

# Lying and Hiding in the Name of Privacy

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Results of the first survey in a series by



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Customer Commons Research



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## Abstract

A large percentage of individuals employ artful dodges to avoid giving out requested personal information online when they believe at least some of that information is not required. These dodges include hiding personal details, intentionally submitting incorrect data, clicking away from sites or refusing to install phone applications. This suggests most people do not want to reveal more than they have to when all they want is to download apps, watch videos, shop or participate in social networking.

**Keywords:** privacy, personal data, control, invasion, convergence

## Survey

Customer Commons' purpose in conducting this research is to understand more fully the ways in which people manage their online identities and personal information. This survey, the first of a planned series of research efforts, explores self-reported behavior around disclosure of personal information to sites and services requesting that information online. We believe the results of this survey offer a useful starting point for a deeper conversation about the behaviors and concerns of individuals seeking to protect their privacy. Subsequent research will explore how people feel and behave toward online tracking.

This research is also intended to inform the development of software tools that give individuals ways to monitor and control the flow and use of personal data.

For this research project, Customer Commons in late 2012 surveyed a randomized group of 1,704 individuals within the United States (1,689 finished the survey, or 95%).

Respondents were geographically distributed, aged 18 and up (see the appendix for specifics), and obtained through SurveyMonkey.com. The margin of error was 2.5%.

Respondents gave checkbox answers to questions and in some cases added remarks in a text box. (Survey questions and answers are in an addendum to this paper.)

## Key Findings

### Protecting personal data

This survey focused on the methods people use to restrict disclosure of requested personal information. Those methods include withholding, obscuring or falsifying the requested information.

**Only 8.45% of respondents reported that they always accurately disclose personal information that is requested of them.** The remaining 91.55% reported that they are less than fully disclosing. If they decide the site doesn't need personal information such as names, birthdates, phone numbers, or zip codes, they leave blank answers, submit intentionally incorrect information, click away from the site, or — in the case of mobile applications, decline to install.

**Most people withhold at least some personal data.** Specifically,

- 75.7% of respondents avoid giving their mobile numbers
- 74.8% avoid “social” login shortcuts such as those provided by Facebook or Twitter
- 73.4% avoided giving sites or services access to a friend or contact list.
- 58.3% don't provide a primary email address
- 49.3% don't provide a real identity

The concept of trust was raised in 22% of the written responses explaining why people hide their information. Some examples include:

- “I cannot trust a random website”
- “I do not want spam and do not want to expose others to spam. I also don't know how that information could be used or if the people running the site are trustworthy.”
- “If I know why info is needed then I might provide, otherwise no way”
- “I felt the need to cover my I.D. a little bit -- like age and gender. And I still withhold my social security #.”
- “If I feel they don't need it to provide a service to me they don't get it even if I have to enter in fake info”
- “Worries on identity theft and general privacy.”
- “i would never give out my friends or and familys (sic) info ever”

Many respondents said sites and services request more data than required. Others suggested that providing requested information would result in an increased risk to their security. More results:

- When the 71% of respondents who reported withholding information were asked why, they said they didn't believe the sites needed the information. Specifically,
  - 68% reported they either didn't know the site well when they withheld their data or didn't trust the site.
  - 45% of those who felt they knew the site or service well still withheld information.

**Respondents lied about various line items as a strategy to protect their privacy. For example, 34.2% intentionally provided an incorrect phone number, and 13.8% provided incorrect employment information.** Here are some reasons they gave:

- “I didn't want them to have all my information, or feel it was necessary.”
- “I have obscured various information so that I would not have further contact with a vendor who won't leave me alone”
- “Faking it is the best to avoid unwanted contact”
- “Sometimes you just want to use a service without them knowing every thing about you.”
- “I don't like websites to have very much information on me. I regularly give out spam email addresses, bad birthday dates, and bad location information.”
- “Registering for many mundane website often requires some pretty detailed personal info. I generally fudge this. None of their business”
- “Because information is so easily found and transferred on the internet I do provide false info quite often to protect my identity.”

Even those who had never submitted incorrect information made statements such as:

- “Have never made up info - just ignored requests :-)”
- “i just don't use that website”
- “I have an email address that is purly (sic) for junk mail. I use this email address for websites that request my email address and then I go into that email and delete all email monthly.”
- “I have never given incorrect information, but I have thought about it.”
- “I don't lie, but I omit as I feel appropriate.”

## Going with the flow

**Correcting already obscured or falsified information appears to be too much of a chore.** Specifically,

- Over 50% have rarely or never corrected data they submitted incorrectly
- 30% correct their data “sometimes.” Of that 30%,
  - 55% said a purchase required correct information
  - 56% had a growing feeling of comfort with the site or service
  - 46% cited the ability to realize new benefits from the site with corrected information

- 30% said they noticed others' incorrect data at Facebook or other social sites, or in phone applications, and —
  - 80% of this group assumed that the data was falsified as a way to protect privacy
  - 40% believed the incorrect data was there to mislead marketers
  - 12% believed secretive associates were trying to mislead them
- 13% believed services always needed correct personal information
- 75% believed the services needed it only sometimes
- 12% said it was never needed.

Respondents also believed that other users of these services always needed or expected correct personal data about each other 27% of the time, whereas 23% said it was sometimes needed, and 48% said it was never needed.

