

Financially Speaking

With Trisha Arndt

The World of Lost Money

I would venture to bet that everyone reading this column has, at some point in their life, lost track of money. Whether it was a paycheck that went through the washing machine or a \$20 bill that you just can't lay your hands on, we've all been through the frustration of knowing we misplaced something of value.

Have you ever wondered about money that you may have "lost" without being aware of it?

A couple of years ago I assisted a client with establishing a brokerage account for the estate of her recently departed mother. As is very common, the mother had accounts at several banks, some retirement accounts, savings bonds and several stocks. The stocks were predominantly held in certificate form – meaning that she actually had possession of paper certificates representing the shares she owned.

Our initial goal was to get everything consolidated and titled in the name of the estate and we almost immediately ran across a problem with some of the stock certificates. Some of the companies had merged with other companies over the years and her shares were exchanged for shares in the new company. As the mother had not kept a current address on record with the Transfer Company she never received the new certificates and, when the Transfer Company was not able to locate her after several tries, her new stock shares were turned over to the State Treasurer under the laws that govern lost or forgotten property.

In Wisconsin assets are turned over after 1 to 5 years of inactivity and there is no time limit for collecting the unclaimed property.

Once assets have been turned over to the respective government agency the only way to get them back is by filing the proper claim paperwork. This process begins by doing a search for property on-line with the government. In the State of Wisconsin you can search at www.ost.state.wi.us/home/ucpweb/ucpsearch.aspx. Many states, including Wisconsin, also participate in a national search engine at www.missingmoney.com.

According to the State Treasurer's Office, Wisconsin currently has over \$281 million dollars in cash and an additional \$58 million in stock assets that belong to citizens and businesses of Wisconsin. In 2006 alone the program facilitated the return of over \$20 million and almost 300,000 shares of stock.

Don't think it is possible that you may have money in the system? You might be surprised.

MissingMoney.com lists some of the most frequent causes of “losing” money as leaving behind prepaid utilities when moving, failing to update an address on an account or with an old employer, failing to cash dividend checks promptly and failing to keep a list of accounts available in case of your demise or incapacity.

In my experience benefits at prior employers tend to be some of the most overlooked assets. While generally people are aware of 401k or similar accounts that they have been contributing to, a lot of people don't keep track of vested pension benefits, profit sharing plans, etc. If you have ever worked for a company that offered a benefit of this type you may have benefits coming that you are not aware of. It pays to check it out.

It is very important to update your address on all accounts and with former employers when you move – a post office forwarding card often doesn't do it. Similarly, make sure to update your legal name in cases of marriage, divorce, adoption, etc. And keep a current list of all of your accounts in a safe place that you share with a trusted family member or advisor.

Even if you take all of these precautions it is still possible to lose track of something so I recommend that everyone perform a lost property search occasionally. You never know what you may find. When we performed the search for the stock of my client's mother mentioned above we also came across accounts with three additional banks that we had previously seen no record of.

It was well worth the 10 minutes of time to locate over \$2,000.

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