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Associated Builders and Owners
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Tenant Screening

How Much Information is Too Much Information?



Proving a prospective tenant is low-risk should be easy with hundreds of internet people-search sites offering to get anything on anybody for a modest sum. But even with information you can have too much of a good thing.

“It’s information overload,” says Manhattan-based real estate attorney Helene Hartig. “The new technology makes it very easy to find out if someone is a credit or quality-of-life risk, but at the same time it makes it difficult because you might get conflicting information. And a lot of the services are inaccurate, particularly the free or cheap ones that say ‘give us your credit card and we’ll do a comprehensive search.’”

Hartig recommends doing a Google search and utilizing some of the better rated people search sites (such as the ones listed below) to uncover red flags, but then going to sophisticated professional service like NexusLexis to uncover more reliable information. A NexusLexis subscription is expensive, but chances are your attorney has one. And an attorney will be better equipped to decipher the results.

For example, says Hartig, a litigation search might turn up someone’s involvement in a court action but fail to indicate the outcome of the dispute. “It might indicate that a landlord brought a proceeding,” she says, “but not whether the landlord was successful or not. So if there is a judgment, you have to delve a little further.”

Or an eviction action for nonpayment might be on his or her record, painting the prospective tenant as a deadbeat. But it might fail to report that it was actually

the fault of the landlord’s accounting system, which failed to record the payment properly.

By the same token, a credit check might reflect some deception on the part of the tenant. “A lot of times you will have a savvy tenant,” says Hartig, “who closes every one of their accounts so that when you get your credit report it will show ‘closed at customer request for each card.’ When you ask them why that is, they tell you their cards were stolen. It’s a trick to avoid questions about a delinquent account.”

Still, while taking results with a grain of salt, it behooves landlords and rental agents to use the internet to eliminate risky candidates. For example, recalls Hartig, “I had a case where a real estate broker actually rented an apartment to somebody and then found out he was harassing people in the building. Only then did she look him up online — and discovered that he was on mugshots.com.” Too late.

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Not that mugshots.com can be trusted entirely, if at all. A report in the *New York Times* recently revealed that a lot of the people who wind up on mugshot sites have not been convicted or have had the charges against them dropped. Indeed, some of these sites are themselves running into problems with the law.

But as a general rule, cautions Hartig, “if you see something that is a red flag, don’t even interview them. Once you interview and ask questions you are open to discrimination claims. Also, there are certain questions you can never ask, like people’s marital status or sexual orientation.”

Best of the People Search Services

There are many commercial tenant screening services, including services provided by the major credit reporting companies. Google is the best place to start to research someone’s background. But while you will uncover obscure and useful information you can’t get anywhere else, you will inevitably come up

with an overwhelming deluge of unfocused, irrelevant or inaccurate data. Be careful. Here are some popular, well-reviewed online services that can help focus the search.

Pipl.com

Pipl uses a custom Web-crawling algorithm designed to interact with searchable databases Google can’t see to extract facts, contact details, and other relevant information from personal profiles, member directories, scientific publications, court records, and numerous other “Deep Web” sources. The site clusters results belonging to a single person into a simple, easy to read profile, and also suggests items that might be related to that specific individual.

123people.com

Like Pipl, 123people uses a proprietary search algorithm to trawl the Deep Web to uncover relevant information from public records, like phone numbers, addresses, email addresses, images,

videos and web content. And it does it for free. The site does not go quite as deep as Pipl does, but it does return useful information in an easy-to digest format. As with most free services, 123people presents information amidst a slew of sponsored ads.

Spokeo.com

Much like the sites mentioned above, Spokeo delves into the Deep Web to pull people-related information from phone books, social networks, marketing lists, business sites, and other public sources. But the site is better for tracking down people’s geographic locations. The site charges a fee for the person’s address and deepest information, but it places the person in question on a map for free, providing their general location at a glance.

Remember that if you reject a tenant based on a credit report, you have to provide notice of what service you used and how to protest under the Fair Credit Reporting Act. Most commercial services provide the paperwork. ○

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