

Even after death, identity theft *still a risk* March/April 2014

It's estimated that 15 million Americans each year have their identities stolen. And, nearly 2.5 million of them are dead, according to ID Analytics.

Identity thieves target people who have passed away, as well as stumble upon the dead by illicitly obtaining Social Security numbers. The crime often goes on for months or even years before being noticed.

Thieves grab personal information from funeral homes, hospitals, nursing homes and published information. It could be as easy as skimming the obituaries for critical information and illegally purchasing matching Social Security numbers on the Internet.

In other instances, identity thieves are able to obtain this information from patients' records while they are admitted to a healthcare facility.

Safeguarding against theft

There are numerous measures to take to protect against identity theft for the recently deceased.

- ◆ Obituaries should not list the birthday, mother's

maiden name or other personal identifiable information that could be used to obtain credit cards, loans, etc.

- ◆ Don't include the address of the deceased because burglars comb listings to learn when families will be at a funeral or away from home.
- ◆ A "death alert" should be communicated to the major credit bureaus – Trans Union, Equifax and Experian – which will alert anyone running credit reports or granting credit to that individual. You may have to provide a copy of the death certificate to them.
- ◆ Banks, brokerage houses, insurers and credit card companies should be notified as soon as possible. Potential death benefits may be available to survivors or heirs, and the issuer is put on notice

See **Identity theft after death** on back

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10 tips to help you improve your bottom line

You can improve your company's bottom line by keeping a sharp eye on the needs of your customers and by improving your businesses processes.

These 10 tips from CPAs may improve your profitability:

- 1 Benchmark revenue and overhead percentages to the leaders in your industry. Determine what is needed to pursue the best in your industry.
- 2 Think of every product or service that your company sells as if it were a separate business. Does each one contribute to profitability? Identify profit centers. Keep the winners and lose the losers.
- 3 Develop a cost accounting system to determine exactly what it costs you to deliver a service or

product. Costing has to be comprehensive.

- 4 Listen to your employees' complaints about tedious tasks. Their ideas may result in eliminating, modifying or outsourcing the work.
- 5 Enter into strategic alliances with your suppliers or customers to market each other's products.
- 6 Identify the key positions within your company that have contact with customers. Put the right people in those jobs.
- 7 Find new uses for aging products and services. More reasons to buy mean more revenues for your company.
- 8 Establish an advisory board of key clients.
- 9 Give your customers what they want. If you're meeting a need or desire, they'll buy – and pricing won't be their main concern.
- 10 Conduct a customer satisfaction survey annually. ●

S E E

✓ Tired of rude cell phone behavior?

✓ Where are most millionaires educated?

I N S I D E

Tired of *rude* cell phone behavior?

Do you have people in your life who have a better relationship with you on the phone than in person?

Maybe that's because they're on the phone. When they're with you in person, they're also on the phone – with someone else.

Technology seems to have grown faster than etiquette when it comes to cell phone use. What bothers one person may not bother another, but one observer called cell phones “the cigarettes of this decade,” comparing cell phone impoliteness to blowing smoke in your face.

Hearing the intimate details of a stranger's surgery in the grocery check-out line has become commonplace in this age of anything goes at any volume. And how many lunches have you had ruined by the businessman at the next table who shouts into the phone and acts as if the restaurant is his private office?



Some people have become so addicted to their phones that more than half say they can't keep their hands off them for more than an hour, according to the 2013 Mobile Consumer Habits study.

More than 70 percent of women and 62 percent of men suffer phone separation anxiety, another poll by SecurEnvoy found. The fear of being without a cell phone even has had a name coined: nomophobia, as in no mobile phobia.

Another new word has been created to describe that particularly bothersome habit of some addicted cell phone users of snubbing others in a social setting to scroll through their smartphones – phubbing.

Regular checking of smartphone apps is sometimes triggered by boredom, experts say, as users become hooked on mental stimulation. The problem is that the addictive behavior often disrupts observation of important things that are happening in the real environment, sometimes with dire consequences, such as driving accidents.

