Online ID cards can protect children against predators, firm says

INTERNET | Subscribers able to check the age of chat room pals

BY WENCY LEUNG
VANCOUVER SUN

A new weapon in the war against Internet predators was launched in Canada on Wednesday, aimed at protecting children and teenagers by allowing them to verify the ages and identities of the people with whom they chat online.

Scottish tech firm NetIDme Ltd. provides subscribers with a virtual ID card that they can swap with each other when using instant messaging, social networking sites and chat rooms.

The company touts its Net-ID as the world's first online age and identity verification system for children.

The service doesn't work unless both parties are registered with NetIDme, and it doesn't prevent sexual predators from making contact with children. Rather, it allows children to determine whether other registered users are who they say they are.

"It removes the anonymity of the Internet and prevents predators from masquerading as kids to gain their trust," NetIDme's managing director Alex Hewitt said in a statement.

Hewitt said he developed the system because he was concerned when he discovered his daughter could only verify the age and identity of less than a third of people on her list of online friends.

The company says the process of applying for a Net-ID is similar to applying for a passport. Children register on its Web site www.netidme.com, and their parents pay for the service by credit card at a cost of $19.99 per year.

The company then mails an application form, which must be completed by the parent and child, and be counter-signed by a professional, such as a teacher or doctor.

NetIDme itself also runs checks using its own software.

When registered users encounter strangers on chat rooms or social-networking sites, they can request to see each others' Net-IDs by swapping registered NetIDme nicknames and logging on to the company's Web site.

They can then view each others' first name, age, sex and general location.

NetIDme on Wednesday also launched the service in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States.

In a phone interview on Wednesday, Hewitt said the company had tested the service at five schools in England and Scotland over two years, during which some 600 to 700 children, aged 13 and up, signed up to use it.

"The uptake was fantastic," he said.

Hewitt added that NetIDme consulted authorities in the United Kingdom while developing the service.

He noted it did not consult Canadian authorities, but said it has received endorsements from the Scottish Crime and Drug Enforcement Agency.

"Everyone views it as a fantastic move forward . . . . The challenge is getting it rolled out to as many children as we can," Hewitt said.

Anne Collier, co-director of BlogSafety.com, a U.S. website for parents concerned with social networking, was skeptical of how effective NetIDme's service would be.

"You'd require uptake with your child's entire peer group for it to work," she said.

"Kids just want to freely use the Internet. They want to go wherever they want to go, and it's not going to be their idea to use ID cards. It's going to be their parents' idea," she added.

Collier said parental involvement can protect children better than identification services, filtering or blocking software alone.

"There's just no substitute," she said.

Collier said about one in 99 children receive aggressive sexual solicitations, or offers to meet in person, from adults over the Internet.

While she said that's still too many, the actual risk is lower than an often-cited 2000 report by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, which estimated that one in five children receive sexual solicitations.

The vast majority of sexual solicitations aren't made by adults, but other teens and older children, she said.

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NetIDme has produced an online ID verification service that allows young people to use virtual ID cards to verify the name and age of the person they're chatting with online.

Vancouver real estate a 'seller's market'

From C1

sales was not accompanied by a drop in home listings.

"[The statistics] are certainly suggestive of a market that has stopped its rate of excessive growth of transactions," Somerville said.

But, he added, that "that doesn't mean prices will follow, [although] one can't imagine prices continuing to increase at 28-per-cent-plus [per year], especially with sales drying up."

Still, he is hesitant to call the development "a turning point."

"If you're holding your breath waiting for a market crash, you should probably take another breath," Somerville said.

Somerville said there are other factors that could potentially trigger a a slowdown in housing, such as the decline in United States housing markets that is dampening demand for Canadian lumber.

Lower Mainland real estate markets can expect to experience a slowdown as prices keep squeezing buyers out, said Cameron Muir, a market analyst with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., but he doesn't see that happening just yet.

"I don't think [the July sales drop] is the turning point we're expecting," Muir said. "Fewer listings [in Vancouver] are at least partly responsible for fewer sales.

"The ratios [of sales to listings] are still high, it's still a seller's market out there, and that won't change until we see more listings," Muir said.

Rick Valouche, president of the Greater Vancouver Real Estate Board, noted that 2006's drop in sales is in comparison with the biggest year in the board's history.

And with 23,223 transactions recorded to the end of July, Valouche added that the board is still on pace to record the third-highest number of sales in a year.

Valouche said he doesn't believe the Greater Vancouver market has seen its limit for growth, because "houses that are listed properly" sell within a week, usually with multiple offers.

"We're not seeing the frenzy we saw last year ... [but] there is still too much demand and not enough listings."

The drop in Fraser Valley sales is also compared with an abnormally high month a year earlier, said Jim McCaughan, vice-president of the Fraser Valley Real Estate Board.

McCaughan added that while Fraser Valley housing inventories might be higher in a relative sense, "they're probably not as high as we would like to see."

"From all reports out there, there is still a lot of market activity and a lot of interest [in real estate]," he added.

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At the limit?