## Privacy online

**The results of this survey support the hypothesis that people limit, refuse to give or obfuscate personal information in an attempt to create a measure of privacy online.**

On July 30, 2010, in the first article in its “What They Know” series, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, “One of the fastest-growing businesses on the Internet ... is the business of spying on Internet users. The Journal conducted a comprehensive study that assesses and analyzes the broad array of cookies and other surveillance technology that companies are deploying on Internet users. It reveals that the tracking of consumers has grown both far more pervasive and far more intrusive than is realized by all but a handful of people in the vanguard of the industry.”<sup>1</sup>

Adds Doc Searls, in *The Intention Economy*, “Tracking and ‘personalizing’—the current frontier of online advertising—probe the limits of tolerance. While harvesting mountains of data about individuals and signaling nothing obvious about their methods, tracking and personalizing together ditch one of the few noble virtues to which advertising at its best aspires: respect for the prospect’s privacy and integrity, which has long included a default assumption of anonymity.”<sup>2</sup>

This survey showed one result of this system. **Respondents expressed a general lack of trust in their relationships with online businesses.** Many feelings ran strong. Here are some of the comments:

- “Scary world out there, and I am a bit angry about the fact that all these website 'track me' as if that is OK, and then they sell MY data, obviously making money in the process. How is that OK or even legal? Don't I control MY information? Apparently not...”
- “So if I think it might be 'harmful' to give out info, I don't do it.”
- “I want cookies outlawed :(
- “My ex-husband was abusive and has stalked me. I don't need to let the greedy sellers of my personal information draw him a map to my front door.”

- “While I doubt I have any real protection of privacy, I have a desire to try to send a message that I want my right to protection of privacy. I regret how much we as a society have lost to the powers of marketing.”
- “I don't trust the security procedures of most companies. Security costs money, which cuts into profits, thus most companies have limited incentive to protect PII from cyber criminals.”
- “The web is far less secure than commonly known.”
- “Just as I have disconnected my land line because of a flood of unwanted calls, I refuse to give online/ access information for the same reason.”

These survey responses show people resort to withholding data or submitting false data to avoid feeling exposed online. When deciding whether to share personal information, the majority of respondents doubt that sites or services need to collect more than a minimum of obviously necessary personal data.

## Conclusion

**When people withhold personal data, it is to create a sense of privacy and control of their personal lives.**

People are afraid or distrustful of sites, services and phone apps that request their personal data. They withhold or falsify information because they do not believe the sites need their data, and because they do not want to disclose information that might lead to spamming or other intrusions. Moreover, the techniques that people employ to preserve their sense of privacy online are largely improvised, informed by fear, and based on their subjective evaluation of entities that solicit personal information.

For the sake of privacy, people contribute to and tolerate the presence of incorrect personal data online, and attempt to correct it only when they see the clear upsides of accuracy. And, despite the failure of businesses and other organizations to convince users of the need to provide personal details beyond an email address, most users remain comfortable disclosing additional personal data only with those they know and trust.

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## Customer Commons

Customer Commons is a not-for-profit working to restore the balance of power, respect and trust between individuals and the organizations that serve them, especially in the online world. We stand with the individual and therefore do not take contributions from commercial entities.

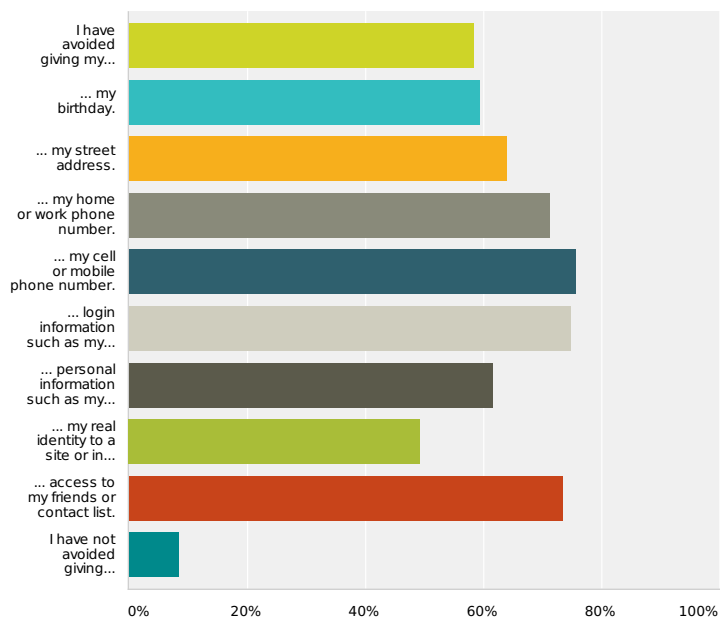
## ADDENDUM: Questions and Answers

Attached are the complete questions, answers and written answers offered by people to provide additional information.

Personal Data Online - Survey

### Q1 Have you ever avoided giving your information to a website, service or a mobile form that asked for personal information? (Please check all that apply.)

