide free search engines or free e-mail accounts because of the income they receive from advertisers trying to reach users on their websites. How comfortable are you when those websites use information about your online activity to tailor advertisements or content to your hobbies and interests?"

Base: All adults

	Total	Generation			
		Echo Boomers (18-31)	Gen X (32-43)	Baby Boomers (44-62)	Matures (63+)
		%	%	%	%
<b>Comfortable (NET)</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>31</b>
Very Comfortable	7	9	9	5	4
Somewhat comfortable	34	40	36	29	27
<b>Not Comfortable (NET)</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>69</b>
Not very Comfortable	34	35	30	36	34
Not at all Comfortable	25	17	25	30	35

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding

**TABLE 2**

**COMFORTABLE WITH WEBSITES ADOPTING PRIVACY AND SECURITY POLICIES**

"Some websites using customized marketing and seeking to insure user trust could adopt privacy and security policies for their customization program. The web site would:

- Explain to all users how it would use information about their online activities to customize content or advertising to their interests;
- Offer users some choices about the type of tailored content and advertising shown to them;
- Apply reasonable security measures to safeguard online user information;

- Promise not to share any user's personally identifiable consumer information from their online activities with other companies without the user's consent.

If a website adopted and followed all of these policies, how comfortable would you then be with companies using information about your online activities to serve customized ads or content to you?"

Base: All adults

	Total	Generation			
		Echo Boomers (18-31)	Gen X (32-43)	Baby Boomers (44-62)	Matures (63+)
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Comfortable (NET)</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>
Very Comfortable	9	10	9	9	4
Somewhat comfortable	46	52	46	43	42
<b>Not Comfortable (NET)</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>54</b>
Not very Comfortable	26	27	25	26	28
Not at all Comfortable	19	11	19	22	26

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding

## Methodology

*The Harris Poll*<sup>®</sup> was conducted online within the United States March 11 and 18, 2008, among 2,513 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the *online* population.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to

participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

***These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.***

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