Googling Yourself - To Open or Not to Open That Digital Pandora's Box
Appeared in Quarters Magazine October 29, 2013

I remember the first time I Googled myself. I don't know what the hell I was thinking but I do remember having a feeling of excitement mixed with fear. As if the results would be like looking in a crystal ball and being able to see the future. Well I didn't see photos of myself bathed in riches standing in front of a Lamborghini, and neither will you (Unless you actually have a lot of cash and own a Lamborghini). There is a chance the results may, surprise, shock or down right mortify you. With that being understood let's discuss what happens when you visit www.google.com, enter your name into that rectangle and hit that RETURN button. To Google or not to Google? That is the question.

As someone who has crafted my social media and internet presence purposefully, I now search myself regularly. Does my personal website appear when I do a search? Do samples of my writing and design work also come up on the first page? Is my Twitter feed in the results? For people who work in social media these are the questions they are asking and the type of results they are looking for. All of these results are good results and this just shows that all my work in Search Engine Optimization has worked. Go a few more pages into the results and there is mention of me in my grandfather-in-laws obituary and a quote from me in an article on Atlanta nightclubs. Although these are not the things I am looking for, it is not odd that they have popped up.

The danger arises if you are not a social media, electronic age kind of person. During a Google search for my 70-something mother I found only two things. The first was her address listing in the online White Pages. The second was quite disconcerting. It was her current position and salary for the school system she worked for. Why could everyone see how much money my mother made? I was furious and so was my brother when I told him. We agreed not to tell our mom. She viewed the internet as pure evil. If she had found out that her efforts to stay free of its clutches had failed we could only imagine what would have happened. Imagine a pissed off old black lady in the Mac store with a baseball bat. Madea anyone?

She has since retired and that information has long been updated and her name no longer appears. It proves that even when you think you are in the clear you might not be. But what about pictures of you? How many of those could be on the Internet? What if you do a Google search for yourself and click the IMAGES button?

Danger! Danger! Will Robinson!!!! This is the part of Googling yourself can be he most painful and scary. If any of your "friends" have posted and tagged pictures of you that don't show you in a very positive light this is where you can lose. The rules and regulations of Facebook privacy settings and keeping tabs on who can tag a picture of you are not to be laughed at. You doing a keg stand at that frat party - Buddy took a picture and promptly posted it. That picture of you with your eyes half closed with a glass of wine in your hand makes you look like crap; but your "friend" looks great in it so they posted it to their page and tagged you. Isn't that wonderful? Not only do these

pictures appear in your friends' feeds; they will also appear as a search engine results if you aren't up to speed on your privacy settings.

In this technological world the difference between you and the other guy getting the job can be as simple as a Google search by the HR department. This weekend behavior now endangers your workweek success and no one wants that to happen. Make sure friends have to request permission to tag photos of you. It also pays to keep up on the changes in privacy settings. Make sure your social media persona can only be seen people you want to be able see it. Out of all of the results from my personal Google search, my Facebook page is not one of them. That is the way I want it and you should want that too.

What about pictures that you really don't have control over? I am not talking about ones that you can simply request be removed or change a setting to hide from the masses. I am talking about the worst photo you can ever take - the mug shot. In a search for images for a project I was working on I came across mug shots of one of the people I was working on the project with. Did I know they had an arrest record? Heck no! Do I and everyone else know now? Yes. While this information is public knowledge someone has decided to make money from it. If you have been arrested at anytime for anything and have had a mug shot taken chances are that Kodak moment is going to show up a search in Google images. Clicking on the shot will probably take you to a page where for a small fee you can have the picture removed. Sounds like extortion? I think so too but these websites are favorited by people who want to make sure their E-Harmony match isn't a felon. They are a free way to see the criminal history of everyone. There are also several counties and cities who post recent mug shots as well. In these cases there is no option for you to pay to have it removed. What can you do about it? Whether you were booked for a DUI or for blocking a demolition crew trying to tear down a historical landmark; be truthful about the arrest to potential employers. You can't escape it and depending on the job and the charges it may not even be a factor.

Knowing all of these possibilities you now have a choice. Will you Google yourself or won't you? The red pill or the blue pill?

Good luck Neo.