

How to protect your identity when your cards go missing

A Wallet Gone AWOL By Sid Kirchheimer

Even in the age of computer hacking and elaborate Internet schemes, huge numbers of identity thefts begin with something very old-fashioned, the loss or theft of a wallet or purse, according to the 2010 Identity Fraud Survey Report by Javelin Strategy & Research.

To protect yourself, start now

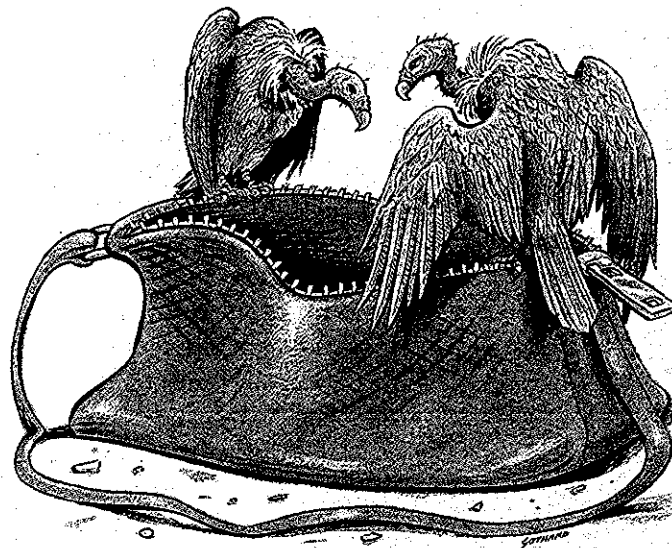
Make photocopies of the front and back of every card you keep in your wallet—your driver's license, credit and insurance cards, even video rental memberships and library cards. (Overdue videos and library books taken out in your name will result in fines.)

Having copies at home or in your hotel room safe while traveling will give you access to all your accounts, including those you may forget in a panic. Plus, the back of a card usually lists important information, such as security codes and contact information to report loss or theft.

Quick-action steps

If your wallet goes missing, here's what to do:

- Immediately call all your credit card companies to request an "account number change." Don't ask to "cancel" your account—that can hurt your credit score, especially if you have an outstanding balance. Explain that you want a new number issued so that nothing shows up on your credit report as "canceled by consumer," advises Linda Foley of the Identity Theft Resource Center.
- Change passwords to ensure that your ac-



counts can't be opened by an identity thief. The best passwords use made-up words that are a mixture of letters, numbers and symbols. Don't make passwords of your mother's maiden name, pet's name or other identifiers that can be found online.

■ File a report with the police in your hometown and the place where you and your wallet parted ways.

Get copies. You'll need them in later dealings.

■ Request a fraud alert be put on the credit accounts that the three major credit bureaus maintain about you. Contact Experian at 1-888-397-3742 (experian.com), TransUnion at 1-800-680-7289 (transunion.com), and Equi-

fax at 1-800-525-6285 (equifax.com).

With a fraud alert in place, creditors are supposed to verify your identity, usually by phone, before issuing new credit in your name.

■ Ask the DMV to put a "flag" on your license file. This will make it harder for a thief to apply for a new copy of your license. It will help protect you if someone runs up traffic violations in your name.

You may have to replace your license in person, proving your identity with a birth certificate, passport or Social Security card (which you shouldn't carry in your wallet).

■ Notify your bank. You'll want a new ATM or debit card and a new checking account if your checkbook went missing.

■ Check your credit history about two weeks later. Visit AnnualCreditReport.com or call 1-877-322-8228 toll-free for your free report and then look under "Inquiries" for any new credit applications made in your name.

The two-week wait provides enough time for thieves to apply

for credit but generally not enough for cards to be issued, says Foley. Recheck your credit report two to three months later. □

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Sid Kirchheimer is the author of *Scam-Proof Your Life*, published by AARP Books/Sterling.