Inappropriate cell phone use can also become a problem in the work environment and can have implications in hiring,

career advancement and workplace efficiency, recent research by University of Southern California found.

Three of four professionals of 550 interviewed in the USC study said checking texts or emails is unacceptable behavior in business meetings. An even higher percentage, 87 percent, said answering a call is rarely or never acceptable in a business meeting.

Women are more likely than men to be offended by inappropriate smartphone use. Far more women than men think it is inappropriate to check texts at a business lunch (66 percent to 41 percent).

The study found that mobile manners vary by gender, age and region. Not surprisingly, Millennials and younger professionals are more likely to be accepting of smartphone use than their older co-workers.

“Hiring managers often cite courtesy as among the most important soft skills they notice,” says USC researcher Peter Cardon. “By focusing on civility, young people entering the workforce may be able to set themselves apart.”

The key to cell phone etiquette is to use common sense and common courtesy. As with a landline, keep private conversations private. Speak softly and be aware that strangers are not interested in your private conversations – and you very well may be bothering them.

In meetings, at meals or in social gatherings, keep in mind that not every phone call you receive is an emergency. Be courteous and attentive to the people you are with. It is best to turn off your phone during these times or at the very least disregard non-essential calls until later. No one likes to be interrupted or ignored. Treat others as you would like to be treated.

The following cell phone etiquette tips are recommended by etiquette trainer Rachel Wagner on her etiquette and protocol website:

- 1. Give 100 percent focus to the person in front of you.** Don't interrupt a face-to-face conversation with someone by taking a call or texting. The question to ask yourself is this, “What impression am I making when my attention is diverted to my phone?”
- 2. At a business lunch, a mobile device shouldn't be part of the place setting.** Keep it stashed in a jacket pocket, handbag or briefcase.
- 3. In meetings, avoid “reading under the table.”** Most people know to turn their phone to silent in a meeting. People who scroll through their emails, check their Facebook page, text, tweet or check sports scores in their laps are

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A USC study found that 87 percent of respondents said answering a call is rarely or never acceptable in a business meeting.

See **Rude cell phone behavior** on page 3

Where are most millionaires educated?

More of the world's millionaires were educated at universities in the United States than any other country, and the major that produces the most seven-figure incomes is engineering, according to a new study by WealthInsight consultants and the U.K.'s *Spear's* magazine.

Harvard University and Harvard Business School have produced more millionaires than any other universities, followed closely by Stanford, University of California and Columbia, the study found. Oxford and Cambridge in the U.K. were the only non-American universities to make the top 10.

Students studying engineering most often went on to riches, followed by those earning an MBA. Economics and law produced the next highest number of millionaires, although many future top earners left their fields of study to go the entrepreneurial route.

"You would expect to see a high number of scientific or



financial degrees in the top 10, like engineering, commerce and accounting. Numerical degrees are a notable advantage when it comes to amassing a personal fortune," said Oliver Williams of WealthInsight. "But, interestingly, few of these degrees turn out to be outright vocational. Most engineering graduates, for example, are not engineers but entrepreneurs. The same goes for most law and politics graduates, who owe their fortunes not to practicing their professions but climbing the ranks of the financial services sector."

Just 1 percent of the world's millionaires did not study at a university or dropped out before they graduated, including some of the world's wealthiest billionaires: Microsoft's Bill Gates, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and British magnate Richard Branson – who left school at 16. ●

Top 10 Majors of Future Millionaires

1. Engineering
2. MBA
3. Economics
4. Law
5. Business Administration
6. Commerce
7. Accounting
8. Computer Science
9. Finance
10. Politics

