Your intimate details on the line

Amazon database would mine available resources for data

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Amazon.com is developing a system to gather and keep massive amounts of intimate information about its millions of shoppers, including their religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and income.

The database, which would combine information disclosed voluntarily by customers with facts gleaned from public databases, conceivably would give Amazon a larger or more detailed profile of its customers than any other retailer.

The Seattle-based company, with 59 million active customers, said it has no immediate plan to implement such a program. Its ability to do so emerged in a detailed patent application with the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office, disclosed Thursday.

A privacy expert said customers should be wary about Amazon having the capability to gather such a large amount of detailed information.

She said the data could end up in the hands of the myriad retailers that do business with the company, or with government officials or hackers.

"Amazon never ceases to amaze me," said Lillie Coney, associate director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, D.C.

"If they create this database, it will be used for other purposes. ... They are really creating something worth a great deal of value that will help their company."

The patent disclosure comes at a time of heightened awareness over online security and a rash of recent security breaches.

AOL recently published a list of more than 650,000 user queries that revealed names, addresses and Social Security numbers, and the company this week apologized and removed the data, but it's unknown how many copies of the sensitive information were made.

Amazon's pending patent application would give Amazon a larger or more detailed profile of its customers than any other retailer.
Amazon's pending patent, which would bar competitors from replicating the company's process for gathering information, details how it could compile data from customers to create a profile of products that a person might want to buy.

Such a database would include the gender, date of birth, interests, occupation, education, income level, residence, race and ethnicity of customers for Amazon's "gift clustering" program.

Customers already willingly disclose some personal information on the site -- to create a "wish list" of desired products, for example. The larger potential database would go beyond that.

"Even if a customer does not know demographic information or interests of a possible recipient, the system may be able to access such information from a user profile for the recipient, from past ordering patterns of the recipient, or from publicly accessible databases," the patent application said.

Company spokeswoman Patty Smith said Amazon.com has "no current plans" to implement such a system.

"Not every company uses a patent it has in its name, but it may have a patent in portfolio," Smith said. "Who knows 10 years down the road or five years down the road? It might be good to implement. We want to protect our intellectual property."

Smith said the document released Thursday is an addendum to a patent Amazon sought in October 2000 and received in February of this year.

She said much of what was in the original patent was also disclosed Thursday, but she didn't have details on what was new.

Smith said that six years ago Amazon was "trying to figure out ways to make it easier for customers to find information" on the company's wish list feature for gifts.

"Amazon is always careful how it uses customer data so the customer experience will be as good as it can be," she said.

The system described in the patent would give shoppers, with the click of a mouse, additional detailed information at the discretion of the gift recipient. Amazon already groups or clusters gifts, such as camping items or back-to-school goods, and then suggests them to buyers based on generic factors such as price, the relationship between the giver and receiver or the recipient's age or gender.

The patent disclosure also comes at a time when Amazon, originally an online bookseller in 1995, is moving into new ventures to boost profits. The company's stock took a huge hit last month after Amazon reported disappointing second-quarter earnings and company executives said there would be continual heavy spending on technology. Amazon recently started its own toy and food stores.

The patent application, filed Dec. 9, 2005, by Amazon inventor Amit Agarwal but made public Thursday, could take years to be approved,
according to Brigid Quinn, a Patent & Trademark Office spokeswoman.

Quinn said there's a backlog of more than 700,000 patent applications, and the agency reviews about 300,000 a year.

"It's in the early stages. It's not even on an examiner's desk yet," Quinn said. "But they could use it without it being patented. The patent only prevents others from using it."

Greg Linden, a former technology team leader at Amazon, said it sounds to him like Amazon is just protecting its wish list feature.

Linden, founder of Findory.com, an online news site, also warned not to read too much into a patent application because lawyers "throw in everything they can think of" to keep competitors from copying an idea.

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