

PLANNING AHEAD

'Digital Afterlife' gives ideas for handling estate

By David Olson
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

In the old days — circa 1998 — family or friends of someone who died would sometimes spend weeks rummaging through boxes and sifting through stacks of papers to locate photos, bank statements

and personal letters.

That still happens, but today many people leave a detailed trail of their personal and financial lives in computer files and on online accounts.

The only problem is, grieving loved ones don't always have passwords to access the

In digital age, companies are forming to help people deal with the online life, business of those who die

information, and social-media sites like Facebook don't always know if a user died, leading to morbid computer-generated messages about getting in touch with a friend, now deceased.

Enter the "digital executor."

A new book, "Your Digital Afterlife," by John Romano and Evan Carroll (paperback, 216 pages, New Riders Press) recommends appointing someone to handle your digital legacy, much as a traditional executor carries out instructions in

a written will.

Companies with names like Legacy Locker have formed to consolidate computer-based information in one secure online place and pass it on to designated beneficiaries. The service can be especially helpful for people with more complex online lives, including owners of small-business websites, said Jeremy Toeman, founder and CEO of the Legacy Locker.

Mike Combs, 50, of Hesperia, Calif., said he doesn't need a formal document. He

already told his wife where to find important information on his computer and how to access it.

"Digital Afterlife" co-author Carroll said that may be enough for some.

"If you give your wife your password, she becomes your digital executor," said Carroll, who is also co-writer of a blog on digital afterlives.

Yet some people may not want their spouses, parents or children to view everything they've done online, he said. They might consider giving them passwords for financial information and delegate trusted friends to discreetly delete items they probably would have wanted to keep private.

Pornography, viewed by tens of millions of Americans online, including an unknown number who die every day, is the most obvious source of potential posthumous embarrassment.

But there also might be posts on a chat line or comments in an e-mail that were innocent but could easily be misinterpreted or taken out of context, Carroll said.

"There is no greater fear someone has than having something you said, did or wrote misrepresented after you pass away," he said.

Carroll said many people don't think their Facebook posts and updates are worth saving. But they don't always

reflect on how the remnants of their Facebook page may have meaning to loved ones and help them in the grieving process, he said.

Facebook deletes or converts an account to a memorial page if a legal executor or member of the immediate family sends verification of death. The memorial page does not include the deceased person's Facebook status updates and only allows Facebook "friends" to view it.

Twitter allows family to archive public tweets. Yahoo! totally deletes accounts when a death is verified.

Christian Quintana, a funeral home manager, said Facebook and computer files can offer a treasure trove of items for an online or DVD tribute.

Even if decedents did not have Facebook pages or a computer, loved ones often have computer-based photos of them, he said. Instead of searching through drawers and closets for photos in time to include in a tribute, loved ones can quickly e-mail them to the funeral home.

An increasing number of younger people who die had Facebook pages, he said. Friends and family members sometimes go over the pages with Quintana to pick out not only photos, but also poems, sayings, favorite quotes and other postings that become remembrances in tributes.

Parade of Homes

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Thur. March 10th, 12-4pm

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