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State inspectors keep it fair

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Welcome to the year-end edition of the award-winning Consumer Connection magazine. We all get very busy this time of year: family celebrations, shopping, gift giving. Being able to purchase holiday necessities online makes life easier and lets us avoid crowded malls if we desire. However, the flip side of the Internet is it gives identity thieves more avenues to steal from us.

More than ever before, we’ve got to be diligent about protecting our personal information from identity thieves. While we might think it’s strangers doing most of the stealing, a new study indicates that about half a million kids under 18 have had their identities stolen by a parent. In addition, more than two million elderly parents have also been victimized this way by an adult child. We tell you who else is doing it, how to protect yourself and what to do if it happens to you.

Around the holidays, DCA receives many calls asking about gift cards and gift certificates. Which ones expire and which ones don’t? Can you get money back instead? We try to clear up some of the confusion in this issue.

Were you surprised by the photo on the front? It might surprise you to know that DCA plays a huge role in the boxing and mixed martial arts arena, a very exciting — and highly regulated — business. Our cover story brings you in on all the action.

This issue is filled with many other timely tips on choosing a career school, finding cheaper gas, and getting on top of your finances. That’s our job here at DCA: protecting and educating you, the consumer. All of us at DCA wish you a safe, happy, and empowered holiday season. Keep in touch with us daily through Facebook, Twitter, and RSS feeds.
COMBAT ON THE CANVAS
4:15 p.m. It may look like a peaceful October afternoon in Sacramento, but inside Ultimate Fitness people are getting ready for a fight. The gym, which has been converted into an arena for the night, is the home of Urijah Faber, the professional mixed martial arts fighter known as The California Kid. On tonight’s ticket: The Fall Classic, ten fights and 20 fighters scheduled to take the ring for mixed martial arts combat.

Chairs are set up for an expected crowd of 200-300, and large, black punching bags and mirrors dot the perimeter of the large, gray, industrial space, the only spots of color supplied by professional MMA fight posters and one or two bulletin boards. There’s a lot of prefight preparation going on that most people don’t see and don’t know about. These fights—held in small local gyms, casinos, night clubs, and venues as large as L.A.’s Staples Center—are the territory of the inspectors and licensees of DCA’s California State Athletic Commission (CSAC).

It’s easy to spot the CSAC inspectors and staff members: They’re the ones dressed in dark suits. It’s not so easy, however, to spot the licensees: The timekeeper, the ringside physicians, the referees, the judges, the corner men or “seconds,” the promoters and the fighters themselves are all licensed by CSAC, which regulates California’s amateur and professional boxing, kickboxing, and mixed martial arts.

California hosts more fights than any other state in the nation—even more than Nevada, home of Las Vegas, the fight capital of the world. According to CSAC’s Assistant Executive Officer Kathi Burns, the number of CSAC inspectors—55—is barely enough to cover all of the events in the State. Promoters have to apply to CSAC for permission to host a fight. “If we can put it on, we do,” she says, “our Executive Officer is really dedicated.”
4:30
one promoter’s staff announces in a loud voice. “We’ll let you back in soon.” The inspectors have already measured the ring to make sure it meets regulations for measurement, padding, height, and rope tension and spacing. The ring looks like the ones used in boxing matches, but this one has five ropes instead of four. According to Burns, MMA fights are usually conducted in a cage—an octagon-shaped structure made of steel pipe, plywood, and chain-link fencing. In the back, drug testing is taking place. Once a fighter provides a urine sample, it’s looked at by an inspector; if the test shows any hint of drug use, the sample follows a chain of custody and is sent to a lab for official certification of the results. The samples are tested for marijuana, prescription drugs, all drugs of abuse that are prohibited according to the regulations.

“OK, anyone who is not a fighter, trainer, or official, needs to leave the building NOW”

Left: One of the referees checks the rope tension to make sure they meet regulations.

Top right: The timekeeper gets her tools ready: The bell, the 10-second snapper are on the table; the air horns remain on the canvas outside of the ring.