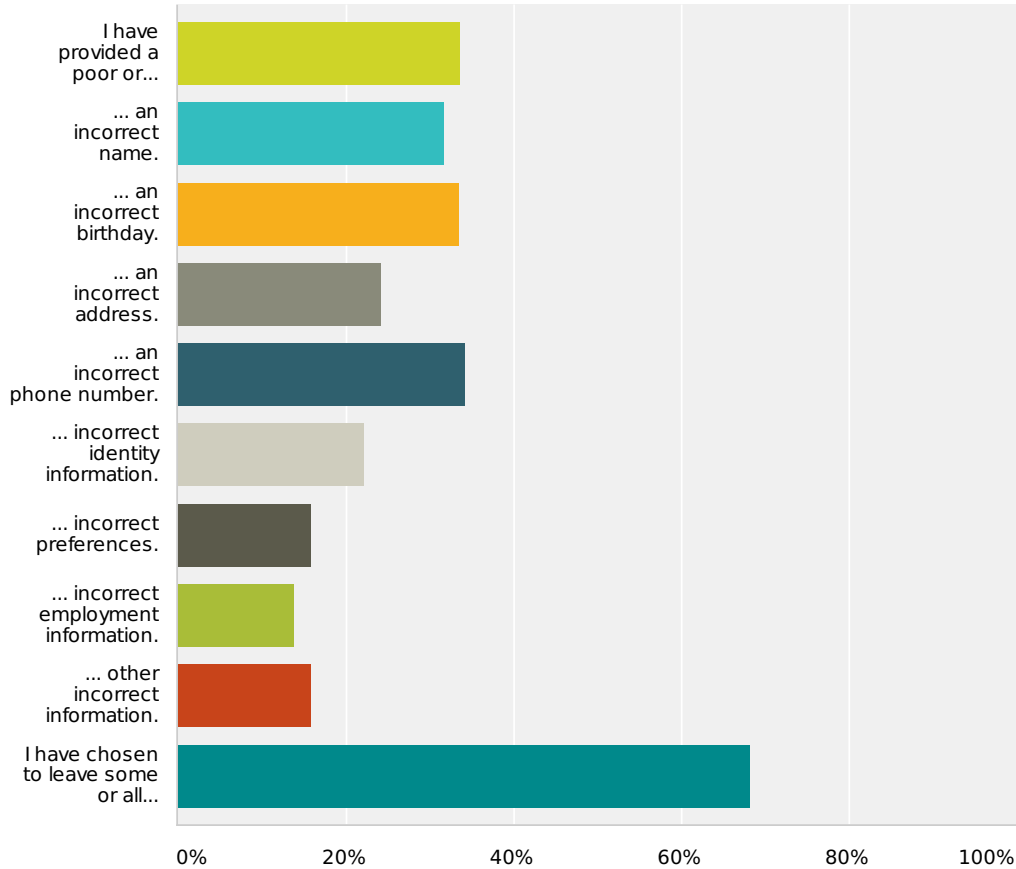
Answered: 1,704 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
I have avoided giving my primary email address.	58.33%	994
... my birthday.	59.45%	1,013
... my street address.	63.97%	1,090
... my home or work phone number.	71.24%	1,214
... my cell or mobile phone number.	75.70%	1,290
... login information such as my Facebook login to another site.	74.82%	1,275
... personal information such as my employer or job title.	61.62%	1,050
... my real identity to a site or in a mobile form.	49.30%	840
... access to my friends or contact list.	73.42%	1,251
I have not avoided giving information to a site, app or service.	8.45%	144
Total Respondents: 1,704		
Please elaborate on your reasons if you wish: ( 368 )		

## Q2 Have you ever made up and submitted incorrect information to a website, service or a mobile form that asked for personal information? (Please check all that apply.)

