

Money for Life

December 2005

Dear Readers,

Shopping on the Internet can be a convenient way to take care of your holiday gift list. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) — the nation's consumer protection agency — says sizing up your finds on the Internet is a little different from checking out items at the mall. This month's newsletter focuses on savvy online shopping this holiday season.



Phyllis Zalenski
Family Resource Management Specialist
Iowa State University Extension

To an identity thief, your personal information can provide instant access to your financial accounts, your credit record, and other assets. Unfortunately, when it comes to crimes like identity theft, you can't entirely control whether you will become a victim. If you're buying items from an online retailer or auction website, the FTC offers the following advice to help you make the most of your shopping experience and minimize your risk while you're online.



If you are shopping online, don't provide your personal or financial information through a company's website until you have checked for indicators that the site is secure, like a lock icon on the browser's status bar or a website URL that begins "https:" (the "s" stands for "secure"). Unfortunately, no indicator is foolproof; some scammers have forged security icons.

Read website privacy policies.

They should explain what personal information the website collects, how the information is used, and whether it is provided to third parties. The privacy policy also should tell you whether you have the right to see what information the website has about you and what security measures the company takes to protect your information. If you don't see a privacy policy — or if you can't understand it — consider doing business elsewhere.



Know who you're dealing with. Confirm the online seller's physical address and phone number in case you have questions or problems. If you get an email or pop-up message while you're browsing that asks for personal or financial information, don't reply or click on the link in the message. Legitimate companies don't ask for this information via email. The safest course of action is not to respond to requests for your personal or financial information. If you believe there may be a need for such information by a company with whom you have an account or placed an order, contact that company directly in a way you know to be genuine. In any case, don't send your personal information via email because email is not a secure transmission method.

Know exactly what you're buying. Read the seller's description of the product closely, especially the fine print. Words like "refurbished," "vintage," or "close-out" may indicate that the product is in less-than-mint condition, while name-brand items with "too good to be true" prices could be counterfeits.



Know what it will cost. Check out websites that offer price comparisons and then, compare “apples to apples.” To get the best consumer protections, pay with a credit card. Factor

shipping and handling — along with your needs and budget — into the total cost of the order. Do not send cash under any circumstances.

Check out the terms of the deal, like refund policies and delivery dates. Can you return the item for a full refund if you’re not satisfied? If you return it, find out who pays the shipping costs or restocking fees, and when you will receive your order. An FTC rule requires sellers to ship items as promised or within 30 days after the order date if no specific date is promised.

Keep a paper trail. Print and save records of your online transactions, including the product description and price, the online receipt, and copies of every email you send or receive from the seller. Don’t email personal or financial information. Read your credit card statements as you receive them and be on the lookout for unauthorized charges.



For more information about protecting your computer and your personal information online, visit www.ftc.gov/infosecurity.

The ISUE publication, “Online Shopping and Security,” provides additional tips. Read it at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1789G.pdf>

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension

... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.

Online Fraud

If you have problems during an online shopping transaction, try to work them out directly with the seller, buyer or site operator. If that doesn't work, file a complaint with:

Consumer Protection Division Iowa Attorney General, Hoover Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Call 515-281-5926, or 1-888-777-4590 toll-free. The Web site is: www.IowaAttorneyGeneral.org

Better Business Bureau

WWW: <http://www.desmoines.bbb.org>

Email: info@dm.bbb.org

Phone: (515) 243-8137, 24 hour automated system
Toll Free: 1-800-222-1600

Federal Trade Commission

To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357). The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

Newsletter contact information:

Phyllis Zalenski
605 E. Main
Anamosa, IA 52205
319-462-2791
319-462-4572 (FAX)
zalenski@iastate.edu