

Protect Yourself From ID Theft

BY TAMARA GURNEY

Every time you conduct a financial transaction, you share or transmit information that could make you vulnerable to identity theft. When you

write a check, rent a car or complete an application for a credit card you could become the victim of a new breed of crook. These identity thieves appropriate your personal information for the purpose of committing fraud or theft.

While it is probably not possible to make yourself completely safe from this threat, you can minimize your risk by managing your personal information wisely and by taking some specific steps to make fraud or theft at your expense much less likely.

Identity thieves use a combination of both low and high-tech methods to gain access to data. They steal wallets or purses to gain credit cards, bank cards or checks. They also steal mail, including bank and credit card statements, pre-approved credit offers, telephone calling cards and tax information. Sometimes they go through personal or business trash to gain information. Personal information shared on the Internet is also a prime source of information for these criminals.

They might go to elaborate lengths to take advantage of you. They could open a new credit card in your name, or they might use stolen or counterfeit checks or debit cards to drain your bank account. Many times they simply use your credit card number to run up charges by phone. Sometimes they will call your credit card issuer and, pretending to be you, change the mailing address on your account. In such cases, it may take a long time to realize that you have become a victim.

Doing business by long distance, using a credit card, shopping on-line and other normal everyday procedures are convenient, but it is much safer to do business with people you know and are sure you can trust. As a community banker, I recognize the value of knowing the customer personally and understanding the normal patterns in the account activity of each customer we serve. Recently, an attempt to cash a customer's stolen check was foiled by an alert member of our staff who thought something was wrong with a check cashing inquiry and called the customer directly. This personal contact revealed the stolen check, protecting the customer from a serious fraud.

Here are some helpful tips on how to guard against identity theft:

- ◆ Know how information will be used before you reveal any sensitive information. Find out if it will be shared with others and if you can

choose to keep it confidential.

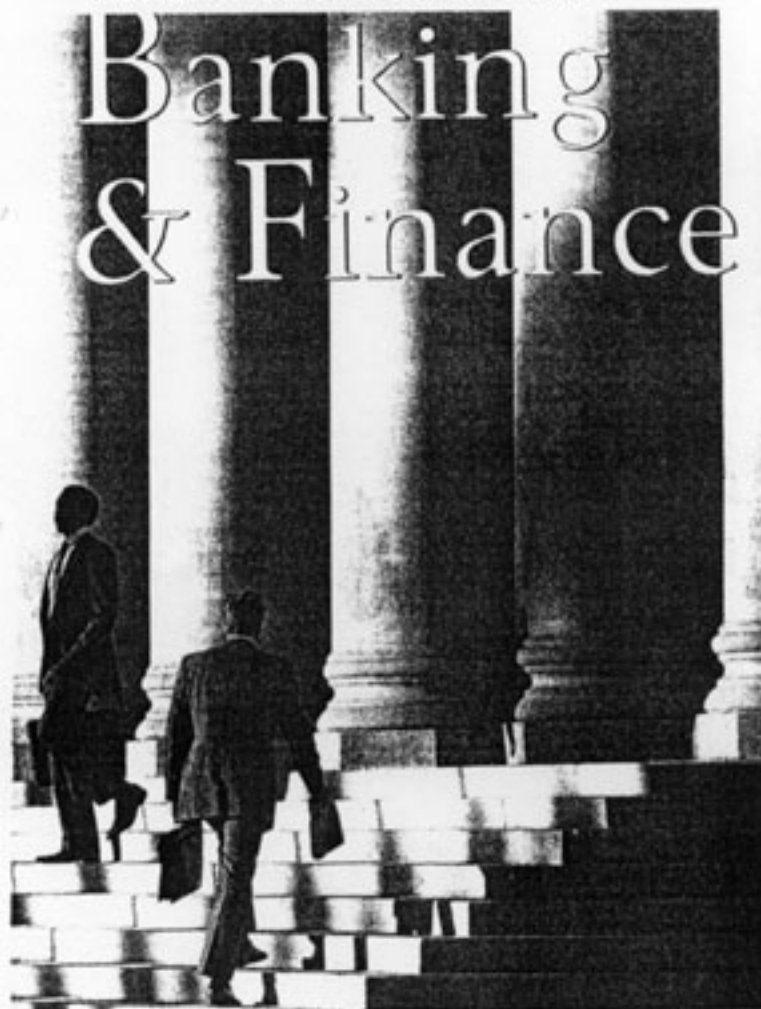
- ◆ Pay attention to your billing cycles. Call your creditors if bills don't show up on time. Save your receipts to compare with billing statements.

- ◆ Carefully review credit card statements looking for any unauthorized charges.

- ◆ Protect your mail from theft by depositing outgoing mail in post office collection boxes or at a post office and promptly remove mail from your mailbox after it has been delivered. Arrange to have your mail picked up or held by the post office when you are away. Don't ever write your account number on a postcard or the outside of an envelope.

- ◆ Use passwords on your credit card, bank and phone accounts. Avoid using easily available information like your mother's maiden name, your birth date or the last four digits of your SSN or phone number. Minimize the identification information and the number of

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cards you carry.

- ◆ Be very cautious about disclosing account numbers or other identifying information over the phone unless you know you are dealing with a reputable company.

- ◆ Keep items with personal information in a safe place and be careful about discarding forms with personal information on them. Destroy carbons and tear or shred charge receipts, copies of credit applications, insurance forms and credit offers you get in the mail.

By dealing with independent banks and people you trust and know personally, your chances of identity theft are greatly reduced. But in a society that is becoming more impersonal and more dependent on technology, you can minimize the risk of identity theft when you take sensible and prudent precautions. It's worth the effort, because when your identity is stolen bad things can happen in your good name.

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