

MANAGING YOUR MONEY

A Few Credit Resolutions Can Go A Long Way

(NAPSA)—The season for resolutions is upon us, and our best intentions range from losing a few pounds to being kinder to our loved ones. Of course, for many of us, thoughts turn to the year's financial decisions.

More consumers than ever before rely on the safety, convenience and flexibility of their credit cards for everyday transactions, major purchases and emergencies.

Most people use credit cards wisely and manage their financial decisions very well. Still, nearly everyone can do a few things to improve their financial picture and their credit card habits. A few simple resolutions will go a long way:

- Make payments on time—establishing and maintaining a history of making regular payments helps to improve consumer credit scores and can lower credit card interest rates.

- Evaluate competing offers of credit—credit card companies regularly solicit prospective and existing customers with better terms and interest rates to ensure that responsible users of credit have access to the best financing opportunities.

- Track monthly spending—design a reasonable monthly budget and do your best to stick to it. Track actual expenses as they are incurred. Notice whether you're spending more than you budgeted, and reduce your spending where you can.

The best hopes for the coming year can be foiled when a criminal decides to make you a victim of fraud or identity theft. When it comes to protecting against crimes that use your personal informa-



Start the year out smart: a few small changes in your financial habits may make a big difference.

tion, there are a few easy resolutions to consider:

- Frequently check your credit and bank statements to ensure that there are no unauthorized purchases or changes in your personal information.

- Review your credit report regularly—credit reports usually cost about \$9 each, and in a variety of circumstances, such as suspicion of fraud or denial of credit, consumers are entitled to free reports.

- Record your credit card account numbers, expiration dates and customer service department telephone numbers in a safe location—if you realize your credit or charge cards have been lost or stolen, immediately call the issuer(s). Many companies have toll-free numbers and 24-hour service to deal with such emergencies.

- Save receipts to compare with billing statements to quickly evaluate whether the purchases listed are yours. Shred receipts

and statements before throwing them away.

- Don't lend credit cards to anyone or leave cards or receipts lying around, and never write account numbers on a postcard or the outside of an envelope.

- Don't give out credit card information over the phone or online unless you initiate the transaction and you are comfortable that the company you are dealing with is reputable—if you have any questions about a company, check it out with a local consumer protection office or the Better Business Bureau.

At the heart of these resolutions, lies a basic truth about a little knowledge going a long way. Taking these steps in the right direction can help you improve your overall credit picture and avoid falling victim to fraud or identity theft. Surely, that's worth a resolution or two.

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