



THE SAVVY CONSUMER COLUMN

The Savvy Consumer
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Use these tips to guard against identity theft

Nashville, TN – Each year, as many as 9 million Americans become victims of identity theft, the unauthorized acquisition and use of a person's identifying information – such as a name, Social Security number or credit card number – to commit fraud or other crimes. Identity thieves might use data to rent apartments, obtain credit or establish telephone accounts. Victims often discover the crimes when reviewing credit reports or statements. Thieves often strike by:

- Dumpster diving: They rummage through trash, looking for bills or other documents.
- Skimming: They steal credit/debit card numbers by using a special storage device when processing credit cards.
- Phishing: They pretend to be financial institutions or companies and send spam or pop-up messages to get Internet users to reveal personal information.
- Changing victims' addresses: They divert billing statements to another location by completing a change-of-address form.
- Old-fashioned stealing: They steal wallets, purses and mail – including bank and credit card statements and pre-approved credit offers, replacement checks and tax data.

Identity theft victims can spend large amounts of time and money trying to repair their name and credit record. Tennesseans can take the following steps to help prevent becoming victims:

- Don't divulge information like account numbers by phone, Internet or mail.
- Store personal information in a safe place, and shred old credit card receipts, ATM receipts, old account statements and unused credit card offers.
- Pay attention to billing cycles. Inquire with your bank if you do not receive a monthly bill.
- Guard your mail from theft. Do not leave bill payment envelopes in your mailbox with the flag up. Instead, deposit them in a post office collection box or at a local post office.
- Order and review copies of your credit report from the three major credit bureaus every year, to make sure it is accurate. This can be done for free

Consumer Affairs (www.tn.gov/consumer/) is a division of the Department of Commerce and Insurance (www.tn.gov/commerce/), which works to protect consumers while ensuring fair competition for industries and professionals who do business in Tennessee.

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