



Internet Shopping Tips

Keeping Internet Shopping Safe

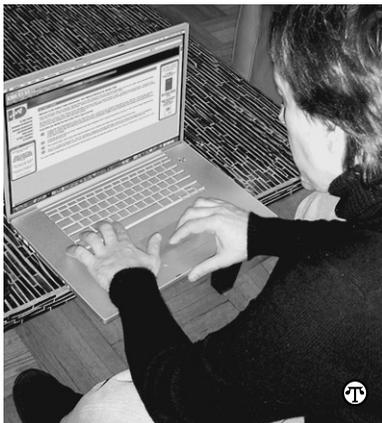
(NAPSA)—Online stores offer great benefits to shoppers including 24/7 convenience, price breaks, the ease of ordering from your own home and the variety available from their Web sites. Meanwhile, there's been a lot of talk about the dangers of Internet shopping including online scams and the potential for Internet identity theft. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to protect yourself.

A recent study, however, shows that consumers who take common-sense precautions, monitor their financial accounts on the Internet and pay bills online actually may be safer than those who visit brick-and-mortar stores and then pay bills through the mail.

The survey estimates that 9.3 million Americans were victims of identity theft in 2004, but it found that using the Internet can reduce the impact of fraud dramatically. Identity theft victims who regularly went online to look at their financial transactions often uncovered fraudulent activity much more quickly than those who awaited paper records in the mail.

The study, conducted by Javelin Strategy & Research for several financial institutions, estimated that consumers who discovered fraudulent use of their accounts online sustained an average theft of \$500. Those who only checked paper records lost an average of \$4,500.

Moreover, experts say criminals often have easier access to personal information from statements and receipts in unopened mail that are tossed in the trash, than from password-protected and



You can be safe at home, even when shopping.

electronically secured Internet accounts.

“Transacting online can actually combat identity theft very effectively if people do a few simple things like monitoring their financial accounts and protecting their financial information,” said Rob Chesnut, vice president of Trust and Safety for eBay and the PayPal online payment service.

The best deterrent to online identity theft is to practice safe surfing. Besides monitoring your accounts online and shredding paper records before discarding them, follow these suggestions from Chesnut:

- Use payment services that protect your personal financial information and don't share your financial data with merchants.

- Use a different password for each account so that if a thief discovers one, he cannot use it to access the others.

- Select a combination of letters and numbers for your online passwords. Some thieves use online

tools that automatically try every word in the dictionary to uncover passwords.

- Don't reply to and never trust the origins of an e-mail that solicits personal or financial information. While it may appear to come from a reliable merchant, its source can be disguised. Links in the e-mail that guide you to sites appearing genuine may actually be taking you to fraudulent sites where personal information can be gathered.

- To ensure you're really visiting a legitimate site, enter its URL manually instead of clicking on an e-mail link.

Chesnut recommends consumers who suspect fraud take five steps immediately:

- For credit-card charges, phone the credit card company to set up a new account. Most credit cards provide protection against online fraud and will remove the charges in question if notified promptly.

- For bank account fraud, contact the bank and ask for their protection procedures.

- File a police report and keep a copy of it.

- Contact the Federal Trade Commission to help law-enforcement officers track down the thieves. File an FTC complaint online at www.consumer.gov/idtheft.

- Notify all three credit bureaus—TransUnion, Experian and Equifax—to help preserve your credit rating.

“Consumers should be encouraged by the security that the Internet can offer them,” Chesnut concludes. “With simple precautions, anyone can shop with confidence from their desktop.”