

Watch for “Red Flag” Consumer Links-List Sites

Most screening firms stay away from the so-called consumer sites, but once in a while firms may be fooled into thinking they are getting a great deal on a public record search. Some consumer sites are helpful, especially if someone is looking for a lost relative or classmate. But some of these sites are misleading. They often try to disguise themselves as sites used by professionals or they tout unrealistic features.

There are a few considerations to review before spending money on public record research from certain “all powerful” sites. If I find a site using any of the marketing schemes listed below, a giant red flag pops up in my mind and I take a closer look—

- **Charging membership fees for the ability to view free links lists**

The most common is charging a \$29 to \$35 fee for a one to five-year membership term. Some sites even offer an affiliate program to set up your own site in order to sell memberships to others. The “benefit” of membership leads the buyer to either a free link or to a series of free links pages belonging to others. This is nothing but a rip-off. Another money-making concept is to offer links access for free, but charge a monthly fee to avoid sitting through twenty seconds of pop-ups before the free link connects.

- **Show endorsement by a phony or suspect trade association**

Several of the suspect public records membership sites tout an endorsement from a national association of private investigators. Do a Google search on that association’s name and read the results.

- **Promote non-FCRA compliant employment screening**

Any public record professional will agree that you cannot purchase a “background check” on a new hire for \$15 and be truly protected from a negligent hiring lawsuit or be in compliance with the Federal Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA). You may be able to do quick record search from a couple web pages or court repository, or from a supplementary database vendor, but that does not equate to due diligence or to a full background check.

- **Over exaggerate the number of free public record sites with links**

If a people-searching site or free links list claims to access more than 35,000 or more “databases,” then something is misstated. There are not 35,000+ government web addresses in the U.S., each with a searchable database of free public records. The 35,000 number is calculated by duplicating the count of possible record types and jurisdictions within an existing database. For example, the docket index search for Iowa court records at www.iowacourts.gov includes criminal, civil, probate and traffic case data from all 99 Iowa counties. This is one database. But an over-exaggerator will count this one database as 396 databases (4 x 99) in the advertising text. Making the number count high won’t fool a professional, but it can mislead the novice consumer.