

Trust Spouse Before the Web With Your Secrets: Rich Jaroslovsky

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Commentary by Rich Jaroslovsky

March 27 (Bloomberg) -- Just how much should you trust the cloud?

It's a question you'll be asking yourself more and more often as your software and data slip the confines of your hard drive and take up residence on servers hundreds or thousands of miles away. What information do you feel comfortable entrusting to the Internet?

I've been using a new program called **InformationSAFE** that raises the question in stark terms. The software, which I like quite a bit, is a simple way to organize all your most sensitive personal information -- bank-account log-ins, insurance policies, even your will -- so that a spouse, heir, lawyer or accountant will have everything they need in one place should something bad happen to you. The issue is where that one place should be.

InformationSAFE comes in two versions. One you buy, download and install on your **Windows** PC or **Mac**, and it stores your encrypted data on your hard drive. The other version, which has most of the same features, is an online service -- meaning both the software and your data reside on InformationSAFE's servers. You or anyone you authorize can access it from any computer connected to the Web.

Fire, Flood, Crash

The trade-offs are where you learn a little something about yourself: Information that's stashed locally is under your direct control but vulnerable to fire, flood, or a crashed hard drive if it isn't adequately backed up. As for trusting information to the vast Out There, it's always available, but you must have faith in a small company's security procedures to make sure the bad guys don't grab it.

The desktop edition of InformationSAFE costs \$49.95 from the company's Web site. The Web version costs \$4.50 a month, or \$49.95 for a year of service. Both employ advanced 256-bit encryption, the type used by the U.S. government. The company provides assurances that data is protected no matter which option you choose.

The software is particularly helpful for a couple in which one spouse handles most of the financial record-keeping -- and is simple enough that no one needs to be tech-savvy to use it.

Your data is organized into one of seven categories arrayed horizontally across the top of every screen: Personal Info, Financial, Insurance, Legal, Health, Property and Key Contacts. Clicking on one of them opens a menu of items, some of which lead to further menus.

Digital Will

Choose Bank Accounts under the Financial tab, for instance, and you'll be asked to specify the type of account. Then you fill out a form that includes fields for financial institution, account number, Web address, user name, password, and the like. You can provide as much or as little information as you choose, and attach files from your computer -- anything from a spreadsheet of current investments to a digital copy of your will.

There are a several ways to share access to the data. InformationSAFE can generate and print a booklet in **Adobe's** PDF format, making for an easy-to-use written record. You can also create a secure link for e-mailing files that expires after 30 days, and lets you track the documents. The online edition enables you to control who else can see your account and what they're allowed to do with it, and sends you an alert whenever one of them logs in.

A Generational Thing

The decision on desktop versus cloud could turn out to be a generational thing. Older consumers may balk at the notion of entrusting their most sensitive data to the amorphous cloud -- let alone to a small company whose business future is by no means assured. Younger users have a vastly different notion of privacy in the era of Facebook and Twitter, to say nothing of **Foursquare** and **Blippy**.

InformationSAFE's publisher says that about three-quarters of its customers so far have opted for the desktop version. That's the right decision. Besides the dollars-and-cents equation -- paying a fee every year or an equal amount just once -- the benefits of the online version just don't outweigh the risks.

I'll make sure my wife knows the software password, and print out a report for the safe-deposit box and maybe my lawyer. The closest I'll come to the cloud is making sure the data is backed up to a remote online service I'm already comfortable with.

Guess I'm just old-school.