Top 30 Universities for Producing Millionaires

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Harvard University | 11. Cornell University | 21. Northwestern University |
| 2. Harvard Business School | 12. University of Michigan | 22. Princeton University |
| 3. Stanford University | 13. Yale University | 23. HEC Paris (France) |
| 4. University of California | 14. University of Chicago | 24. Bocconi University (Italy) |
| 5. Columbia University | 15. INSEAD (France) | 25. University of Pennsylvania –
The Wharton School |
| 6. University of Oxford (UK) | 16. Tel Aviv University (Israel) | 26. University of Illinois |
| 7. Massachusetts Institute of
Technology | 17. University of Texas | 27. London School of Economics (UK) |
| 8. New York University | 18. Sciences Po (Institut d'études
politiques de Paris) (France) | 28. University of Virginia |
| 9. University of Cambridge (UK) | 19. University of Southern California | 29. University of Wisconsin |
| 10. University of Pennsylvania | 20. Ecole Polytechnique (France) | 30. Duke University |

Rude cell phone behavior *continued from page 2*

noticed more than they think. It's distracting and discourteous to the speaker and others. Paying attention to phone messages instead of the meeting sends a signal that the people in the room are not important to you.

And that's a dangerous message if those people are clients or have power over your job or career path. You want to appear engaged and a team player. If you are expecting an urgent call, mention it before the meeting begins and then excuse yourself and step away when you take the call. In longer meetings, wait until a break to check emails and phone messages.

4. **Have a professional ring tone.** Whether it's your personal cell phone or one issued by your company, a professional ring tone is important to convey a professional image of you.
5. **In a cubicle, turn your mobile device to silent.** It's annoying and distracting if your phone rings and you're there, but it's more irritating to coworkers if it rings and rings when you're away from your desk. Let voice mail take the call if you step away for a cup of coffee or a meeting.

6. **Take personal calls in a private place.** Hearing someone talk loudly on a cell phone, especially about personal business, is distracting and discourteous to coworkers trying to do their jobs. It's best to go to an empty conference room or other private location to make a personal call.

And do keep personal calls to a minimum so that you don't appear unfocused to your team or your boss.

7. **Never use your cell phone in the restroom.** This is not the place to share personal or confidential company or client information. You never know who might be in listening range.

Technology and good manners can mix – cell phone etiquette just has some catching up to do. ●

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Identity theft after death *continued from front*

- not to accept future charges or grant additional credit.
- ◆ As accounts are closed, note that the owner is deceased to prevent future solicitation calls, etc. When communicating, consider sending correspondence by certified receipt mail to maintain a documented trail.
- ◆ Survivors should promptly shut down social media profiles of the deceased, along with their email accounts. Most passwords can be easily compromised.
- ◆ Insist that nursing homes, hospitals, etc., hide the Social Security number and full date of birth from all visible patient records unless completely necessary. Inquire about security used to protect this information.
- ◆ The Department of Motor Vehicles should be informed to cancel the deceased's driver's license to prevent duplicates from being issued to thieves.
- ◆ Likewise, cancel the passport if the deceased had one.
- ◆ Credit cards should be destroyed. Remove the name from joint accounts.
- ◆ Once financial affairs have been settled, old bank and credit card statements should also be shredded. Destroy old prescriptions or prescription bottles that contain personal health information.
- ◆ The computer hard drive the deceased used should be

rendered useless to prevent the recovery of vital information. Monitor the mail of the deceased and look for suspicious activity by running a credit report at periodic intervals afterward.

A death should be reported to the Social Security Administration as soon as possible. A small death benefit or enhanced survivor benefits may be available. Once a death is reported, benefits to the deceased end promptly.

Who is responsible?

In most cases, surviving family members are not personally responsible for the damage caused by identity thieves. But it's imperative to remove their names from joint accounts to prevent an issuer from attaching liability to a surviving spouse or other family members.

The estate may have a more difficult time. Defrauded banks, credit cards and cell phone companies may seek to recover losses from the estate. The same protections and defenses are available, similar to an individual, but the estate administrator will have to prove what occurred. This process can be frustrating, time-consuming and costly.

Now, more than ever, careful consideration should be given to selecting someone who can devote the proper attention to winding down the affairs of someone who has died. – *James Marasco, CPA, CIA, CFE* ●

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