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SCAMS TARGET YOU! PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's Deputy Chair, Ms Louise Sylvan, today warned Australians to be alert to scams that try to steal their identity.

"Scams aren't just sent to people to extract their money," she said. "In many cases they are sent with the intention of collecting enough information to steal your identity. This is done through 'snail-mail', telephone or email scams - it doesn't matter what method they use - the intention is the same."

Consumers can do a number of simple things to help protect them from identity theft and stay out of the scammer's traps. Ms Sylvan offered the following tips to help consumers protect themselves from identity frauds:

1. Never give out personal information to someone you don't know or trust.

Putting together a 'picture' of the person is the start of building up the use of your identity fraudulently. Don't make it easy! People that you meet online or casually may not be people you can trust – don't give them personal information like your phone number or where you live, or important confirming evidence like children's and spouses names or mother's maiden name. Your personal information is valuable – take a bit of care who gets hold of it.

2. Don't just bin it – destroy old bills, records, or expired cards.

Identity thieves will use all methods to build up a profile on people – including rummaging in your garbage for records of past purchases, expired credit and other cards, and telephone and utility bills. Don't help them out! Destroy these by ripping them up or shredding them before you discard them. And be sure to check important bills like credit cards and account statements for activity that was not yours!

3. Check your credit report at least once a year.

An easy way to make sure that fraudulent use of your identity has not occurred is to check your credit report from a reputable source. If you find that you have been marked as having unpaid accounts, for example, that you have not ever heard of, you might have become the victim of an identity theft. If you suspect this, get hold of the identity kit below and follow the advice for dealing with this serious problem.

Media inquiries

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General inquiries

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BACKGROUND

Some recent examples where consumers have been targeted include:

Identity fraud by stealth

Misleading and deceptive mailings including phishing emails mimicking bank alerts, internet auction updates and notifications of prizes can be fronts for identity fraud. This activity is not restricted to stolen bank details. Sellers on internet auctions, for example, have been fooled by false emails requesting user ID updates. Once these seemingly innocent details are in the hands of scammers, the person's listing can be used for selling bogus products via the online auction. The scammer disappears leaving the seller with a reputation in tatters and a dispute with the auction administration. Buyers having been taken by the scammer's false advertising find themselves out of pocket and in most cases, unable to get redress.

Hidden traps

Buried in what seems like point 107 in a never-ending list of fine print terms and conditions, the disreputable trader will hide a sinister clause. This can have you agreeing to your details being passed on for 'marketing purposes' or to a computer download that will effectively install a mild form of spyware onto your computer.

Unexpectedly, you could become the target for unsolicited mailouts, text messages, pop-ups and phone calls offering dodgy products, competition wins and unexpected 'prizes'. While many consumers ignore these sorts of offers, they can be a problem for more vulnerable consumers, in particular young teenagers and the elderly.

Read all terms and conditions carefully before passing on any personal details or accepting computer downloads from an unknown source.

CHECK YOUR CREDIT RECORD

John* and Sarah* applied for a home loan having finally found a beautiful house that they could afford on their budget with Sarah leaving work to have their first baby. The bank said that given John's credit history, the loan was refused. Since he'd never ever failed to pay his full credit card payment, John was mystified. On checking his credit record, he found that a number of credit card defaults had been placed on file. It turned out that as a result of the theft of his wallet four years earlier, a criminal had obtained a number of cards in John's name, purchased a range of items over the course of only two weeks, and then disappeared from his supposed address. John and Sarah unfortunately couldn't buy the house until his record had been re-established and the listings removed from his file after police investigations.

GIVING AWAY IMPORTANT PERSONAL INFORMATION TO STRANGERS

Jennifer* received her bank statement in the mail and was surprised to see that she had almost no money in her day-to-day transaction account. On querying the bank, it appeared that a number of small but significant transfers had been made over the past two weeks. Jennifer had not made them. After much investigation, the perpetrator was found – a really friendly lady that Jennifer had been talking to on the bus six weeks ago. Jennifer had been tricked into unknowingly revealing a number of personal details in the conversation (that she was on her way to her bank, that it was going to be a big evening because her two grown children – Rowan and Kate - were taking her to dinner because it was her birthday, where she lived, that her parents were from the country and who her mother's family was) – enough for the criminal to then steal receipts and other information from Jennifer's rubbish to create a sufficient 'picture' to attempt a successful access on her account.

*These cases are created from real incidents and are provided for illustrative purposes.

To obtain a copy of the Identity Theft Booklet contact your local Consumer Affairs or Fair Trading Office or download the Booklet or the full ID Kit on www.crimeprevention.gov.au.

Details on how to check your credit report are available on:
www.protectfinancialid.org.au/checking-your-credit-file/default.aspx

Background to the Australasian Consumer Fraud Taskforce

Scams are crimes of dishonesty such as forgery, counterfeiting, on-line deception, and theft. Potential victims can be those who use fixed line or mobile phones, computers and the internet, older people, and those who use professional advisers.

As part of a whole of Government approach to combat consumer fraud and scams targeted at consumers, the Australasian Consumer Fraud Taskforce was established in March 2005 and comprises all of the governmental regulatory agencies and departments in Australia and New Zealand who have responsibilities for consumer protection.

The four-week campaign was launched on March 4 by the Australasian Consumer Fraud Taskforce to help people protect themselves from scams.

The overall theme for the four weeks of the campaign is 'SCAMS TARGET YOU - Protect Yourself'. The theme for the fourth week of the campaign is 'Protect Your Identity'.

Agencies participating in the Taskforce are:

Australian Government: Attorney General's Department; Australian Bureau of Statistics; Australian Communications and Media Authority; Australian Competition & Consumer Commission; Australian Federal Police (represented by the Australian High Tech Crime Centre); Australian Institute of Criminology; Australian Securities & Investment Commission; and the Department of Communications, Information Technology & the Arts.

New Zealand Government: NZ Commerce Commission; Ministry of Consumer Affairs.

State and Territory Governments: All State and Territory Police jurisdictions; Australian Capital Territory – Office of Fair Trading; Consumer Affairs Victoria; New South Wales – Office of Fair Trading; Consumer Affairs Northern Territory; Queensland – Department of Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development; South Australia – Office of Consumer & Business Affairs; Tasmania – Office of Consumer Affairs & Fair Trading; Western Australia – Department of Consumer & Employment Protection.

Taskforce partners

Taskforce members are joined in communicating with Australian consumers about scams by a range of community, non-Government and private sector organisations. Visit <http://www.scamwatch.gov.au> for a list of Taskforce partners.

Consumers who think they've spotted a scam can check the SCAMwatch website at www.scamwatch.gov.au which has detailed information about scams, or report a scam on 1300 795 995.

Consumers can also fill out the scams survey on the Australian Institute of Criminology website at <http://web.aic.gov.au/surveys/acft/>