

Safety Tips to Help Safeguard Your Identity

Identity theft is a serious and costly crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years cleaning up the mess thieves have made of their good name and credit record. The following tips can help you lower your risk of becoming a victim.

Protect your Social Security number. Don't carry your Social Security card in your wallet, and try to avoid using it as an identifier on checks, health plan cards, etc.

Don't give your personal information over the phone or via e-mail or mail. Scam artists "phish" for victims' information by posing as representatives of banks, stores or government agencies. This is done over the phone, in e-mails and through regular mail. Don't respond to a request to verify your account number or password, and don't give out personal information unless *you* made the contact.

Keep your identity from getting trashed. Shred all papers with personal information before you throw them away. Shred unwanted credit card applications and "convenience checks" that come in the mail, credit card receipts with your account number, outdated financial papers and papers containing your clients' personal information.

Control your personal financial information. Many states require banks and other financial institutions to get your permission before sharing your personal financial information with outside companies. In general, when prompted on a form, always select the choice that you want to "opt-out" of sharing your personal information with other companies or organizations.

Check your bills and bank statements. Open credit card bills and bank statements right away. Check for any unauthorized charges or withdrawals and report them immediately. Call if bills don't arrive on time; it may mean that someone has changed contact information to hide fraudulent charges.

Stop pre-approved credit offers. Stop most pre-approved credit card offers by calling toll-free 888-5OPTOUT (888-567-8688) to have your name removed from credit bureau marketing lists. These mail packages are valuable for identity thieves, who steal your mail and fill out the applications in your name.

Check your credit reports. One of the best ways to protect yourself from identity theft is to monitor your credit history. You can get one free credit report every year from each of the three national credit bureaus: Equifax, Experian and Trans Union. Request all three reports at once, or order from a different bureau every four months. (More comprehensive monitoring services from the credit bureaus cost from \$44 to over \$100 per year.) Order your free annual credit reports by phone, toll-free, at 877-322-8228, or online at www.annualcreditreport.com/cra/index.jsp.

Sources: The Federal Trade Commission, The Office of Privacy Protection in the California Department of Consumer Affairs

This article is part of the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® 2005 REALTOR® Safety Week Kit.