

## Money Matters Why you should consider freezing your credit reports

By Joseph Pisani  
The Associated Press

Freeze your credit reports before you get burned.

That's the message from security experts, consumer advocates and some state Attorneys General. They say more people should consider a credit freeze as a way to block identity thieves from opening new credit cards and other accounts in your name. They recommend a freeze even if your identity hasn't been stolen.

"It's much better to shut the door before it even takes place," says Mike Litt, a consumer program advocate at the nonprofit U.S. Public Interest Research Group. "You can save yourself so much time and headache."

I didn't listen, and now I regret it. Someone recently applied for 10 credit cards in my name and opened two wireless phone accounts. Removing the fraudulent activity off of my credit reports took hours: I had to make several phone calls, send paperwork and fill out a police report. And my credit score will probably be hurt temporarily until everything is removed. I could have avoided all that if I had frozen my credit reports earlier.

But there are some downsides to a credit freeze to consider. It also blocks you from opening new lines of credit, so if you plan to take out a mortgage or apply for a new credit card you'll need to remember to unfreeze it each time. And residents of some states have to pay a fee for a freeze.

Here's more on how credit freezes work:

### What happens during a credit freeze?

New creditors won't be able to view your credit reports. That prevents new credit cards or loans from being opened since lenders look at



credit reports to decide whether to offer you credit. Instead they'll see that the report is frozen. The freeze won't affect any credit cards or loans you had before the freeze was placed; those creditors will still be able to see your reports.

### When should I freeze my credit report?

It's a must if an account has been opened in your name or if you've been notified that your Social Security number was taken in a data breach. Even if identity theft hasn't struck, you still should seriously consider it, since data breaches have become so common. So far in 2015, there have been 766 data breaches at banks, government agencies and big companies, exposing more than 178 million records, according to the nonprofit Identity Theft Resource Center. A breach of government records, for example, exposed

Social Security numbers of about 26 million federal employees and their spouses.

### How do I freeze my credit report?

Contact each of the three credit reporting agencies — Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. You'll need to freeze your credit report at all three because some creditors only use one. Contact Equifax at [freeze.equifax.com](http://freeze.equifax.com) or 800-349-9960, Experian at [experian.com/freeze/center.html](http://experian.com/freeze/center.html) or 888-397-3742 and TransUnion at [transunion.com/securityfreeze](http://transunion.com/securityfreeze) or 888-909-8872. They'll ask you for your Social Security number, name, address and other details.

### How much does a credit freeze cost?

It depends on the state laws where you live. Fees are typically between \$3 and \$10 to freeze each credit report, and you may pay

another fee to unfreeze. Freezes are free at a few states, including Indiana and Maine. Fees may also be slightly different at each credit agency. Equifax has a list of fees and rules for each state at <http://bit.ly/1LUIF0P>

### Will the freeze hurt my credit score?

No.

### Is this different than credit monitoring?

Yes. Credit monitoring services, which you have to pay a monthly fee for, alerts you if a new account is opened or other suspicious activity takes place. A credit freeze is the only way to stop criminals from opening new accounts in your name. Some experts don't recommend credit monitoring because it's expensive, as much as \$20 a month. Instead, you can monitor your credit report on your own. You're entitled to get a free copy of your credit report from each of the three agencies once a year at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).

### When do I need to unfreeze my credit reports?

If you're applying for a mortgage or auto loan or credit card. That's because lenders check your report to see if they should lend to you. You can ask the lender what credit reporting agency they use and unfreeze that one, says Litt. You can unfreeze a credit report temporarily or permanently at any time.

### How do I unfreeze my credit reports?

By contacting the credit agencies again. When you ask to freeze your credit reports you'll get a number that you will need to save. That number will be your key to unfreezing your account, so keep it in a safe place. Losing the number will delay removing the freeze.

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## The Week In Review

### AMAZON HAS A VERY MERRY SEASON

Amazon had a very happy holiday season as enrollment in its loyalty program jumped and shipping hit records.

The company has been benefiting from a larger industry trend toward online and last-minute shopping.

Amazon added 3 million members to Amazon Prime, its \$99-a-year loyalty program which offers free two-day shipping, in the third week of December

alone. It also said that Christmas Eve was the biggest day yet for deliveries through its Prime Now



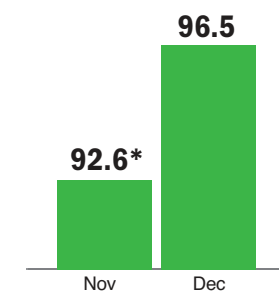
service, which offers free two-hour delivery to customers in more than 20 metropolitan areas.

The company said that it shipped a record number of items worldwide for the holidays, with deliveries going to 185 countries.

### CONSUMER CONFIDENCE RISES IN DECEMBER

A stronger job market helped boost consumer confidence in December.

#### Consumer confidence index



\*Recently revised  
Source: The Conference Board

The Conference Board announced this week that its consumer confidence index rose to 96.5 this month, up from 92.6 in November.

