

Ask the Advisor



“I lost my pocketbook and I’m worried about identity theft, what can I do?”

Beatrice in Bow

There are many things you can do, but the first is not to worry. Identity theft, while fast growing, is still far less common than traditional physical theft of property.

The real burden is the time involved, hundreds of hours by some accounts, in cleaning up the aftermath of identity theft.

The best protection is prevention. Know that there are four key pieces of information that an identity thief would like to have: your name, your address, your date of birth and especially your social security number. Your name and address are readily available from numerous public sources, but your birth date and social security number are less easily obtained.

Don’t give out either unless to a known and trusted entity and even then, only do so when absolutely necessary. Ask the requestor, “Do you really need this information?” Be especially wary giving such information to a caller or via email.

Your driver’s license already has your name, address and birth date. Don’t make things easy for an ID thief by also carrying your social security number with your driver’s license in your wallet or pocketbook.

Stealing mail is a common method for ID thieves to get information. Be sure not to let your mail sit in your mailbox any longer than necessary, and certainly not overnight. Get a post office box or a lockable mailbox.

Don’t advertise when you are away by letting your mail pile up; instead, file a vacation hold with the post office.

One of the more onerous forms of identity theft is for a thief to steal and complete a pre-approved credit card application sent to you. Use a crosscut or confetti paper shredder to shred any applications, statements or documents with personal information that would otherwise be thrown away.

Reduce the number of pre-approved credit card offers that you receive and that could potentially be stolen by calling the consumer credit reporting industry opt out toll free number, 1-888-5-OPTOUT (1-888-567-8688) or visit the website, www.optoutprescreen.com.

You will be asked to provide the very information that you are trying to protect, but according to the Federal Trade Commission, the information you provide is confidential and will be used only to process your request to opt out.

Reduce potentially

dangerous, not to mention annoying, phone calls by registering your phone number on the Federal Trade Commission National Do Not Call Registry. Register for free by calling 888-382-1222, or visiting www.donotcall.gov.

Also, review credit card statements carefully for unauthorized transactions. Instruct children not to give out personal information.

When giving out personal information, do so quietly so eavesdroppers cannot hear. Don’t respond to emails from unknown senders. Install virus protection software and a firewall on your computer.

Last but not least, monitor your credit. You can now obtain a free copy of your credit report (that will not count against your credit score) once a year from each of the three major credit-reporting bureaus.

By requesting a single report every four months, each time from a different bureau, rather than three reports at once, you can create your own credit monitoring service for free.

Call 877-322-8228 or go to www.annualcreditreport.com for your free report.

So what if your pocketbook, wallet or mail is lost or stolen? Get a lost or stolen property report

from the police.

While the police are unlikely to recover such items, the police report will be invaluable in clearing your good name should you actually become a victim of identity theft.

Immediately call one of the three major credit-reporting bureaus and have a security freeze or fraud alert placed on your file. You only need to call one bureau; each is required to inform the others.

Equifax can be reached at 800-685-1111, Experian at 888-397-3742 and Trans Union at 800-916-8800.

Where applicable, call your credit card companies, bank, Department of Motor Vehicles and the Social Security Administration.

Follow up with written confirmation of your queries and save copies. Just as with a police report, the copies can prove invaluable in clearing your good name should you actually become a victim of identity theft.

Lastly, provide details of any identity theft to the Federal Trade Commission. The FTC doesn’t pursue small cases, but the information will become part of a national database that will help in the fight against identity theft.

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