

New To the Neighborhood  
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Neighbors! What a warm, wonderful concept when you are new to a neighborhood. Since I write about computer issues, I am delighted to have the opportunity to share computer information with you, my new neighbors.

Since I am new to your neighborhood, you might be interested to know that I have been involved with computers since 1979. Although currently "retired", I still teach at Mt. San Jacinto College, and do outside speaking and consulting.

One of my areas of interest is safety and privacy while online, which, of course, includes identity theft. However, in order to introduce this subject, it seems appropriate to put this crime into context in our daily lives. There was a recent article in the Press-Enterprise regarding a man who was hospitalized and undergoing treatment for cancer. While in the hospital, he received letters welcoming him to new credit card accounts, as well as other puzzling information. The problem was he hadn't opened these accounts. According to the paper, he contacted the appropriate agencies and organizations, but, over a period of six months, was unable to get them to act. Finally a journalist got and published the story. At that point, he was able to get some action regarding the closure and alerts needed to stop the fraud, and begin to fix the problem. The culprit was found. It was a hospital employee who accessed his personal information while he was undergoing treatment.

Though this isn't a computer-related incident, it underlines that we are all responsible for common sense precautions in our daily lives, including computer access.

In the "National and State Trends in Fraud and Identity Theft" publication for 2003, the Federal Trade Commission states that 42% of all complaints received in 2003 related to ID theft, up from 40% in 2002. But what I think is most startling is that major metropolitan areas with the highest per capita rates of ID theft reported include Riverside/San Bernardino counties.

Since we didn't talk about computer id theft in this issue, what can we talk about in future articles? Well, perhaps you know someone who has been impacted by computer identity theft, or overrun by viruses or worms. Or they may simply have a problem with their computer, such as slowing down, or rebooting frequently. Or perhaps you want to know about solutions to problems that may occur to your system when online, and what protections you might need to stay safe. Or you might have other areas of interest.

This is your column. If you have a question, then others may have the same question. We can be neighbors, sharing information for the good of the neighborhood.

And specifically, what about online id theft? We will begin in the next article to explore the ways in which you may become infected, and how to protect yourself. There are several documents which provide detailed information about online identity theft, what it is, how to protect against it, and who to call if it happens. These documents were prepared from information culled from a variety of websites, and are free to those who email me with a request. They are in Microsoft Word format, and include: *Twelve Points about Privacy and the Internet*, *Privacy and Protection Information: Websites of Interest*, and *Identity Theft and the Internet: Are You At Risk?*

With neighbors helping neighbors, let's build a computer "safety net" and start a "computer neighborhood watch" for all to share.

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