

On-line shopping safety tips



By Peter Menyasz

It seems a little early to be talking about Christmas, but since next month's column will be the annual Christmas buying guide, it's more than appropriate to turn our thoughts to the issue of on-line shopping.

Driven by the convenience of on-line ordering, and spurred by retailers' efforts to boost online sales through incentives including reduced prices and free shipping, on-line shopping is a growing phenomenon. And other than not being able to touch and feel items before buying them, it's a trend with no apparent upper limit.

But is it safe? Media outlets have correctly highlighted the growing spectre of identity theft and on-line fraud, but the answer remains a qualified "yes". There are some basic steps you can take to help eliminate the risks and take advantage of the very real benefits on-line shopping offers.

1. Know the merchant. Reliability is a key issue, and your chances of having a bad experience grow exponentially as the size and reputation of the merchant decrease. Many large on-line retailers are accredited by organizations like the Better Business Bureau, and although that isn't a guarantee of safety, it provides a measure of comfort that your transaction will go smoothly. Large, reputable organizations are also more likely to help you if there is a problem.

2. Use a credit card. A credit or debit card provides a degree of protection, as financial institutions have specific rules on your liability for disputed charges. The experts recommend using credit cards ahead of debit cards, as the cap on liability makes credit card issuers particularly vigilant for unusual spending activity. For an added level of security, consider using a disposable or "vanilla" credit card. These cards are available in specific dollar amounts and can be reloaded, and even if someone fraudulently gains access to the card, your loss is absolutely limited to the remaining balance.

3. Protect your personal information. It seems convenient, particularly with merchants you use on a regular basis, but resist the temptation to store your credit card information on-line. Or any personal information, for that matter. Companies are implementing increasingly stronger security, but if you've noticed the number of major data breaches, the time savings of having your information already on the retailer's site doesn't seem like such a good deal. You should also always check to make sure the on-line retailer offers a high level of security, with secure sites using an https: address and putting a "padlock" icon on your screen. Sites that advertise certification from privacy enforcement organizations provide a greater level of comfort, but regardless of the level of security a site looks as though it provides, always be careful that you're not providing any more personal information than is absolutely necessary to complete a transaction. And make sure to review the retailer's privacy policy so you know how your information will be stored, and whether it will be used for any purposes beyond the current transaction. If it seems like a site is fishing for information that you don't think is appropriate, don't do business there, and never transmit credit card or banking information via e-mail ... it's insecure, and reputable merchants don't do business that way.

4. Get all of the details. Unlike a bricks-and-mortar store where you carry your purchase home with you, on-line shopping involves shipping of the product, and you need to have full details up front on delivery dates, any shipping or other fees that may be involved, and what recourse is available to you if your purchase doesn't turn up as promised. Returns are also more complicated, so make sure you know the on-line retailer's warranties and return policies, and take them into account in deciding whether or not an on-line transaction is your best option. Make sure that the retailer provides an easy way to get in touch, either by telephone or e-mail, if you have a question or problem or need help.

5. Maintain a paper trail. Print and/or save electronically any records related to your online transactions. This will help you keep track of shipping dates, applicable fees, and other details, as well as providing you with the material you'll need if you encounter a problem with your transaction. Make sure you check your credit card statements carefully, both to ensure that any transactions are completed exactly as advertised and to ensure that there aren't any unauthorized charges.

The security and privacy risks are real, and the growing volume of identity theft and fraud can make on-line shopping scary. But as long as you're well-informed and well-prepared, the greater selection and bargains make it a great way to do your Christmas, and any other, shopping. Enjoy, but be careful out there!

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