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Natural disasters cause virtual “safety deposit boxes” to gain popularity

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Natural disasters spur Web-based safety boxes

By ROY L. WILLIAMS
Newhouse News Service

BIRMINGHAM, ALA. — A Birmingham company founded by former University of Alabama electrical engineering students has carved out a niche with a product that acts as a virtual safe deposit box.

WebSafe, which has customers in most of the United States as well as Canada and Europe, converts personal records into digital data stored in an online safe that can be accessed only with an encrypted code or key.

The company was founded three years ago and has seen business take off since Hurricane Ivan struck the Mobile, Ala., area in September 2004 and Hurricane Katrina devastated much of the Gulf Coast a year later, said Don Moore, WebSafe’s operations director.

The Internal Revenue Service, Small Business Administration and Insurance Information Institute have all issued warnings and pointers lately on how individuals and businesses should protect information from natural disasters.

Moore, who joined WebSafe two years ago after working for IBM and other computer companies, said his former classmates, Bob Wilson and Larry Bates, had perfect timing when they started WebSafe.

The company provides Internet storage encrypted with secure passwords to protect birth certificates, financial records, wills, deeds and other personal data, Moore said.

Costs vary based on the size of the account. A WebSafe account useful to a family is less than \$100 a year, Moore said, while one west Alabama planning commission bought an account with considerable storage data that cost about \$2,000.

“People are now embracing this idea of a virtual safe deposit box, so we are trying to keep it comparable to a bank safe deposit box,” Moore said.

Doctors' offices have signed up for its feature MyMedSafe, which stores medical records such as prescriptions and immunization forms, Moore said.

"Experts say after Katrina that many people were literally being treated in a vacuum, with no knowledge of medical history," Moore said.

Wilson, president of WebSafe, and Bates, vice president of technology, started WebSafe after seeing a need for data management, digital conversion and data storage through their other company, SysCon, a commercial hardware/software sales company founded in 1981. They still run SysCon, which has done consulting for WebSafe.

Web-based storage and security services have grown the past few years amid efforts to counter identity theft and protect documents from natural disasters, Bates said.

"Any piece of information, whether document, photo or audio, can be uploaded to a user's secure account," Bates said.

He said each account has a unique encryption/decryption key. The company describes its system as virtually hack-proof and says if there were a security breach, the intruder would see only meaningless information because of the encryption used.

"This is very important because if the main WebSafe site were compromised or hacked, the hacker would need each key for each account to access information," Bates said.