Answered: 1,615 Skipped: 89



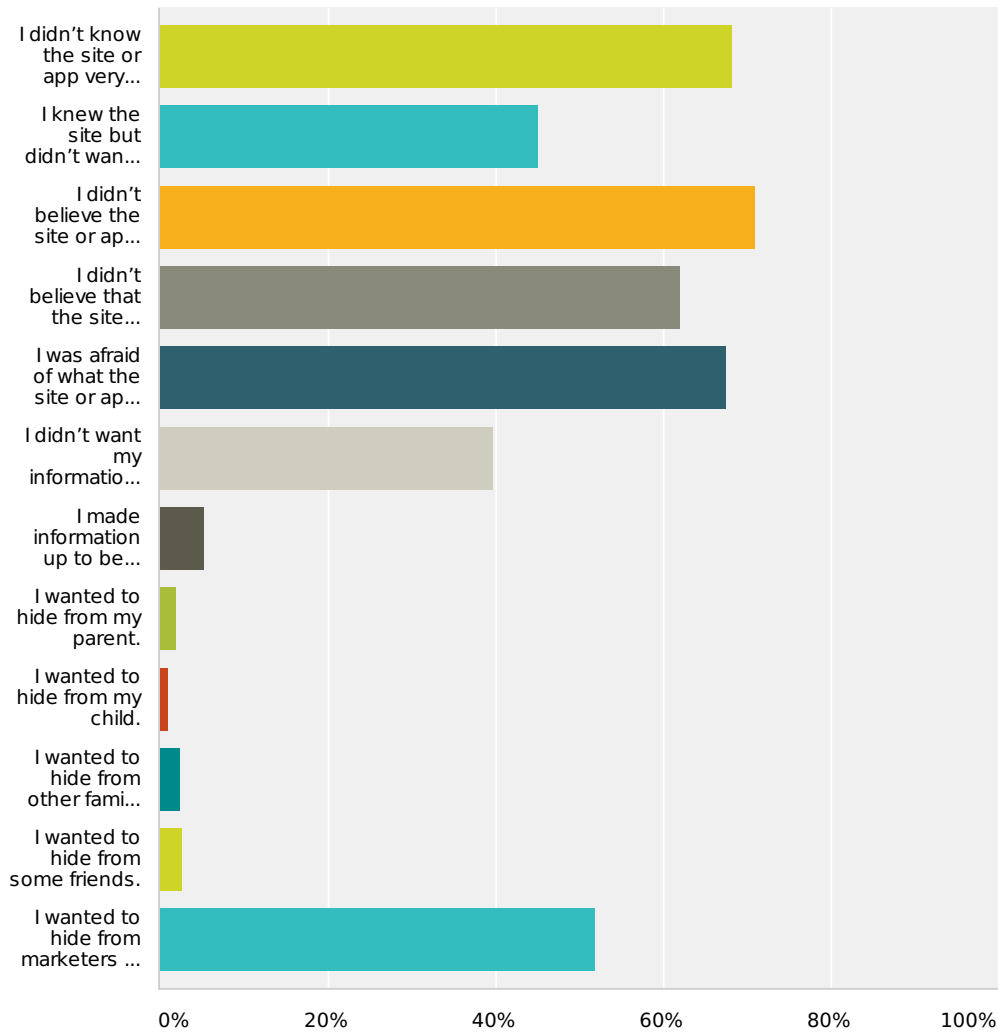
Answer Choices	Responses
<b>I have provided a poor or "spam" email address.</b>	<b>33.62%</b> 543
<b>... an incorrect name.</b>	<b>31.64%</b> 511
<b>... an incorrect birthday.</b>	<b>33.50%</b> 541
<b>... an incorrect address.</b>	<b>24.15%</b> 390
<b>... an incorrect phone number.</b>	<b>34.24%</b> 553
<b>... incorrect identity information.</b>	<b>22.11%</b> 357
<b>... incorrect preferences.</b>	<b>15.85%</b> 256
<b>... incorrect employment information.</b>	<b>13.81%</b> 223
<b>... other incorrect information.</b>	<b>15.79%</b> 255
<b>I have chosen to leave some or all information fields blank instead of answering.</b>	<b>68.17%</b> 1,101

Total Respondents: 1,615

Please elaborate on your reasons or other kinds of data you've obscured, if you wish: ( 209 )

### Q3 If you've ever withheld or submitted incorrect information at a website or mobile app, why did you do so? (Please check all that apply)

Answered: 1,553 Skipped: 151



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>I didn't know the site or app very well.</b>	<b>68.25%</b> 1,060
<b>I knew the site but didn't want them to have my information.</b>	<b>45.07%</b> 700
<b>I didn't believe the site or app needed the information.</b>	<b>70.96%</b> 1,102
<b>I didn't believe that the site having the information would in any way benefit me.</b>	<b>62.01%</b> 963
<b>I was afraid of what the site or app would do with the information.</b>	<b>67.48%</b> 1,048
<b>I didn't want my information at one site or app to be matched with other sites or apps data about me.</b>	<b>39.73%</b> 617
<b>I made information up to be funny or to fool people who don't know me.</b>	<b>5.22%</b> 81
<b>I wanted to hide from my parent.</b>	<b>1.80%</b> 28

Total Respondents: 1,553

Please elaborate on your reasons, if you wish: ( 94 )



Personal Data Online - Survey

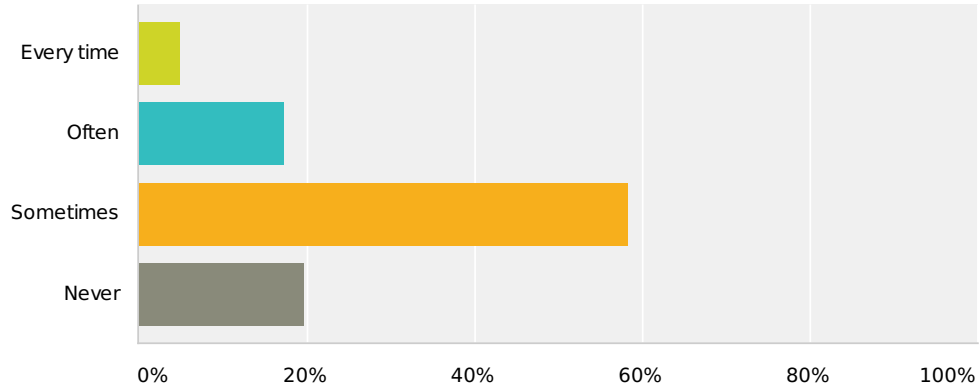
<b>I wanted to hide from my child.</b>	<b>0.90%</b>	14
<b>I wanted to hide from other family members.</b>	<b>2.32%</b>	36
<b>I wanted to hide from some friends.</b>	<b>2.58%</b>	40
<b>I wanted to hide from marketers or 3rd party data collectors or aggregators.</b>	<b>51.90%</b>	806

Total Respondents: 1,553

Please elaborate on your reasons, if you wish: ( 94 )

### Q4 Do you ever withhold or obscure information about yourself when first using a service, site or application (eg. creating an account)?

