

Identity Theft - Awareness, Prevention, Recovery

Article by: Michael Russell

Identity theft is rapidly becoming the most popular crime of the new millennium. In an age where most of our daily transactions are conducted electronically, criminals are finding more and more ways of infiltrating computer systems once thought to be impervious. What's especially frightening is that they require only a single successful attempt in order to steal everything that is your life. That one victory in accessing your data can result in financial ruin, or worse, criminal activities which are attributed to you because they were committed under your identity. Fortunately, there are ways to prevent identity theft, and options which you can pursue if you should ever become a victim of this terrible crime.

The best way to avoid the consequences of identity theft is to not become a victim in the first place. You'll need to take some added precautions in your daily life in order to discourage identity thieves, but it will be well worth your time to do so.

Use of the internet is one of the most common causes of identity theft. We apply for jobs, go shopping, and even handle our banking over the internet. This makes it a prime target for identity thieves! In order to protect yourself, it's important that you're conscious of the vulnerabilities in your computer. Programs known as spy ware and viruses are capable of quietly infiltrating your system and wreaking all sorts of havoc. They might even be monitoring what you're typing and then sending that information along to the malicious recipient. As such, it's vital that you purchase good anti-virus software, which is available in virtually any retail computer store. Reputable anti-spy ware programs can be found freely on the internet and are quite effective.

Another effective protection against internet-based identity theft is called a firewall. This is essentially an addition to your computer which prevents hackers and other infiltrators from accessing your system any sensitive data contained therein. Firewalls can take the form of either internal software programs or external hardware devices which attach to your computer. Some forms of wireless internet routers also come equipped with firewalls. Acquiring a firewall, in whichever form you choose to apply one, is absolutely vital for anyone who stores or transmits personal information through their computer. Some users keep several firewalls raised at all times! After a point, attempting to break through layer upon layer of defenses is simply not worth the identity thief's time, which means that personal information protected in this fashion is far more secure.

Of course, identity theft in the physical world remains a threat worthy of paying considerable attention to. It's vital that you retain any personal documents in a secure location, particularly with sensitive information such as your Social Security Number. You'd do well to store this sort of paperwork in a solid lockbox, which is then kept in a location that is both safe and out of sight. This may sound a touch paranoid to you, but identity theft is not unheard of in the wake of home robberies. Similarly, be aware of your surroundings when you have a reason to carry these documents on your person. Have a look over your shoulder before presenting such information to anyone, and when inputting your bank PIN number at the ATM or grocery store, cover the keypad with one hand as you type with the other. Such precautions might seem overly simple, but they do work.

Should you become a victim of identity theft despite the above precautions, it is vitally important that you don't wait to take action. Your first move should be to contact any one of the three major credit bureaus in the United States (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) and request that they place a fraud alert on your credit report. The bureau you make this request of is then obligated to pass the word on to its counterparts. A fraud alert means that you will automatically be opted out of any pre-approved offers of credit and insurance for up to two years, and it also enables you to work with the bureau to wipe fraudulent charges from your records. You should also promptly file a report with your local police department. Not only does this begin the investigative process, it also enables the credit bureaus to instantly delete fraudulent charges and information without having to conduct their own investigation.

Michael Russell

Your Independent guide to Identity Theft