



Personal Privacy: Protect Your Identity In Financial Matters

Identity theft is on the increase. Not only is identity theft an invasion of your privacy, but also someone actually assumes your identity. Using a variety of methods, criminals steal Social Security numbers and the numbers of credit cards, driver's license, ATM card, telephone calling card, and other key pieces of an individual's identity. Using this information, they can charge your cards to the max, open new charge accounts in your name, establish cellular phone services, buy a new car, and wipe out your children's college savings accounts or even your retirement nest egg before looking for another victim.

Even when you are careful with your personal information, you can still be a victim of identity theft. You can reduce your risk of someone getting access to your personal data by managing your personal information wisely. Here are a few tips to keep in mind, other than with bank accounts, credit cards, bills, insurance, and investments:

Get a copy of your credit report from each credit bureau annually and check it for inaccuracies. By law, you are entitled to one free credit report every 12 months from each of the three credit bureaus.

It is your responsibility to look for inaccuracies in your credit report. By doing this, you will be able to correct mistakes **before** they show up when you try to obtain a job, a loan, or insurance.

The Fair and Accurate Credit Transaction Act was signed into law in December 2003. Consumers are entitled to **one free credit report every 12 months** from each of the three credit bureaus. Free credit reports **must** be requested from the central service established to handle these requests **NOT** from the individual credit bureaus. Order:

- On-line at www.annualcreditreport.com
- By phone (toll free number) -- 877-322-8228.
- By mail -- print out a form from the web site and mail it to:
Annual Credit Report Request Service
P.O. Box 105281
Atlanta, GA 30348-5281

NOTE: It has been recommended by some consumer education groups that you call or write for your free credit report due to the operation of a number of imposter web sites. It has also been suggested that you order your credit report from one bureau, four months later from another and in another four months from the remaining bureau. By doing so, you will be able to monitor activity on your accounts for the entire year.

The credit bureaus will ask specific personal information in order to positively identify you when you order a copy of your credit report.

If you want additional credit reports during the year a fee (about \$9) will be charged for each copy. This law also entitles consumers to several identity theft measures including placing "Fraud Alerts" on their credit files after suspicious activity.

If you have been denied credit, you should receive a letter with the name of the credit bureau that provided the negative credit report. You are entitled to a free credit report from that credit bureau (order within 60 days). Contact the credit bureau directly.

- ◆ **Tear or shred personal papers that you do not want anymore.** Use these disposal methods on all charge receipts, copies of credit applications, insurance forms, bank checks and statements, expired credit cards, and credit card offers that arrive in the mail.
- ◆ **Use other types of identifiers or pass words with financial issues (insurance, investments, credit cards, banks, and phone accounts), other than your mother's maiden name, whenever possible.** Do not use important dates like familiar birth dates, anniversary dates, and so on as an identifier or password.
- ◆ **Minimize the amount of personal identification information and the number of credit cards you carry with you** or never carry these other papers or cards with you, unless needed:
 - Bank account information that includes:
 - Debit card
 - ATM card
 - Bank account I.D. card
 - Bank credit card
 - Store and other types of credit cards (make sure your credit cards are signed).
- ◆ **Keep a list of your credit cards and bank accounts or photocopy fronts and backs of all these items.** Write down expiration dates and telephone numbers of customer service and fraud departments. Store the originals and the copies in two separate secure and moisture free places. If you need any of these items, carry them in your wallet or purse in a safe or guarded place on you.
- ◆ **Guard your financial account numbers.** Only provide your bank and store credit card numbers and expiration date, debit card, or bank account number when you are paying for a store purchase, initiating an Internet, phone, or fax purchase, or when you are applying for credit. It isn't necessary to give that type of information for any other reason.
- ◆ **Reconcile your bank statements** against your canceled checks each month. If there are any irregularities, report this to your bank.
- ◆ **Watch your bills for unusual activity.** Also, pay attention to all your billing cycles. If you do not receive one of your expected bills on time, call your creditor to inquire.
- ◆ **Do not give out personal information like credit card numbers and expiration dates or checking account numbers** on the phone, through the mail, or over the Internet unless you have initiated the contact or you know whom you are dealing with.
- ◆ **More specific tips for credit cards:**
 - Reduce the number of credit cards in your name.
 - Destroy or shred all printed offers for credit cards you do not want.
 - You can call the toll-free number to notify the top three credit bureaus to opt-out of pre-approved credit offers and marketing lists you receive via the mail: **1-888-5OPT-OUT (1-888-567-8688)**. You will be calling the National Opt-Out Center. This **hot line** was established by top three credit bureaus: Equifax, Experian, and Trans Union Corporation. By calling, you can opt-out of most junk mail credit card offers for two years or fill out a form for a permanent opt-out.
 - Lower the limits on your credit cards to no more than you will normally use.
 - Reconcile your credit card statements against your receipts each month. If there are any irregularities, report them to your credit card company.
 - Cut up or shred old or unused credit cards before discarding. Notify those credit card companies by letter that you no longer wish to use their card before cutting up unused, yet active credit cards.
 - Do not loan your cards to anyone.

◆ **Opt-out from financial institution(s) sharing personal information with outside companies:**

- Banks, credit unions, credit card and insurance companies, brokerage firms, and other financial institutions are required by the FTC to send yearly privacy notices to their consumers so they can opt-out of personal information sharing only with outside companies (non-affiliated third parties).
- Look for bill inserts or documents with lots of writing with the titles of privacy notice, privacy policy notice, or opt-out notice.
- Consumers should follow the company's procedures stated in the privacy notice on how to opt-out by calling the financial institution's toll-free number, by mail, or via the Internet.
- If you lost or tossed out the privacy policy and you haven't opt-out, consumers can still contact the financial institution to find out their specific opt-out procedure(s).

For more information on protecting your privacy and identity, call your local University of Illinois Extension Unit office.

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