Answered: 1,645 Skipped: 59

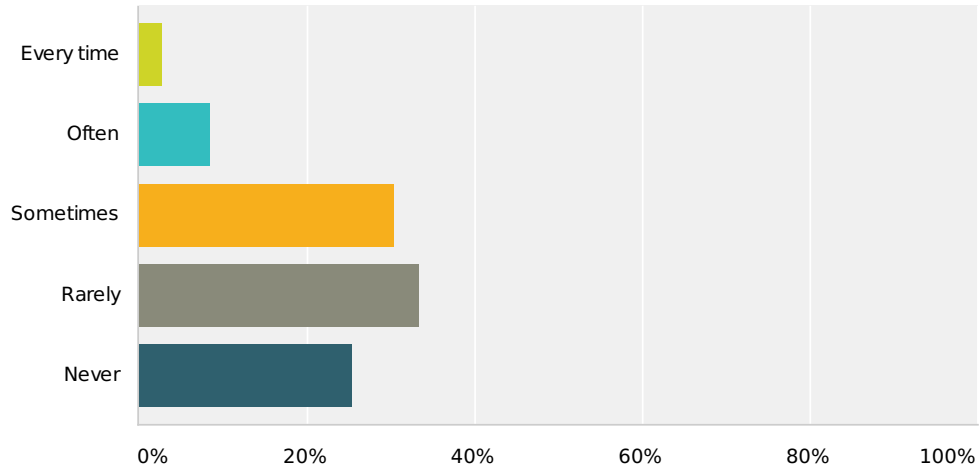


Answer Choices	Responses	
<b>Every time</b>	<b>4.86%</b>	80
<b>Often</b>	<b>17.26%</b>	284
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>58.30%</b>	959
<b>Never</b>	<b>19.57%</b>	322
Total		1,645

Please elaborate if you wish: ( 104 )

## Q5 How often have you fixed incorrect information later, after initially using a site, service or app?

Answered: 1,324 Skipped: 380

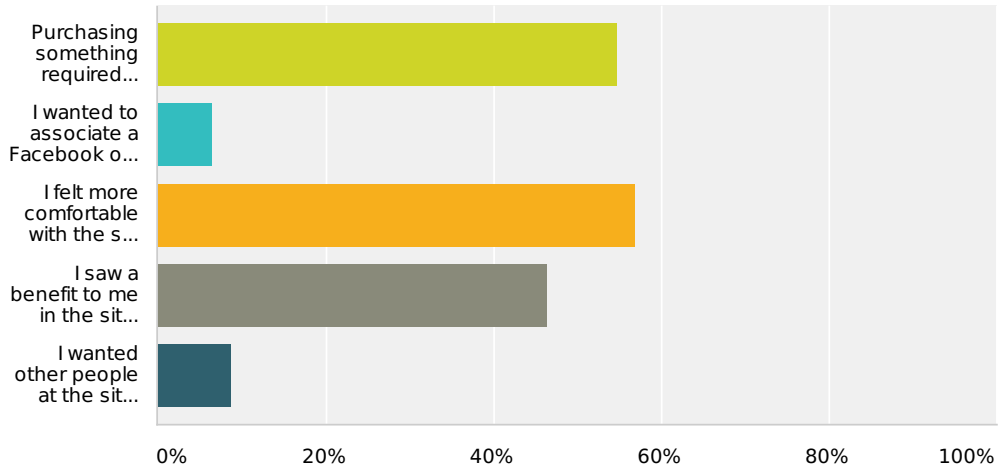


Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Every time</b>	<b>2.64%</b> 35
<b>Often</b>	<b>8.38%</b> 111
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>30.36%</b> 402
<b>Rarely</b>	<b>33.31%</b> 441
<b>Never</b>	<b>25.30%</b> 335
Total	1,324

Please share other reasons you may have corrected previously incorrect information: ( 68 )

### Q6 Why did you submit corrected information after initially submitting incorrect information? (Please check all that apply)

Answered: 981 Skipped: 723

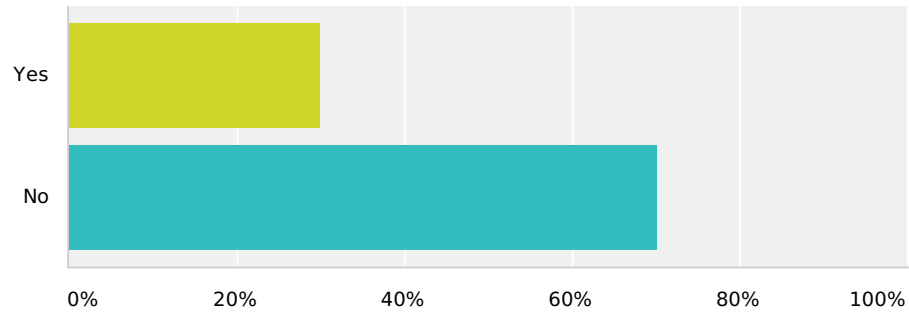


Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Purchasing something required correct information.</b>	<b>54.74%</b> 537
<b>I wanted to associate a Facebook or other account with my account at a site with previously fake information.</b>	<b>6.42%</b> 63
<b>I felt more comfortable with the site because of using it over time.</b>	<b>56.88%</b> 558
<b>I saw a benefit to me in the site having my correct information.</b>	<b>46.38%</b> 455
<b>I wanted other people at the site to see my correct information.</b>	<b>8.66%</b> 85
Total Respondents: 981	

Please share other reasons you may have corrected previously incorrect information: ( 34 )

### Q7 Do you notice others submitting incorrect information at sites, services or in apps where you see their activities?