Bottom right: A CSAC Inspector signs across a fighter’s hand wraps.
5:15 The ringside physicians, paramedics and referees start to arrive. Burns explains that each fight must have two physicians in attendance, and the physicians who work the fights must be licensed by the Medical Board of California and approved by CSAC. The physicians must go through a special training with a mentor; they have to know when to stop a fight and how to treat fight-related injuries. “They have to really know what they’re doing,” she says. The physicians not only tend to the fighters, they also give the referees a short physical before the event begins. After the paramedics park the ambulance outside the one physician goes over medical specifics for the event with them, including the route out of the building if a fighter is injured. The timekeeper, in a black-and-white-striped referee shirt, comes in and sets up her assortment of tools: a large bell on a wooden plank, two air horns, and two pieces of wood with a hinge on the end and handles on either side.

5:30 The crowd streams back in. About half the seats are filled, and the fans are a sea of mainly red, black, and white T-shirts showing their allegiance to favorite gyms, or teams such as Team Voodoo, or fighter’s names: Tony Boyles, Shakour Vanquish. Loud music fills the air from several large speakers near the front door. Behind the curtains of the makeshift locker rooms, fighters are getting their hands taped while inspectors watch. “We make sure the fingers are wrapped and protected, the knuckles are padded, and there are no foreign objects placed inside the tape,” the inspector explains. Once the taping is finished, the inspector signs across the wraps on both hands. The tape is checked again immediately after the fight. “If the tape is broken, we’ll know something isn’t right,” he says. The referees wear black latex gloves; inspectors are not required to wear them but some choose to do so.
“Ok, we need all fighters in the locker room. Now!” one referee booms. Warm-up sparring slows, then stops. Once the fighters are gathered, the referees go over the rules, demonstrating for the first-time fighters some of the moves that are not allowed.

6:00 A small problem: One fighter has dropped out. The event, originally ten bouts, dropped to seven at the start of the evening; now there are six. Time and rounds for each bout are determined by the fighters’ experience and win-loss records. The new fighters will fight three three-minute rounds; the more experienced ones fight three five-minute rounds. The final bout, a title match, will go for five, five-minute rounds.

“Fighters are paid immediately after their bout, sometimes with cash, sometimes with a check”

5:45 “Ok, we need all fighters in the locker room. Now!” one referee booms. Warm-up sparring slows, then stops. Once the fighters are gathered, the referees go over the rules, demonstrating for the first-time fighters some of the moves that are not allowed.

Top: A CSAC inspector watches the fighters getting their hands wrapped.
Right: Fighters and sparring partners warm up before the event starts.
6:15 The announcer calls the first bout, a fly-weight match. The fighter in the blue (visiting) corner is called, and he comes out of the locker room and heads toward the ring, escorted by the CSAC inspector and, following them, the seconds. They are stopped at the corner by the referee. The referee watches while one of the seconds smears Vaseline™ under the fighter’s eyes and across his eyebrows; he then checks the mouth guard and pats down the fighter from the top of his head to his feet. Once cleared, the fighter goes into the ring, the inspector right by his side. The fighter in the red (home) corner comes out, and everything is repeated exactly the same way.

6:20 The fighters are ready; the referee raises his hand and says “Fight.” The timekeeper sounds the bell and the fight begins. The fighter from the blue corner, Tony Boyles, is too much for his opponent; the fight is stopped at 59 seconds into the first round. Burns explains that a fighter can stop the fight by tapping the canvas or his opponent. The fighters are escorted by the inspectors back to the locker room where they have their wraps checked and are examined by a physician. If a fighter is injured or gets knocked out, he or she cannot fight again until an automatic suspension period is served and/or CSAC receives a medical clearance.

“Fight!”

Top: Josh Emmett of Team Alpha Male gets Vaseline™ around his eyes before his bout.

Left: Stockton’s Emilio Gonzalez getting instruction from his second between rounds. The CSAC inspector, (left) stays with the fighter before, during, and after the bout.
The rest of the bouts go the full number of rounds. The fighters are checked, the timekeeper rings the bell, the judges keep score. At 2:50 of each round, the timekeeper picks up the wooden boards and snaps them together, signaling that there are 10 seconds left. At the end of each round the air horn sounds. The officials—inspectors, judges, referees, timekeeper—adhere to the exact same routine every time.

