How to Prevent Phone and Tablet Theft

If you're under the age of 25, there's almost an even chance you have lost your cell phone or had it stolen at least once. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted last April, 45 percent of cell phone users between the ages of 18 and 24 have had a phone lost or stolen.

The survey also found that 3 out of 10 cell phone users between the ages of 35 and 54 have misplaced their device or had it stolen, as Kashmir Hill reports on Forbes.com [1].

There's nothing new about cell phones being popular targets for thieves, but today's smartphone is a full-fledged computer that stores all kinds of sensitive personal data: passwords, contacts, documents, Internet history, and more.

One reason smartphones are so popular with thieves is how easy it has been to reprogram and resell the devices. Verizon, Sprint, and (more recently) AT&T make it more difficult to resell a phone that someone has reported to the carriers as stolen. T-Mobile is expected to provide a similar service soon.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission made news last spring by announcing joint initiatives with carriers and law enforcement to create a centralized database of lost and stolen cell phones [2]. The database promises to serve as a deterrent to cell phone thefts, but it is still many months away.

Lower your phone's profile in public A young woman I know has had three iPhones stolen in the last three months. In each case she was using the phone while waiting for the bus to or from school. She now waits until she's on the bus before taking the phone out of her bag.

Students should know their electronic devices are at risk when they're using them in a library, at a coffee shop or restaurant, or while in transit on public transportation, particularly when boarding or leaving a bus, streetcar, or train.

The obvious solution is to minimize the use of your phone in public. Of course, they're not called "mobile" phones for nothing. The key is to be aware of your surroundings at all times.

First, don't leave your phone, tablet [3], or notebook computer unattended. Prevent snatch-and-run robberies by keeping the device in your pocket, purse, backpack, or otherwise out of sight. Likewise, don't leave personal electronics in plain view inside a parked car [4].

If you're going out for a night on the town, leave your expensive electronics at home. Consider buying a cheap, prepaid phone for these occasions, such as through

TracFone [5], Net10 [6], or AT&T's GoPhone [7].

Act now to minimize the damage of a phone theft In a post from August 2011 [8] I described how to use the free Find My iPhone [9] app to locate a lost or stolen iPhone [10]. (The earlier post also provides five other tips for keeping your iPad and iPhone data safe.)

Find My iPhone is one of several apps that let you remotely erase the data on a misplaced iPhone or iPad. Similar programs are available for Android phones, BlackBerrys, and other mobile devices. The thing all such apps have in common is the need to register the phone or tablet ahead of time.

Find My iPhone uses Apple's iCloud service, which is available in free and paid versions. Alternatives for the iPhone and iPad include the $4 GadgetTrak [11], the $4 Device Locator [12], and the subscription-based iHound [13] ($4 for three months).

Once you've determined the lost phone's location, you still have to retrieve it. To facilitate recovery of a lost phone, put your contact information on the wallpaper so the finder can reach you without having to know the device's access code.

(If you haven't activated the passcode on your iPhone or iPad, do so by opening the Settings, choosing General > Passcode Lock, and entering a four-digit code.)

The simplest way to add your contact info to your wallpaper is to write your e-mail address on a piece of paper, use the device to take a picture of the information, open the resulting image, select the "share" icon in the bottom-left corner, and choose Use as Wallpaper.

Don't use your home phone number, home address, or other physical address on your "if found, contact me" wallpaper -- unless you work at a police station -- because a thief may try to use this information against you. An e-mail address or work phone number should be all a legitimate finder needs to reach you.

Once you've located your lost phone, you have to decide whether to lock it or wipe its data. One of the tips in my August 2011 post explained the iPhone option to erase data automatically after 10 failed passcode attempts. If you have a recent backup, you can restore your wiped data from that backup once the phone is recovered (or replaced).

Report the lost device to your carrier and a theft to the police Whether you lock the phone or wipe its data, contact your carrier to report the device as lost or stolen. If the phone was stolen, file a police report. The police report will likely require the device's serial number.

If you're able to track a stolen phone, police advise against confronting the thief directly. Several location-tracking apps let you use the device's camera to take a picture of the thief that is e-mailed to you automatically. This may help prosecute the thief after he or she is apprehended, but it may not improve the chances of

recovering the phone.

To record the serial number of an iPhone or iPad, look on the back cover, or open Settings > General > About and scroll to the serial number entry. The serial number is also listed on the iTunes Summary tab when the device is connected to your computer.

Also note the device's 15-digit International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number, which can be used to prevent a stolen phone from accessing the cell network. The IMEI number is engraved on the back of some iPhone and iPad models and may be listed on the About screen. Apple's support site [14] describes how to find the IMEI number on various iPhone, iPad, and iPod models.

You can capture the information on the About screen by pressing the Home button and sleep/wake button simultaneously. Then e-mail the photo to yourself: open the screen in your photo roll, press the "share" icon in the bottom-left corner of the iPhone or top-right corner of the iPad, and choose Email Photo.

If you can erase your personal data on the lost phone and have a recent data backup to restore on your replacement device, all you've lost is some expensive hardware...and a few hours of your valuable spare time.

Read More [15]

October 1, 2012

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