Hiring has been healthy in 2015. Employers are adding an average of 210,000 jobs a month through November. Unemployment has stayed at a seven-year low of 5 percent for two straight months. That has helped make Americans more optimistic about current conditions and the future.

Another gauge of how Americans are feeling about the economy, the University of Michigan's consumer sentiment index, rose to the highest level since July.

### WEIGHT WATCHERS LAUNCHES OPRAH CAMPAIGN



Just in time for new year's resolutions, Weight Watchers has started airing commercials with its new pitchwoman Oprah Winfrey.

The commercial shows past videos of Winfrey working out and referencing her struggle with weight, a frequent topic of Winfrey's former talk show. The ad ends with Winfrey asking viewers if they're ready to join her. "Let's do this together," she says.

Weight Watchers stock has more than tripled since October, when Winfrey bought a 10 percent stake in the New York company. Besides the new ads, Weight Watchers has also made changes to its plans to better fit in with Winfrey's message of living a healthy and happier life and not just focusing on weight loss.

Weight Watchers brought in Winfrey at a precarious time for the company. It has been hurt by the popularity of fitness trackers and free food-tracking apps. Despite recent gains in the stock, it is still down about 7 percent from a year ago.

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## Quick Fix

# Believe, set and achieve

How to set and meet your resolutions at home and work in 2016

The new year is upon us and for many this is a time to set resolutions. Want to make sure your personal or professional goals stick? Check out these tips:

- 1 Choose wisely** It is important to pick something you truly want, rather than you feel you should do. Going after something you genuinely desire will help motivate you to take the steps needed to get there.

Ask whether your goal is realistic. Are you willing to put in the work to achieve it? Are there forces beyond your control at play? Set your intention based on the factors you can control.

If you are considering how you can improve at work this year, narrow the field by thinking about what is most important to your business and how you can contribute to that, said Rosalene Glickman, author of "Optimal Thinking: How to Be Your Best Self."

"There are so many 'shoulds' we look at in business. The 'musts' become priorities," she said.

- 2 Be specific** Experts say one reason many resolutions aren't met is because they are too vague. So instead of

saying you want to get lose weight or save money, set a more detailed objective such as to take the stairs each day or set aside \$50 a week. This helps break down a larger goal into more manageable steps.



- 3 Write it down** This is critical as it cements your commitment. "We are all distracted," Glickman said. "To maintain your focus is critical ... Make them visible. Write them down, put them on our desk, put them on your screensaver, put them on your phone. Make them so clear that you can't run away from them."

- 4 Set a deadline** If you set a deadline it helps make you accountable for achieving it.

"Dreams are just goals without action steps," Glickman said.

- 5 Say it aloud** It also helps to let others know about your goals so that an outside force might hold you accountable.

If your coworker, friend or family checks in on your progress, you may be more motivated to do the hard work. They may even offer motivation and support to help meet your objective.

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## Wireless & Cashless

By Mae Anderson



# Mobile Pay in China

China is the next frontier for mobile-payment services.

Apple Pay and Samsung Pay have both announced they're expanding to the world's most populous country. The competition will be tough in China, where many people use mobile phones exclusively to shop online, rather than computers.

Alipay, from Chinese e-commerce powerhouse Alibaba, dominates the payments market, with 400 million users. Alipay works with banks, credit cards and payment services to enable payments online. In stores, shoppers pay using bar and QR codes on the phone.

Apple said it is expanding to China by partnering with UnionPay, which issues bank and credit cards in China. "China is an extremely important market for Apple," said Eddy Cue, Apple's senior vice president of Internet software and services.

Samsung said it's partnering with UnionPay, too. The agreements let Chinese card holders add their cards to Apple Pay and Samsung Pay on Apple and Samsung devices. They are expected to go into effect in early 2016.

Mobile payment services are expanding gradually around the world. Apple Pay is currently available in the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia. Samsung Pay is available in the U.S. and South Korea.

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## Small Business Monitor

By Sarah Skidmore Sell

# SBA program expands opportunities for small businesses

A new law goes further to help small business contractors bid on projects.

Beginning on Oct. 1, a new law will increase the Small Business Administration's guarantee capability for surety bonds,

which are financial agreements designed to ensure a contractor completes a job. The bonds, which are issued by surety companies and are needed to win many public and private contracts, provide reimbursement if a company does not complete the work.

While the SBA does not directly provide these bonds to small businesses, it does guarantee them through its Preferred Surety Bond program. Through this program, SBA guarantees a

percent of the losses incurred by the surety company if the small business fails to complete the contract.

It is designed to encourage surety companies to issue bonds to small businesses when they otherwise might not, which the SBA says enables contractors to bid on projects that they might not otherwise be qualified to bid on.

The new law increases the SBA's maximum surety bond guarantee percentage from 70 percent to 90 percent. It is the first significant legislative change to the program in several decades, according to the agency.

For more information, visit [www.sba.gov/surety-bonds](http://www.sba.gov/surety-bonds).



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