

Financially Speaking

With Trisha Arndt

Understand how the Equifax security breach may affect you

I have an addiction, I admit it. I have literally grown addicted to following the news.

It started out as an offshoot of what I do. To effectively manage money for clients I need to know what is going on that may affect their investments so I have a TV in my office permanently tuned to a business news channel.

Unfortunately it hasn't stopped there. I find myself tuning into primarily news networks in my car, when I'm watching TV alone, even on my phone where I read articles from several newspapers daily. Perhaps it's my inherent desire to absorb information or maybe it's a reflection of the historic time that we are living through, but regardless of the reason I spend more time following the news than any other person that I know.

Most people don't follow current events nearly as closely as I do so I wanted to share some information about something really important that was reported last week.

We learned that Equifax was the victim of a massive security breach. Normally I imagine this would have been a major story but recent headlines have been justifiably focused on the two massive hurricanes that pummeled the US over the last couple of weeks.

The breach is a particularly huge issue because Equifax is one of the three major credit bureaus in the US. You may have never heard of them but they have almost assuredly heard of you. If you have ever had a loan or credit of any kind – a car loan, student loan, credit card, mortgage, etc. – or potentially even if you have had a utility service in your name, you have a credit history and Equifax is one of the services that compiles it. If you have a credit history it is more likely than not that your information was compromised. In fact it is estimated that as many as 143 million people had information in the system that was breached.

Compounding the problem is the scope of the information that Equifax may have about you. Unlike the Target breach a few years ago that involved information about specific credit and debit card accounts, Equifax potentially has all of your credit card numbers. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. Equifax typically has social security numbers, dates of birth, addresses, even driver's license numbers in some cases. In short everything potentially needed for a bad actor to steal your identity.

This is a big deal, and one that you should take seriously.

I've written in the past about steps that you should routinely take to protect your identity like shredding documents, being mindful of unnecessary requests for information and periodically reviewing your accounts to make sure there is nothing on them that shouldn't be. All of that advice still applies but there are some extra steps that you may want to take related to this incident.

First of all, Equifax has established a self-service portal where you can quickly determine if your information was potentially compromised. To check, visit www.equifaxsecurity2017.com/potential-impact and enter your last name and the last six digits of your social security number to find out.

If you were potentially impacted, as most adults including myself were, there are some things that you should know.

Equifax is offering one year of free credit monitoring and theft protection that you may want to consider taking advantage of (the same self-service portal provides instructions for enrolling). There was initially some concern about the service agreement for the crediting monitoring including language that would preclude people from suing Equifax if they take the service but Equifax has come out with a statement specifically stating that will not be the case. Remember that the risk could extend well beyond a year as things like your social security number don't expire and can't be changed so don't assume that taking the year of protection is all you need to do.

You also need to be wary of scammers trying to take advantage of this situation. Equifax intends to directly contact the smaller subset of consumers (about 209,000) that had current credit card accounts compromised but they will be doing this only via postal mail. If you receive an unsolicited email from Equifax purporting to notify you of the breach, asking for information or containing an attachment or link delete it immediately. It is almost certainly a phishing email trying to take advantage of the news.

Sadly, I fear that this won't be the last breach of personal information that occurs. Regardless of whether this one affected you or not be mindful of your identifying information and make sure that you monitor your accounts for suspicious activity. A little bit of prevention can potentially save you a ton of headaches.

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