

Area bank provides identity theft tips

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THE BANK OF

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Building wealth takes time, sacrifice and hard work. And maintaining that wealth begins with protecting it.

Each year as many as 9 million people have their identity stolen, according to the Federal Trade Commission. It's numbers like those that are prompting the Bank of Northern Michigan to work to educate its customers about how to protect themselves from becoming a victim of a stolen identity.

The four primary methods of obtaining a person's identification are skimming, phishing, address changing and Dumpster diving, said Kathy Erber, the senior vice president of the Bank of Northern Michigan, headquartered in Petoskey.

A little more on each follows:

Skimming

In the past, Erber said, people have used devices like dummy ATMs to glean bank account numbers, pin numbers or other data.

"People would walk up, put their card in and their information would be taken," she said.

One of the best ways to prevent skimming is to be aware of where your personal information is being entered, Erber suggests. For example, when on a secure Web site there is a padlock symbol on the screen, and an "s" at the end of the "https://" in the address line.



And always have an updated antivirus and antispyware program for computers to prevent unforeseen thefts.

Phishing

With the constant increase in e-mail communication and paperless billing, phishing has become a predominant form of identity theft. Phishing involves a person pretending to be a financial institution or credit card company in an e-mail that requests personal information.

Erber says that organizations such as the Internal Revenue Service, the FDIC, banks and credit card companies will never request information in an unsolicited e-mail.

"These types of e-mails should be reported to the local police department," Erber said.

Address changing

Using a post office slip, people can file to change their address by simply filling out a document and dropping it in the mailbox. But for some unfortunate people, this change of address method is used to collect financial information, open credit cards or make purchases in another person's name.

"You don't have to buy a credit report subscription"

This type of identification fraud can be difficult to identify immediately, since the credit cards or purchases aren't directly billed to the person's home.

Erber recommends checking credit reports at least once a year to view all possible outstanding debts.

"You don't have to buy a credit report subscription," she said. The Web site www.annualcreditreport.com allows people to view their credit report once each year.

Dumpster diving

This low-tech means of gathering a person's information involves stealing from mailboxes, homes or even most often household trash.

Erber recommends shredding all documents with personal information like accounts or Social Security Numbers, or keeping them in a secure location for future use such as a home safe or locked file drawer.

Recovering from identity theft

While identity theft can be caught, it cannot always be prevented.

"As technology continues to evolve, so does identity theft," Erber said. "It is not something prevented and forgotten. People have to be constantly vigilant about their information and accounts."

But, if a person has been the victim of identity fraud, financial institutions can correct the damage to credit scores and financial losses. "It is an uphill process, but eventually the actions can be undone," Erber said.