

# Can You Find Out Who is Visiting Your Planned Giving Website?

## The Answer is No. And You Shouldn't Try.

*This question has been going around — possibly encouraged by claims some vendors seem to be making — as to whether a nonprofit could and/or should secretly capture name, address and other information about visitors to their websites. That data is valuable, so why not go for it?*

*The simple fact is it is **not technically possible**, and what's more, it's **unethical** to boot.*

***Jason Stauffer**, Director of IT Operations at VirtualGivingCom, provides a layman-friendly explanation of why.*

To answer this question, we need to define a couple of terms, “track” and “identify,” because the distinction between them is critical.

It is possible to track a visitor on a website. In a way, it's like **following a blip on a radar screen**. We can see what pages they visit, where they get lost — if they do — and what page they

exit the site from. Their “blip” is actually their IP [Internet Protocol] address. This address is a string of binary code that labels a piece of computer equipment, such as a visitor's PC, as the user browses the Internet.

But it is **not** possible to **identify** the person “in the driver's seat” of the computer with that IP address label. By “identify,” I mean to getting their name, address, or similar information. This has been proved in a variety of **Internet-related court cases** involving child pornography and copyright infringement, for example.

This quote from one copyright case puts the disconnect between IP address and computer user in a nutshell: “The infringer **might be** the [Internet] subscriber, someone in the subscriber's household, a visitor with her laptop, a neighbor, or someone parked on the street [using a wireless connection] at any given moment.” So that has been established in law.

Think about it — if websites could identify visitors, we'd be deluged every day with media scandals about this or that celebrity, politician, or corporate bigwig visiting pornographic or otherwise controversial sites. *And we're not.*

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But there are serious *practical* issues that any nonprofit thinking of capturing visitors' personal data should think twice about, and **it's all about privacy**.

From a *customer relationship* point of view, no visitor is going to thank you for grabbing their personal info stealthily when they visit your website. In fact, they might try to prosecute you when they discover you did so. So sensible nonprofits that want to stay on their constituents' good side **will discard the idea right away**.

But citizens' privacy is also constitutionally and legally protected. That's why law enforcement agencies making investigations like the ones I mentioned before are **required to get a court**

**order** to ask an internet service provider to reveal personal data on a subscriber based on their IP address. It's just like with a wiretap, *and it's taken just as seriously*.

**Think about it – if websites could identify visitors, we'd be deluged every day with media scandals.**

track visitors on your site, **that's true**. If they tell you they can identify those visitors for you, **that's untrue**.

And why any reputable vendor would want to suggest that you risk losing your prospects' goodwill by violating their right to privacy – **that** is a question *I can't answer*.

#### **Why play with that?**

Besides, we've *already* seen that the IP address has no reliable direct link to the actual computer user, anyway.

To wrap this up, let me just say, if a vendor tells you they can



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