Answered: 1,631 Skipped: 73

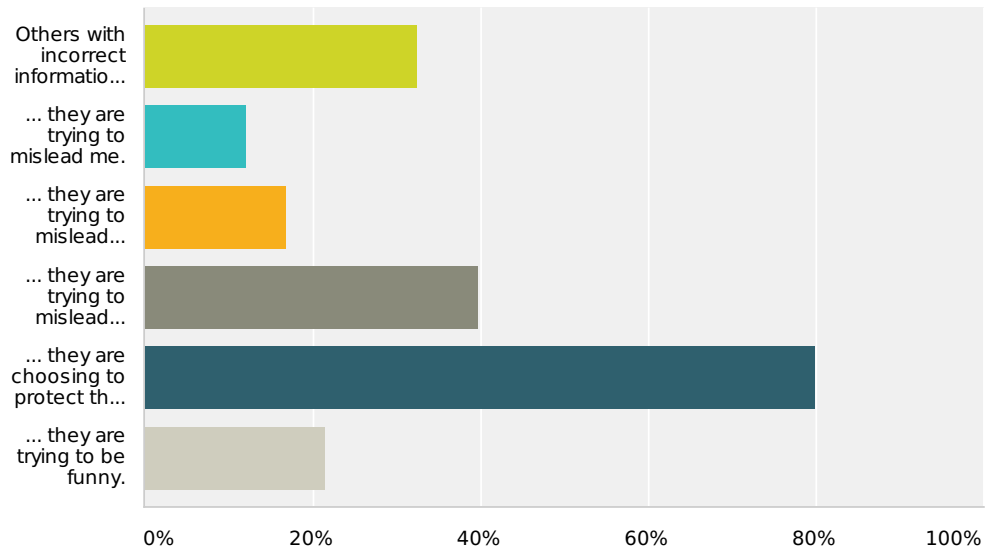


Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Yes</b>	<b>29.92%</b> 488
<b>No</b>	<b>70.08%</b> 1,143
Total	1,631

Please tell us more about this: ( 118 )

## Q8 When you noticed someone else's incorrect information, what did you think? (Please check all that apply)

Answered: 482 Skipped: 1,222

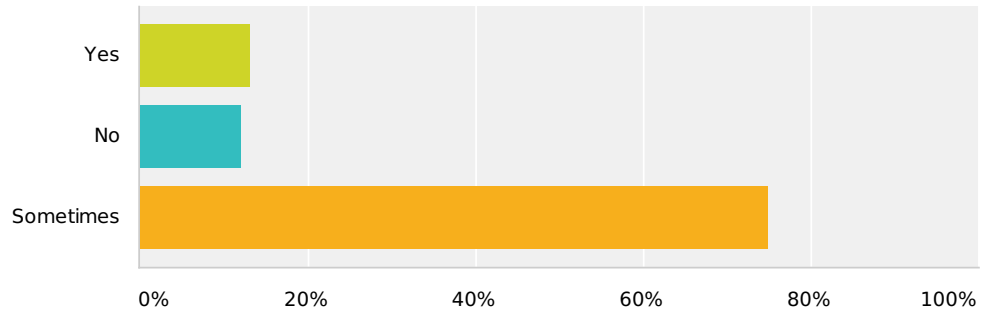


Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Others with incorrect information are trying to mislead or hide from the site or app.</b>	<b>32.37%</b> 156
<b>... they are trying to mislead me.</b>	<b>12.03%</b> 58
<b>... they are trying to mislead others on the site, including parents, children, friends or relatives.</b>	<b>16.80%</b> 81
<b>... they are trying to mislead advertisers or marketers.</b>	<b>39.63%</b> 191
<b>... they are choosing to protect their privacy.</b>	<b>79.88%</b> 385
<b>... they are trying to be funny.</b>	<b>21.37%</b> 103
Total Respondents: 482	

Are there any other reasons you think people would want to put incorrect information? ( 20 )

## Q9 Do you think sites, services or apps need correct information from you?

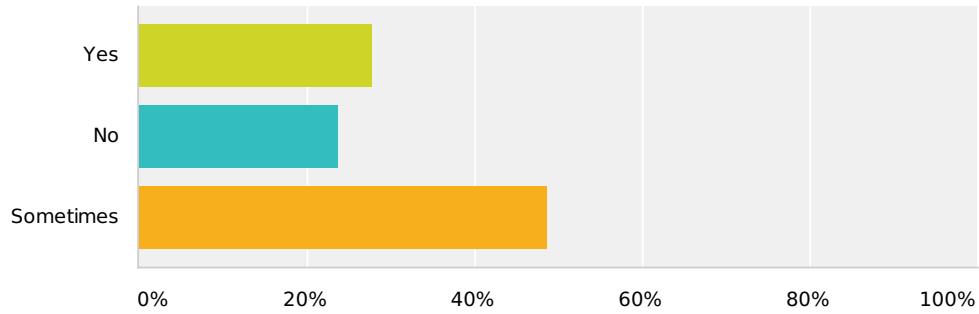
Answered: 1,615 Skipped: 89



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Yes</b>	<b>13.07%</b> 211
<b>No</b>	<b>12.01%</b> 194
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>74.92%</b> 1,210
Total	1,615
Why or why not? ( 309 )	

### Q10 Do you think other people like you, using the sites, services or apps you use, need or expect correct information from you?

