

Safeguarding Your Personal Information From Identity Thieves

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An identity thief doesn't just steal your credit card and personal information to start buying crazily in your name. He gets new cards, opens new loans, and leaves a long trail of unpaid bills in your name. He even uses your identity to commit acts of terrorism or other crimes. What are you to do?

Identity theft occurs more frequently than you would like to believe - and is committed frequently by someone you know. This is what happened to Linda Foley, a magazine writer, who learned that her own employer had swiped her identity to open cell phone and credit card accounts. Now Foley, along with her husband, fight back as the Co-Executive Directors of the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC) in San Diego, California.

Can This Happen to You?

After Bridget J. Thomas learned that her identity was stolen by a bank employee at a branch 300 miles from the one she used, she was shocked. And that was just the beginning of her nightmare! When the thief was caught, she was working at a different bank in a different state. After her arrest, collection agencies continued to hound Ms Thomas.

Setting the Record Straight Might Not Be All That Easy - or Quick!

Setting the record straight is the tip of a nightmarish iceberg that can take months - even years to accomplish - often with undue pain and suffering for the victim. In serious cases victims spend an average of 600 hours and \$1,400 in out-of-pocket expenses to repair their credit. Until they can prove their innocence, they are more likely to be:

- charged higher rates for insurance and fees for credit cards,
- rejected for student loans or home mortgages,
- arrested for crimes they did not commit.
- unable to get or keep a job,

A Call From A Collection Agency Or A turndown For A Loan Is Often the Only Tip-off That Your Identity Was Stolen.

A thief needs only one thing to open the doors to his windfall - your Social Security number. Unfortunately it is routinely used by government agencies, health care providers, utility companies, merchants, employers, and financial institutions. Often, your Social Security number is publicly available. That's how General John M. Shalikashvili, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became a victim. His Social Security number and those of many other military officers were published in the "Congressional Record" and were later posted on the internet. Thieves used their identities to open 273 new credit cards accounts and run up a bill of over \$200,000.00 in charges.

Develop a Form of Defense

To stop identity thieves in their steps, there are several things you can do. You can begin by freezing access to your credit file. By doing so, you cause your file to become off-limits to anyone who does not know the secret PIN (Personal Information Number) of your choosing. This sets the wheels in motion to protect you from the bad guys - anyone who attempts to apply for credit in your name. It causes their application to be rejected; although your credit cards won't be affected. And if you want to apply for new credit or let a bank, store, or agency run a background check on you, you can get a credit thaw. For example, if you decided to shop for a big-ticket item, like a car, you might thaw your history for auto dealers.

Other Things You Can Do - Starting NOW!

- Periodically check your credit report for suspicious activities. Americans are now entitled to a free annual credit report from each of the three bureaus: Experian, Equifax, and TransUnion.
- If you elect to shop online, use a credit card rather than a debit card. With a credit card, you have the extra protection of maximum liability of \$50.00 for unauthorized purchased.
- Learn more about "phishing" email scams, and other schemes, frauds, and cons to separate you from your identity and your money. For more information about these scams and about resources at your disposal, go to <http://www.ProtectingYourIdentity.blogspot.com/>

In the Event You Do Become A Victim

Here are some steps to take:

- Act fast and prepare yourself for an uphill battle uncooperative and unsupportive credit card and law enforcement agencies. For guidance and support, I suggest that you turn to organizations and agencies like ITRC (www.identitytheftcenter.org), the Federal Trade Commission (www.FTC.gov), and others.
- Call the fraud dept. of one of the three credit bureaus, Experian, Equifax, and TransUnion, and request that a fraud alert be placed on your credit reports. (The other two credit bureaus will automatically be notified.) The alert lasts for 90 days and requires creditors to call you before opening new accounts in your name; however, a word of caution is in order here. There are no legal requirements to honor alerts and merchants who are eager to make a sale may ignore them.
- Close your credit card accounts and change the passwords on all your financial and banking accounts.
- File a police report. Although credit bureaus won't extend a fraud alert without it, be aware that local police departments may be reluctant to provide a report. Many may lack the resources to properly investigate the crime.
- Mail copies of the police report to all three credit bureaus with a cover letter demanding your complete credit file.
- Call every credit where you know a bogus account has been created and have them close your file immediately. Demand copies of all fraudulent applications for credit and billing statements. Creditors don't want to divulge that information, but they will if you enclose a copy of a police report and forward your request it in writing via certified mail.

Conclusion:

Face it, identity theft is a growing problem affecting everyone in some way or another. With the increase popularity of internet usage, it has become easier for cybercriminals to steal our identity. In 2002 alone, the victim total due to identity theft climbed to 10 million, a new high. The cost to the economy was up an astonishing 41 percent to \$52.6 billion, according to The Identity Theft Survey Report, available from the Federal Trade Commission at the website (www.consumer.gov/idtheft/). Each year these totals are climbing with no apparent sign of slowing down.

What are your chances of becoming a victim of some form of identity theft? According to the Federal Trade Commission is one in ten.

"So what am I to do?" you ask. My recommendation is that first you educate yourself with information and resources at your disposal. Next, purchase identity theft insurance. Find more information at <http://www.ProtectingYourIdentity.blogspot.com>

Known as The Master Blog Builder, Etienne A. Gibbs, MSW, helps small business owners and non-profit organizations improve their customer relationship marketing. Often he comes across cases that are red flags calling identity thieves to come in. Hence, he started "Protecting Your Identity" blog. Contact him at <http://www.MasterBlogBuilder.com/> for more information.