

SAFETY TIPS FOR ONLINE SHOPPING

How to avoid getting ripped off.

Provided by Timothy C. Hucks, CEP, President, Rising Tide, Inc.

Whether you shop online routinely or infrequently, it will help to follow some precautions this holiday season as you hunt for bargains. The risk of identity theft rises as you offer more and more information about yourself online, so the holiday season is a time to be careful as well as resourceful. Here are some dos and donts.

Don't use a debit card, and use only one credit card. If you use but one credit card for all your online shopping, you'll just have to cancel one card if your card number is stolen and have just a single credit card firm to deal with. It would be wise to keep a low credit limit on that particular card. If your debit card gets hacked, the thieves can go straight to your bank account and drain it. You know that \$50 limited liability common to credit cards? You have to report identity theft within two days to get that \$50 limited liability with a debit card.¹

Some credit card firms give you a really nice option - the choice of creating a unique, protected online transaction number for each purchase you make over the Web. So in other words, the retailer you're buying from doesn't actually see your credit card number - just this unique purchase number. In this case, should your credit card information be stolen, you don't have to cancel your card, and the credit card issuer has records of specific transactions that may help catch the bad guy.²

Do look for the "https://" when you enter personal information. When you see that, it means you are transmitting data within a secure site. (You'll see a padlock symbol at the bottom of the browser window.) Look for the VeriSign or CyberTrust mark of security.

Do watch what you click - and watch out for fake sites. Pop-ups, attachments from mysterious sources, dubious links - don't be tempted to explore where they lead. Hackers have created all manner of "phishing" sites and online surveys - seemingly legitimate, but set up to siphon your information. It is better to be skeptical than to visit a fake PayPal site or to download spyware that is allegedly Norton Utilities or Panda AntiVirus. If anything seems weird, Google or Bing or Yahoo the merchant name and see what comes up.

Do protect your PC. When did you install the security and firewall programs on your computer? Have you updated them recently? Think about buying the latest and greatest from a credible retailer before you shop online this season as a present to yourself.

Don't shop on the job - or if you do, do it after five. If you tell your boss "But I only have dial-up at home," how sympathetic is he or she really going to be? (Of course, if you own a business or work for yourself, no one's stopping you.) If for some weird reason you just can't shop from your PC or Mac at home, at least make it quick - bookmark the sites you need to visit at lunch and go there after 5:00pm or during your lunch hour the next day.

Do update stored passwords - and make them really obscure. If you visit a site a lot, it is a good idea to change your password once in a while. Mix letters/words and numbers.

Don't shop using wi-fi. You are really leaving yourself open to identity theft when you use a public wi-fi connection. Put away the laptop and wait until you leave that coffee emporium or airport terminal. Yes, hackers can tap into your Blackberry, iPhone or Smartphone via the same tactics by which they can invade your PC.

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Citations.

¹ tallahassee.com/article/20091127/BUSINESS/911270320/1003 [11/27/09]

² dailyfinance.com/2009/11/25/a-flurry-of-scams-accompany-black-friday-shopping/ [11/25/09]