Answered: 1,621 Skipped: 83



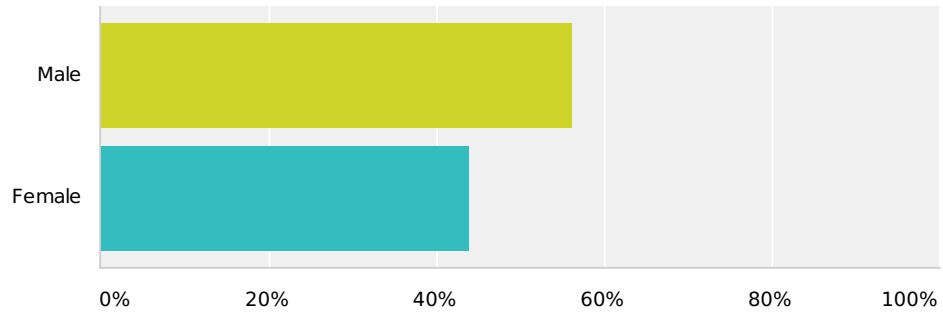
Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Yes</b>	<b>27.70%</b> 449
<b>No</b>	<b>23.63%</b> 383
<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>48.67%</b> 789
Total	1,621

Why or why not? ( 194 )



## Q11 Gender

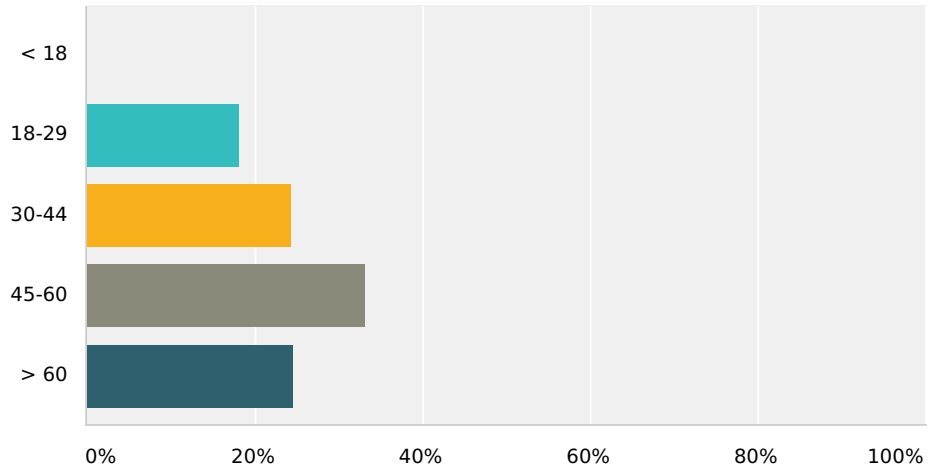
Answered: 1,627 Skipped: 77



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Male</b>	<b>56.12%</b> 913
<b>Female</b>	<b>43.88%</b> 714
Total	1,627

## Q12 Age

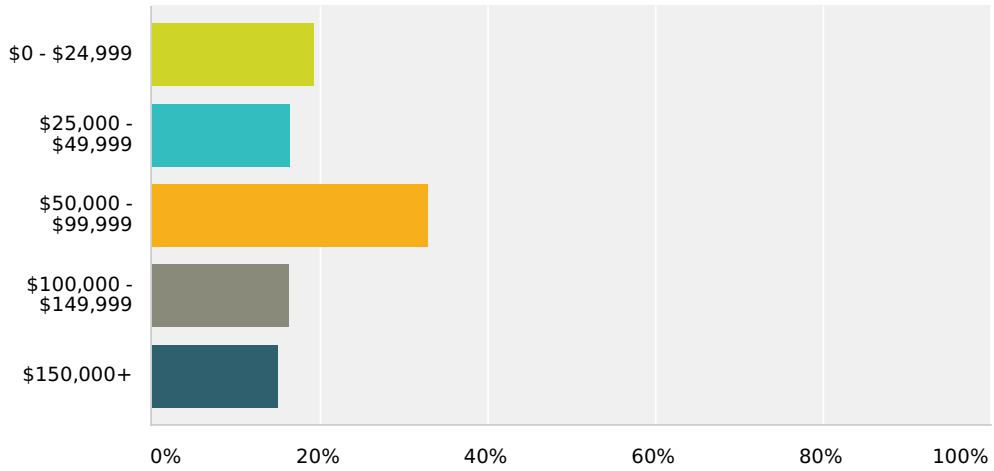
Answered: 1,627 Skipped: 77



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>&lt; 18</b>	<b>0%</b> 0
<b>18-29</b>	<b>18.07%</b> 294
<b>30-44</b>	<b>24.34%</b> 396
<b>45-60</b>	<b>33.07%</b> 538
<b>&gt; 60</b>	<b>24.52%</b> 399
Total	1,627

