



Posted on Wed, Feb. 05, 2014

## Five easy ways to reduce your exposure to identity theft

By KEN EATON

Before my wife and I went to Italy for my honeymoon, we were told many tales about the thieves that lie in wait for Americans around tourist attractions.

There were fake cab drivers, con artists, pick pockets, and even gypsies who would throw a fake baby at a person and take his wallet as he attempted to catch it, not to mention that my wedding was in June of 2002, when the terror of 9/11 was fresh in everyone's minds.

Interestingly enough, we still went on that trip.

To us, the experience of overseas travel, touring the Coliseum in person, and tasting real Italian food and wine far outweighed the perceived dangers. We were just extra vigilant. We knew the threats were real, so we did what we could to minimize them. We didn't carry much cash or wear flashy jewelry. We kept our wallets in a zipped bag. We dressed like the locals and kept our maps in our pockets when we were on the street.

None of these steps were particularly difficult or cost any money, and none were foolproof, but they probably encouraged the thieves to move on to easier prey.

I view identity theft in much the same manner as that trip to Italy. We have all heard tales of the folks whose credit has been ruined by identity thieves, and it seems like every other day there is another security breach at a major company.

According to the Department of Justice, 16.6 million people were victims of identity theft in 2012. The threats are real.

Unfortunately, as tempting as it is, most of us can't live off the grid. The benefits of debit and credit cards, online shopping, and electronic bill paying are just too great to forego. However, there are some relatively painless, common-sense steps that you can take to reduce your chance of being the next victim.

- Know where your wall is and what is in it. Of those 16.6 million victims, 15.3 million had a current account misused. Only 1.1 million had a new account opened in their names.

Protecting yourself against old-fashioned theft is one of the best ways to protect yourself against identity theft. Keep only the cards you need in your wallet or purse, so that you can report them stolen if you need to. Do not keep your Social Security number in your wallet. No one needs to see it, and it's a piece of information that thieves need to access your accounts and open new ones.

- Protect your personal information from prying eyes. Put infrequently used credit cards, birth certificates, passports and any other documents with personal information in a locked cabinet or safe so babysitters, caretakers and other visitors do not have access to them.

Don't let other people see you enter account numbers, passwords, or PINS into your phone or pay kiosks. Make your passwords hard to guess. Don't use the same password for retail and social media sites as you do for employment, bank, and credit card sites. Never use your social security number as a password. Consider using the first letters of a nonsensical phrase that is easy to remember as your password.

- Watch your mail. Thieves can get your personal information from bills or steal pre-approved credit card offers from your mailbox or your trash and open new accounts in your name. If you can, use a locked mailbox. Buy a good shredder and destroy your personal mail.
- Never respond to unsolicited messages asking for personal information. Only thieves will call, text or email you asking for personal information. No legitimate organization does business like that, including the IRS. If you think

you are getting a legitimate phone call, then get the caller's information, hang up, find the businesses' official phone number and conduct your business through it. Do not follow links provided by unsolicited email. Go to the official website.

- Monitor your credit history for rogue activity. Most people know that you can get your credit report free of charge once per year by going to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). In reality, you can get a free credit report from each of the three major credit reporting agencies once per year. Report any strange activity to the credit bureau immediately and if you find evidence of identity theft, report it to the police.

Given that you aren't the only one with personal data, there will never be a foolproof way to prevent identity theft. However, by following these simple steps you can encourage the would-be-thief to find an easier mark.

The Money Matters column is written by members of the Financial Planning Association of Greater Kansas City. This week: Ken Eaton ([keaton@steppandrothwell.com](mailto:keaton@steppandrothwell.com)) a Certified Financial Planner with Stepp & Rothwell Inc. in Overland Park.