The Greater Vancouver real estate market experienced declining sales in July.

■ Single family homes:
1,031, –28.3%
Price: $644,461*, +19.4

■ Townhouses: 513, –20.7%
Price: $404,537*, +20.3%

■ Condos: 1,188, –24.2%
Price: $328,966*, +22.8%

** Benchmark prices for typical properties as determined by the Real Estate Board of Greater Vancouver*

Amerigo posts record profits

COPPER | Mining company nearly triples last year's Q2 earnings

BY FIONA ANDERSON
VANCOUVER SUN

Higher copper prices have pushed Amerigo Resources Ltd. to record profits in the second quarter of 2006, almost triple its earnings over the same period a year earlier.

The Vancouver-based mineral company had net earnings of $12.4 million US or 13 cents US per undiluted share during the three months ending June 30, up from the $4.6 million US or six cents US per share it earned in the same quarter of 2005. During that time, average copper spot prices doubled from about $1.50 US per pound in the second quarter of 2005 to more than $3 during the recent quarter.

"It's a great time for copper companies because the price of copper is . . . fantastic," Amerigo's general counsel and secretary Michael Kuta said in an interview.

What makes the profit especially sweet is that the company makes it money from the tailings of others.

In 2003, Amerigo bought the Minera Valle Central processing plant in Chile which takes the tailings from the El Teniente mine, the world's largest underground copper mine, and processes it to squeeze out more copper. At the time it purchased the plant, Amerigo estimated copper prices would be between 75 cents US to $1 per pound, Kuta said.

"They look like absolute geniuses now," he said.

El Teniente is expected to continue production for at least another 60 to 100 years, and Amerigo has a contract to process its tailings until 2021. With an initial purchase price for the processing plant of $28 million, the company has long been out of debt, even with new capital plant expenditures of $5.8 million US in the second quarter.

"We're just a little money-making machine, and at these copper prices we just make a lot more money. It's as simple as that," Kuta said.

Cash flow from operations were $10.2 million US, almost five times the $2.2 million from a year earlier. But copper production was down seven per cent to 6.57 million pounds, caused by a two-week shutdown of the El Teniente mine because of environmental concerns. Molybdenum production was up 31 per cent.

The drop in copper production and the rise in copper prices, as well as a stronger Chilean peso led to higher costs. Cash costs, including smelter, refinery and production were 90 cents US per pound compared to 59 cents in the second quarter of 2005.

But while costs were higher than last year, they were down from $1.39 US per pound in the first three months of the year.

Raymond James' analyst Bart Jaworski said

"Their costs were quite high last quarter so we're happy to see that has been corrected this quarter," Jaworski said.

Higher costs were caused by a "myriad of elements," including operational issues which ended up costing them more maintenance and higher treatment and refining charges, he said.

"They beat our expectations. We're happy with what they got," Jaworski said.

But a tripling of profits is not uncommon for base metal companies right now because of high prices, Jaworski said.

Jaworski rates Amerigo a "strong buy," with a price target of $3.40. Shares of Amerigo closed at $2.44 on Wednesday, up 19 cents or 8.44 per cent on the TSX.

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Developers spend $2.2 billion on land in first half of 2006

Downtown Vancouver, particularly east False Creek, hottest market

BY DERRICK PENNER
VANCOUVER SUN

Property developers flush with cash went on a spending spree in the first half of 2006 spurring a 58-per-cent increase in the commercial real estate market compared with 2005, the real estate services firm Colliers International reported Wednesday.

Investors spent $2.2 billion in the first half of the year, compared with $1.4 billion a year ago. Kirk Kuester, Colliers' managing director in Vancouver, said land purchases — primarily by developers banking property for future use — drove that figure.

Kuester said transactions to buy land in Greater Vancouver totalled $800 million in the first half of 2006 compared with $300 million for the same period a year ago.

"The reason for that is that the economic fundamentals for Vancouver are really strong," Kuester said.

"Demand [for property] is strong and the development community today is three [to] four years into a very profitable cycle. So they are all extremely well capitalized and able to aggressively acquire and land-bank for developments one, two, three years down the road."

Kuester added that the downtown Vancouver market, particularly east False Creek, was the hottest market for land sales.

Rising prices also contributed to the value of transactions. Kuester said that land downtown typically sold from $125 to $130 per buildable square foot over the first half of 2006. That compared with the $75 to $80 per-buildable square foot it would have cost a year ago.

Vancouver was second only to Calgary in the Colliers International report, which tracked commercial real estate transactions in excess of $1 million in 13 major Canadian markets.

The Colliers research showed that investors in Calgary spent $1.7 billion on commercial real estate in the first half of 2006, a 178-per-cent increase over the same period in 2005.

Nationally, the report tracked a near record $10.7 billion in commercial real estate sales across all 13 markets, a 16-per-cent increase over 2005.

"Activity was fuelled in large part by the strength of western Canada along with strong economic fundamentals, low interest rates, abundant debt capital and improved leasing markets," Keith Reading, Colliers' vice-president, research, said in a release.

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