## Q13 Household Income

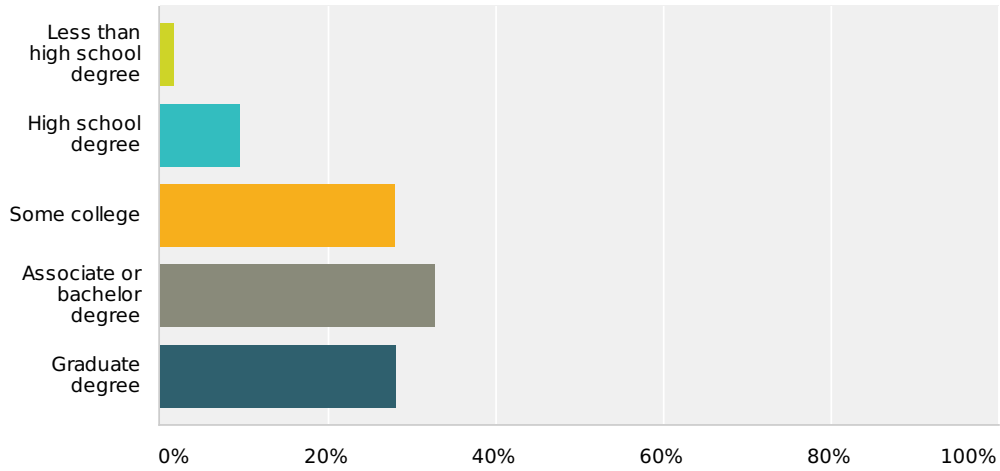
Answered: 1,507 Skipped: 197



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>\$0 - \$24,999</b>	<b>19.31%</b> 291
<b>\$25,000 - \$49,999</b>	<b>16.46%</b> 248
<b>\$50,000 - \$99,999</b>	<b>32.91%</b> 496
<b>\$100,000 - \$149,999</b>	<b>16.32%</b> 246
<b>\$150,000+</b>	<b>15.00%</b> 226
Total	1,507

## Q14 Education

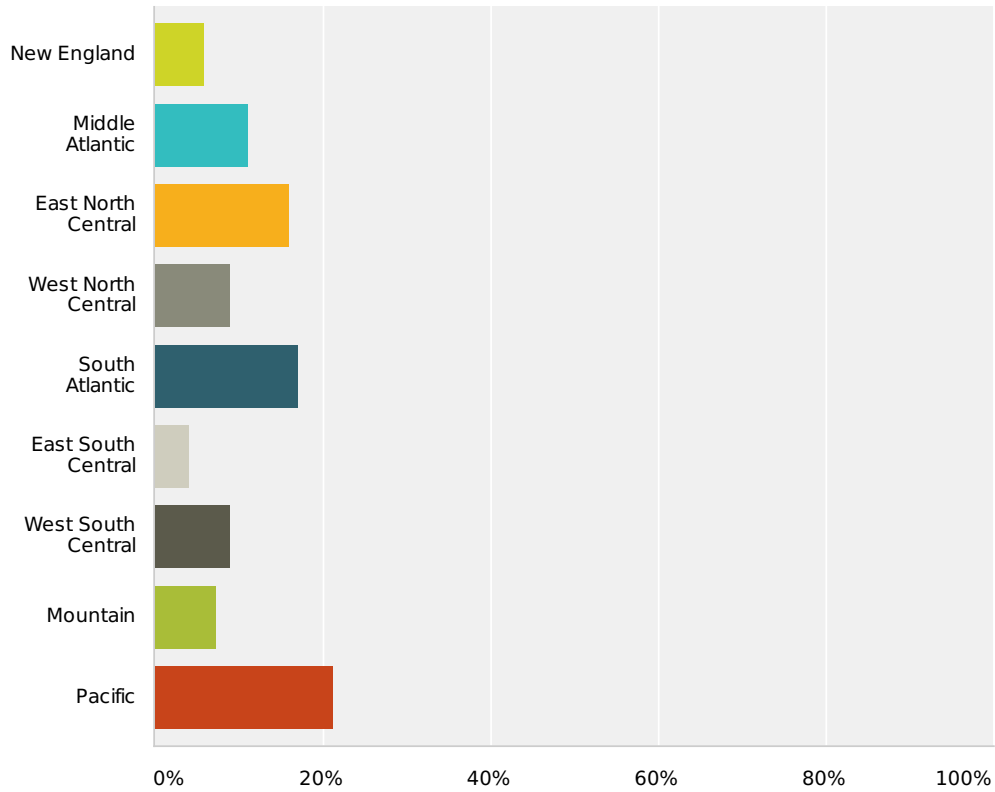
Answered: 1,627 Skipped: 77



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Less than high school degree</b>	<b>1.60%</b> 26
<b>High school degree</b>	<b>9.53%</b> 155
<b>Some college</b>	<b>28.03%</b> 456
<b>Associate or bachelor degree</b>	<b>32.70%</b> 532
<b>Graduate degree</b>	<b>28.15%</b> 458
Total	1,627

## Q15 Location (Census Region)

Answered: 1,605 Skipped: 99



Answer Choices	Responses
<b>New England</b>	<b>5.79%</b> 93
<b>Middle Atlantic</b>	<b>11.09%</b> 178
<b>East North Central</b>	<b>15.95%</b> 256
<b>West North Central</b>	<b>8.91%</b> 143
<b>South Atlantic</b>	<b>16.95%</b> 272
<b>East South Central</b>	<b>4.05%</b> 65
<b>West South Central</b>	<b>8.85%</b> 142
<b>Mountain</b>	<b>7.23%</b> 116
<b>Pacific</b>	<b>21.18%</b> 340
Total	1,605

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Anguin, “The Web’s New Gold Mine: Your Secrets” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2010.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703940904575395073512989404.html>

<sup>2</sup> Doc Searls, *The Intention Economy: When Customers Take Charge*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012). P. 28.