

How To Protect Yourself From Identity Theft

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My dad always says that "it takes all kinds of people to make up the world", but looking at the ever-increasing reports of identity theft, you have to wonder if that is really necessary. Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes today, and if you don't take precautions, you could be the next victim. The funny thing is, if you think about it, the precautions you should take are all common sense!

How does it work? Very simply, someone gets some information about you, perhaps online or perhaps even via some junk mail that you tossed in the trash without even tearing it up. It has your name, address, date of birth, and social security number. So armed with that information, someone opens a Visa account at a bank with YOUR information, except that they put THEIR address on the application form. What's wrong with that, people move all the time, so they indicate this is a new address and also enter your old address. Based on the name, old address, social security number, it is determined that you have good credit, so the card is issued and sent to the NEW address, where the thief then starts a spending spree.

The problem comes in because it will be at least 30 days before the Visa company knows there is a problem there. That is 30 days of spending and charging that Visa card up to its limit. The bill is sent 30 days later, it is of course ignored, and then they start trying to call you. When the REAL YOU is finally reached, now there is a problem because someone via identity theft used YOUR information to charge up a truckload of stuff and now they cannot be found.

Interestingly enough, the majority of the credit card companies are skeptical and very suspicious when you tell them you are a victim of identity theft. From personal experience, I can tell you that Citibank is the worst of the bunch. "I'm sorry sir, it was YOUR social security number on the account so you owe the money, when can we expect a payment?" Maybe when hell freezes over?

At that point, the identity theft has already happened, and you can plan on spending countless hours and probably some legal fees until many months or even years later, things are back to normal for you. But if that doesn't sound like a good time to you, there are steps you can and should take TODAY that will make the act of someone stealing your identity much more difficult. Unfortunately, it will probably never be "impossible" but if the best you can do is "much more difficult", then by all means go for it.

First of all, almost all of us get junk mail – great insurance rates, new mortgage program, car loan offers, and much more. If you look at the content of some of that mail, you would be surprised at the level of detail they contain – name, address, phone, date of birth, sometimes even social security number. Take any and all junk mail that is addressed to you and SHRED it. You can get a decent shredder at any office supply store pretty cheaply. Shred that junk mail.

When you are working online, we all know that there are some great deals that can be had online. But just because a web site is designed well with attractive colors does not automatically mean that the vendor can be trusted. Heck, most 12 year olds today can create a very professional looking web site, so just think of the site that could be created by someone intent on identity theft. One great way to protect yourself when purchasing online is to use a debit card that has ONLY enough money on it for the current transaction. Anything costing more than that will not get approved. Just before you make a transaction, you can transfer funds from your regular credit card or checking account to this single-use debit card, and only transfer enough to cover the current transaction. NEVER give your social security number to an online site. It is never a requirement, and if they insist it is, you should surf in the other direction as fast as possible.

With the emails you get, NEVER open an attachment if you don't know who the email is from. And if there really is a "computer problem" with your bank or investments account, they will NEVER ask you for your password or personal information from an online form. This is known as "phishing", and it totally blows me away to see how many people fall for such a thing regularly. If you go to their online form, which may look exactly like the one your bank actually uses, once they have your password and other personal information, you are toast and can look forward to months of trying to get your very own case of identity theft resolved.

In summary, just apply some LOGIC to it. Shred that junk mail. Use spam filters for your email. Do not divulge personal information via an email request from your bank, since they will never ask you to do that. Never open an email attachment from somebody you don't know, even if the filename of the attachment has your mouse finger twitching out of curiosity. Be smart about your personal information, and remember that identity theft is no picnic and a LOT of work to get straightened out. Jon is a computer engineer who maintains many websites to pass along his knowledge, experience, information, and findings. You can read more about Identity Theft at his web site at <http://www.identity-theft-info.com>