

MARCH IS FRAUD AWARENESS MONTH

Identity Theft – How You Can Reduce the Risk

The Facts

Every year, thousands of Canadians become victims of identity theft. Someone has stolen their personal identity and used it fraudulently – to access their finances or commit a crime.

Many people do not even realize they are victims of this crime, until the consequences set in. Can you imagine discovering, without warning, that you are on the hook for debts that you know nothing about? Someone else has used your identity to incur these debts – leaving you to wonder how this happened, and how to correct the damage.

Before victims even get a grasp of what has happened, they can find themselves thrown into a maze of measures to clear their names. This can be extremely frustrating, confusing and time-consuming – requiring days, months, years.

Victims of identity theft have described feeling embarrassed, angry, anxious and suspicious. Chances are, you don't feel the same. Like other victims, you might also blame yourself for being too trusting and naïve.

Identity theft takes many forms, and anyone – children, youth, adults, seniors – can become a victim.

The facts about identity theft are daunting, indeed. At the same time, they are showing us the time has come. For our society and ourselves, we have to start turning things around.

Commit to Being Careful and Taking Control, One Step at a Time

We are far from powerless – and have great, widely shared reasons to become better guardians of our personal information.

Here are some simple, easy steps you can take at home and in your daily life to lower the risk of your personal information slipping into the wrong hands.

Your wallet

Carry only the identification (ID) you need, like your driver's license and health card.

Don't carry ID like your social insurance number (SIN), birth certificate or passport. Instead, keep these documents in a safe place, like a locked cabinet at home or in a safety deposit box, and only take them out when necessary.

Be particularly careful about your SIN. It is an important key to your identity.

Your mailbox

Pick up your mail as promptly as you can after it is delivered.

Use a lock on your mailbox, or get a mailbox with a drop slot – so no one can steal your mail.

If you are going to be away from home, arrange for a trusted neighbour to pick up your mail. If this is impossible, Canada Post provides a "hold mail" service, for a charge.

Once you no longer need items such as pre-approved credit cards, insurance and loan applications, bills, and credit card receipts, shred or destroy them. Never discard them in your recycling or waste bins.

Credit cards

Keep track of when credit card bills are supposed to arrive, and call the company if they are late.

Review all credit card and bank statements when they arrive to make sure they match your receipts and transactions.

Check your credit report annually. Major credit reporting bureaus provide one free report each year.

The phone

Don't give credit card numbers or any other personal information over the phone unless you are sure you can trust the person you are speaking with, or you initiated the call yourself.

If someone calls offering an 'exceptional offer' or to conduct a survey, do not let them pressure you into disclosing your personal information. If they do pressure you – hang up.

Your computer: online accounts and e-mails

Educate yourself about online security and privacy measures, including firewalls and virus protection.

Set up your online accounts so they can only be accessed with passwords.

Create difficult passwords that no one could guess. Ideally, you should memorize them and change them often.

When you shop or bank online, make sure the website is legitimate.

Before following up on an e-mail from a financial institution you do not know, check if it has a telephone number and call. Never click on links in the e-mail or cut and paste them into your browser. The link may take you to a fake website.

Be suspicious of e-mails from financial institutions and other organizations asking you to provide personal information online.

Tip 1: Reputable firms never ask for personal information in this manner.

Tip 2: Fraudulent e-mails often lack personal greetings, and include spelling and grammatical errors.

Keep Your Information Close

The days of freely giving out our personal information are over. Develop your instincts – to be careful and resist simply providing information when asked, as in the following situations:

Sales agreements: When signing an agreement, check the fine print to see if your name will be added to a marketing list. Check the "no thanks" box, or write and initial a short note on the document saying you don't want your personal information shared with anyone else.

Point of purchase: Many retail stores ask for your name, address and telephone number when you make a purchase. Don't give this information out unless the store gives you a satisfactory reason for requesting it.

Warranty cards: Information collected on product warranty cards is very often used for marketing purposes. You are not required to send in a filled warranty card. In fact, your receipt is all you need to make a warranty claim.

Donor lists: Charities and other fund-raising organizations often share donor lists with one another. If you make a donation and do not want your personal information given to any other charities, enclose a note with your payment.

Ballots and promotions: Avoid filling out ballots for "free draws" or other promotions. These are sure-fire ways to get your name, address and telephone number on a junk mail or telemarketing list.

Reward and point programs: Stores often share your information without directly asking for your permission. If you want to avoid getting junk mail or other promotional material, either don't join these programs, or ask the stores not to share your personal information.

Magazine subscriptions: Most magazines mention they may give your name and address to other companies for one reason or another. They also offer you the opportunity to opt out of this "service". Do it!

Power in Numbers

Identity theft is a threat to our basic rights – the right of each of us to privacy, to control our earnings and savings, and to shape our reputations through our decisions and actions.

By guarding our personal information, we are protecting important values, as well as the public good.

As more people take up the challenge, the stronger and better protected we will all be. Talk with other people in your life about what you are doing, and what they can do – to reduce the risk of identity theft.

This 'n That at Logan Katz

Logan Katz in the Community

On March 19, Logan Katz honoured a fifteen year tradition by offering complimentary personal tax preparation to low-income earners, seniors, and individuals with disabilities at the *Ottawa South Community Centre* at our annual tax clinic. More than 25 individuals responded to our offer, and expressed warm appreciation for our involvement in this program. Every year, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario oversees this program through which thousands of low-income earners and seniors in Ontario benefit from complimentary personal tax preparation services. Logan Katz has been an annual participant in these tax clinics since 1994, an initiative that is internally coordinated by **Juan Gong**.

On March 4, **Anjali Dilawri** and **Janeta Odstrcilik** spoke to new entrepreneurs through the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation (OCRI)/Entrepreneurship Centre, about *Bookkeeping for your New Business*.

On March 6, **Jason Valente** spoke about *How to Prepare your Personal Tax Return* to a group of owner-managers through OCRI/Entrepreneurship Centre.

On March 8, another Logan Katz tradition was honoured with **Denis Chainé** addressing over 20 kidney patients on taxation issues for individuals with disabilities. This annual presentation has been offered by Logan Katz for ten years.

David Logan recently joined the Finance Committee of the *Learning Disabilities Association of Canada*.