What are the risks of social networking?

Behind the excitement and marketing, there are inherent privacy risks associated with social networking. These stem largely from the fact that people often do not appreciate that what they do in cyber-space can often affect them in the real world, if not immediately then sometime in the future. These risks include:

- not being able to effectively control who else has access to the information you post
- not being able to effectively control the information others post about you
- being on sites that do not employ identity verification tools, registering pseudonyms to preserve privacy is a very good safeguard
- identity theft, although adequate software protection on your computer can safeguard against misuse of profile data by third parties.

What can I do to minimise these risks?

1. Plan before you start

If you are thinking about joining a particular site, ask someone you know who already uses it to demonstrate its features and how they use it.

2. Respect the privacy of others

Remember that everyone has different comfort levels when it comes to their privacy. Ask permission before posting information, photos or videos, and respect the choices people make

3. Consider your profile

In order to interact online with a friend, either one of you must usually send the other person a request via the website and this request must be accepted. Once accepted, the technology permits each person to view the other's profile, pictures and send messages. As a general rule, don't publish any information you would not want the world to know about

4. Stay safe

In the vast majority of cases, people's experiences of social networking are positive and fun-filled. But it's best to avoid responding to messages from people you don't know. If you feel threatened or harassed by a contact, you can remove that person as a friend, preventing them from interacting with you. If the matter escalates, you can report persistent or unwelcome contact to the police.

5. Remember that it's hard to control the information once it is out there

In the on-line environment, privacy once lost can be extremely hard to retrieve. You can update your profile, but the comments you publish on your space or on someone else's will probably stick around for a long time, even if you de-register your profile.

6. Report abuse or misuse

All websites have 'Contact Us' sections. Use these details to report abuse or misuse

7. Protect your privacy

While most sites have privacy settings you can adjust to control others' access to your profile and the information you post, the default setting is usually set to open access. If you only want your profile to be accessible to those you have registered as "friends", make sure you adjust it. You might need to click on a link to a privacy page.

8. Guard against identity theft

Don't assume that anything you post online is completely private or limited to certain groups, or that the passwords you set up cannot be accessed through inadequate software protection. Even basic information, such as an address, birthday, photo, or mobile number can be coupled with other public
information, enabling someone to steal your identity

9. Use the most appropriate method of communication

When you want to communicate with a single friend or select group of people only, it may be better to communicate directly by email. If you advertise a party on your Facebook or MySpace page, for example, you might run a risk of a lot of unexpected guests.

Source: Department of Justice – State government Vitoria, Australia