

Mr. Know-It-All: Cyberextortion, Your Kid's Cell Phone, Online Degrees

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Illustration: Christoph Niemann

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The small company I own was recently contacted by a hacker in the former Soviet Union. He claims to have found a security flaw in our e-commerce site and wants a "consulting fee" of \$1,500 for not posting the vulnerability online. What to do?

There is no honor among cyberextortionists, so bowing to your tormentor's demands will only cause you grief. If you cough up the cash, what's to stop the scoundrel from publishing the weakness anyway? Or, for that matter, from telling his shady pals about your willingness to play ball? Paying will likely cause the bribe requests to mushroom — today it's one sleazebag asking for \$1,500; tomorrow it'll be a dozen demanding 10 grand apiece.

The good news is that even if you choose to ignore the threat, your site likely won't be harmed at all. The FBI maintains that the majority of such criminals are bluffers, with no real knowledge of their targets' systems. That assertion is supported by a 2004 Carnegie Mellon University survey that found cyberextortionists made good on just 18 percent of their threats.

OK, so that still leaves you with a 1-in-5 chance of catastrophe. If you'd rather not gamble on those odds, hire a private firm to perform a security audit. The process will likely cost more than \$1,500, but it should identify any gaping holes (or lack thereof) in your site's defenses.

If you decide to report the matter to the authorities, don't expect any miracles: Minor fraudsters from behind the erstwhile Iron Curtain aren't exactly a priority for the Feds. Still, it can't hurt to file

a report. Even the tiniest scraps of intelligence can sometimes lead to unexpected busts: The cops caught Son of Sam because of a parking ticket.

My 10-year-old daughter has been begging for a cell phone. Will I make her a social pariah if I don't give in?

Kids can be cruel, and your daughter might be razzed at school for being the only fourth grader without a cellie. But if your reluctance is solely due to financial considerations, don't cave. Instead, explain to your daughter the importance of living on a budget and the need to focus on family essentials in lieu of frills.

But if you're rebuffing your daughter's pleas only on principle, some personal reflection is in order. "Maybe dad is concerned about the sophistication the phone might bring into her life, about how she'll have the ability to communicate with people outside his control," says Shelley Pasnik, director of the Center for Children & Technology. There's a fine line between protecting and smothering.

As is usually the case in resolving father-daughter tiffs, a heart-to-heart conversation can work wonders. Have your daughter outline exactly why she wants the cell phone and how she plans to use it, and make clear what your expectations and fears are.

If you come away feeling that she's genuinely not ready for the responsibility, stick to your late-adopting guns. There may be school-yard fallout, but your daughter will survive. Mr. Know-It-All was teased mercilessly for not owning a Boba Fett action figure, and he turned out just fine.



Illustration: Christoph Niemann

Am I obligated to tell potential employers that I received my bachelor's degree through a university's online program?

Schools don't necessarily make the distinction, so there's no reason you should go out of your way to do so, either. "On transcripts, we don't designate when a class is online or face-to-face," says Ray Schroeder, director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

While you needn't mention your degree's lineage on your résumé, you are compelled to reveal the truth if asked during a job interview. And if that happens, respond with pride. Your interlocutor may mistakenly equate today's online degrees with the seedy correspondence courses of yore. Seize the opportunity to disabuse them of their prejudice. You might say, for example, that earning a degree through a reputable university's "distance learning" initiative requires more self-discipline than going the traditional route — while on-campus students were blowing daddy's money on J&4germeister and trips to Cancún, you were presumably holding down a job, correct?

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