

Credit Card Fraud

~ Joyce Travers

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The other day, an odd telephone call was transferred to me. It was a gentleman who wanted to know why he had received several packages from us that he had not ordered. They were fairly expensive items: a digital camera and a pretty fancy fax machine. The longer we spoke, the more the alarm bells went off. This was credit card fraud. I asked if he had his credit card on him. He did, but as we spoke he realized that couldn't remember the last time his statement had come in the mail. Turned out he was missing quite a few pieces of mail.

The person who placed the orders had all the information he needed to use this man's credit card to order expensive items. The thief not only felt comfortable enough to place the Internet orders, he even called and brazenly talked to one of our sales representatives. Had the card owner not just happened to be home when the packages were delivered, they would have been picked up by the thief. The thief showed up later in the day looking for the packages and was caught, but that was a lucky break. I wonder how many people don't get that break. Now, of course, the card owner has to cancel all his cards and deal with an investigation and going to court. Our products have been confiscated as evidence -- we don't know for how long -- and we are out over \$200 in shipping costs.

How do you protect yourself? First and foremost, BE AWARE. Know when your statements are due in the mail. Open them and check them that day. Make sure there are no charges you don't recognize. If you don't feel secure about where your mail is being delivered, get a PO box. Sure, it can be a pain to go to the post office, but it's less of a pain than dealing with credit card fraud. Talk to your landlord about locked mailboxes or have your bank and credit card statements sent to your office address.

Shred all credit card applications that you get in the mail. It's just too easy for someone to fill them out as you. And YES, nasty as it is, thieves have no problem going through your garbage. Pull your credit report at least every sixmonths. It is important to verify that there are no accounts in your name that you don't recognize.

If all efforts fail and you should become a victim of identity/credit card fraud, there are things you NEED to do. ACT QUICKLY. You need to report the theft to the credit card companies. Keep a log, and even record all your conversations with your creditors. Send correspondence by certified or registered mail. Keep copies of all letters and documents, including statements. KEEP IT ORGANIZED. If you think it might end up in a lawsuit where you might collect damages, keep track of the time and money spent clearing your identity.

CONTACT THE AUTHORITIES. Report the theft to the police and sheriff's offices. A police report may be required by the credit card companies or banks. Give the police as much documented information as possible. Make sure to take note of your detective's name and direct phone number. You can also complete a form set up by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). You can find the form online at <<[https://rn.ftc.gov/dod/widtpubl\\$.startup?Z_ORG_CODE=PU03](https://rn.ftc.gov/dod/widtpubl$.startup?Z_ORG_CODE=PU03)>>, or call the FTC's Identity Theft Toll-Free Hotline: 877-438-4338.

PUT A FRAUD ALERT on your credit report. Notify the three reporting agencies and ask to have your account flagged. This alert can remain on your account for two years and will require additional verification from anyone trying to open accounts (including you).

Experian (formerly TRW) Report fraud: (888) EXPERIAN, (888) 397-3742. By Fax: (800) 301-7196. Or write: P.O. Box 1017, Allen, TX 75013

Equifax Report fraud: (800) 525-6285 Or write: P.O. Box 740250, Atlanta, GA 30374

Trans Union Report fraud: (800) 680-7289. Or write: P.O. Box 6790, Fullerton, CA 92634.

Hit the Internet. In researching for this newsletter, I keyed in "credit card fraud" and was amazed by the number of sites out there with information on how to protect yourself against fraud and what to do if you have already fallen victim. Almost all of them, however, really preach about using COMMON SENSE, being careful about what you throw out and to whom you give personal information.

I know we are all pretty busy, especially this time of year, and it is easy to think it will never happen to us, but listening to the reality of the situation dawn on the gentleman I was talking to was really uncomfortable. It CAN happen and does happen, but if we are all more aware, I hope that it will happen less.