



IT'S YOUR LIFE

What is “virtual estate” planning?

There’s a piece of the overall estate planning process that few think about or may even be aware of: planning the handling of their “virtual estate.”

If you’re part of the majority of Americans who use the Internet for everything from banking to shopping to socializing, you have virtual estate, because these activities require digital accounts complete with a user name and password.

If something should happen to you, what happens to your digital accounts? Who has access? If your family wants to preserve or download the content, will they be able to? Would you want them to? Even with your user IDs and passwords, accessing a deceased person’s online accounts may violate service agreements or state or federal law. Today, only seven states have passed laws related to digital assets.

Currently, you do have a few ways to plan for your heirs’ access to your virtual estate.

Check website policies. Some automatically close or delete inactive accounts. Others disable an account upon request by the family or executor.

Compile a list of user names and passwords. Then store on a flash drive or print, and keep in a safe place. Don’t include this information in your will, since a will becomes public record during probate.

Leave instructions. While there’s no guarantee your heirs or executor will be able to follow them, make your wishes known on how you would like each account handled.

Commercial digital asset services. These service companies often allow you to name a designated beneficiary to whom your account information will be released upon proof of your death.

Taking time to consider your virtual estate now can save your loved ones significant time and frustration later.◇

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