



IDENTITY SAFETY – PROTECT YOUR MOST PRECIOUS ASSET – YOU!

I am going to give you one of the most important and easy to follow safety tips anyone has ever given you. And I guarantee that it will save you money and a whole lot of hassle down the road as you go through your financial life. You need to protect your identity, and you can do it with just a few clicks on the computer and be done with it. But first, let me share with you my true story.

My wife and I use our credit cards (a VISA card) exclusively for convenience and we always pay our bill in full every month. That's right, we've never paid one penny in interest. One month we received a few rejection letters from some home improvement and department stores. While this should have been obvious, it didn't get our attention immediately. Then my wife noticed that we had not received our credit card statement in the mail and she knew the bill was due, which we pay online. So we called the credit card company and they said "we sent it" and that it must have gotten lost in the mail, so they agreed to resend it. The next billing cycle comes around and again we noticed no credit card statement in the mail. My wife calls the credit card company and they tell her "we sent it." So we ask what address did they send it to and they said "to the Dallas, TX" address. The credit card company then said that we changed our address two months earlier. Well, I can assure you that we never lived in Dallas, TX! By the way, the credit card balance was over \$10,000; all spent at home improvement and department stores! The credit card company was kind enough to work all this out for us, so we did not have to pay that amount. Phew!

So what happened? After some research, we found out that a perpetrator managed to get, not only my social security number and other private information, but were able to link that information with my credit card number. We suspect that the way the perpetrator did this is through known data breaches in government databases that we are associated with. The perpetrator was able to call my credit card company and change the mailing address on the account right over the phone. This way, they were able to use the credit card freely because the bill would never come back to the credit card holder. The process of undoing this mess would take us the next 18 months and \$1,800 out of our pocket.

We acquired copies of our credit reports (6 in total, 3 for each of us) and upon examination found that they had all sustained significant alteration of our personal information. When we called to get the credit reports corrected we were not able to prove whom we were because the first question they asked was "where do you live" and the credit bureau was convinced that we lived in Dallas, TX! Even prior addresses, phone numbers, and places of employment had all been changed. What a mess. The credit bureaus are not your friend. I repeat, they are not your your friend. They wanted nothing to do with us and they encouraged us to get a credit monitoring service if we expecting efficient interactions to get our credit reports cleaned up.



So, reluctantly, we signed up for the credit monitoring services. This provided an online interface where we could systematically address discrepancies in our credit reports. It took us 18 months to finally get it all cleaned up, at the cost of \$100/month for three services. What they did not bother to tell us is the most important part. It turns out that you can place a “freeze” on your credit reports. What that means is that your credit is frozen in time, with no one being able to access your credit history. The result is that no one can apply for credit or even inquire about you through the credit bureaus. The beauty of it is that once the freeze is in effect, you can temporarily lift the freeze at anytime and provide a potential creditor with an access code so that they can check your credit. This is what you would need to do if you wanted to apply for a mortgage, credit card, or car loan – a minor inconvenience compared to the alternative. So here is your free safety tip that will save you big money and hassle:

FREEZE YOUR CREDIT REPORTS RIGHT NOW!

How do you go about this? Simply go directly to these links for each of the credit bureaus (they typically charge a \$5 fee) and follow the instructions:

Equifax: <https://www.freeze.equifax.com>

TransUnion: <https://freeze.transunion.com/sf/securityFreeze/landingPage.jsp>

Experian: <https://www.experian.com/freeze/center.html>

Also, you should immediately get copies of all your credit reports and make sure that all the information is correct on them. Dispute anything that is not correct. The most convenient method I have found is by going directly to: <https://www.annualcreditreport.com/>

I guarantee that you will thank me down the road and will avoid a whole lot of hassle. You should also freeze the credit reports of your children, since the hijacking of underage children’s names is another new trend. This will become evident once they start applying for credit and start submitting applications to colleges as they get older.

Here is what you need to know about how this credit business works. The credit bureaus leave your credit information wide open all the time. Anyone can request anything about you at anytime. Having credit reports wide open makes it too easy for you to get credit whenever you want. This is what happens when you are in a department store and they ask you if you want to open up a department store credit card on the spot! This is a direct path to get into debt. The credit bureaus collect fees every time your accounts are accessed for a credit check. I believe that the credit bureaus want you to get your information hacked so that you need to buy their monitoring services! What a nice self-feeding system they have engineered. Protect your identity and keep your personal information safe. Freeze your credit reports now!

- Mark M. Kowaleski