After the event is over, the lead inspector meets with the promoter to do “box office.” The number of tickets sold and tickets that were given away are tallied. The promoter pays the 5 percent State tax to the lead inspector at that time or will submit it to the State within 72 hours of the event. The inspector then gets the checks for the officials from the promoter and they are paid that evening. Fighters are paid immediately after their bout, sometimes in cash, sometimes with a check.

The fight results—wins and losses, scores, injuries and knockouts—are submitted to SHERDOG, an ESPN-related Web site that reports on MMA activities. For boxing matches, results are submitted to ABC, the Association of Boxing Commissions.

Then it’s on to the next event.

For more about the California State Athletic Commission, or for a schedule of events, go to www.dca.ca.gov/csac.
As people struggle to find or maintain their place in the job market, additional training or education can make the difference. A career-focused, private, for-profit school with industry-related classes; flexible schedules; shorter programs; and job placement assistance may be exactly what you’re looking for.

Many for-profit, postsecondary schools have had increased enrollment lately, but they’ve also been the subject of congressional hearings. Among the concerns addressed in the hearings was the rising number of students who are defaulting on their federally insured student loans.

Just 12 percent of all students enrolled in higher education institutions are enrolled in for-profit schools, but they account for 46 percent of all student loan dollars in default, according to a U.S. Department of Education press release. Data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that for-profit schools have the highest rate of borrowers who default on their loans within three years of beginning repayment. Nearly half of the borrowers at one California for-profit school defaulted after only one year.

New regulations are in the works from the Federal government to address loan defaults, but California has already taken action. According to the California Student Aid Commission, under a recently passed State law (Senate Bill 70) some for-profit higher education schools that have more than 40 percent of their undergraduates receiving Federal student loans could lose their eligibility to participate in the State’s Cal Grant program if too many of their students drop out or default on Federal loans.

A list of Cal Grant institutions affected by the new law can be found online at www.csac.ca.gov/default.asp. Click on “About Senate Bill 70” on the left side of the page. The Commission’s Web site has informa-
tion for students about other changes in the Cal Grant Program, including student eligibility.

Congressional hearings also examined how well for-profit colleges were doing in preparing students for careers in their chosen field. That’s one of the areas monitored by the Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education, part of the Department of Consumer Affairs. Private postsecondary schools that operate in California must be approved by the Bureau.

The Bureau works to ensure that the content of each education program can enable students to achieve stated objective; that teachers are qualified, that the institution is financially sound, that student records are maintained, and that facilities, instructional equipment, and materials are sufficient for students to achieve educational goals.

The Bureau also collects information from each school on student completion rates, job placement, wages, and success in passing State licensing exams.

A directory of schools approved by Bureau is available online at www.bppe.ca.gov.

The Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education has these tips to keep in mind when considering enrolling in a private postsecondary school.

- Investigate the school yourself before enrolling.
- Get a copy of the student catalog and read it thoroughly.
- Check the BPPE Web site to find out if the school is approved. Or, if the school is exempt from BPPE oversight, check its accreditation with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges or other accreditation entity.
- Get a copy of the enrollment agreement and review all binding terms, conditions, costs, and student disclosures of your rights and responsibilities.
- If your education will lead to a State license, check with the licensing entity to be certain the school is approved. Two examples: Nursing schools must be approved by the Board of Registered Nursing. Beauty schools must be approved by the Board of Barbering and Cosmetology. Classes taken at unapproved schools will not qualify you to take the licensing exam.
- Read all advertising carefully and compare what is being advertised with what is disclosed in the school documents and catalog.
- Ask to see the school’s student performance fact sheet completion and job placement rates.
- Be certain you understand the amount of and type of financial aid you will need before you enroll.
- Get everything in writing and keep copies of your documents.

State and Federal regulations may help ensure a quality education and improve the odds of a student completing the education program successfully, but will the graduate end up with crippling loan debt in a career that promises only low wages? A group of former students at California-based culinary schools sued their school alleging they were falsely led to believe they would be able to get good-paying jobs as chefs after graduation. In many cases, the students said, they were only able to land entry-level positions at low-wage jobs they could have gotten without the expensive additional education.
The students’ lawsuit brings up the issue of what you could call return-on-investment. Should you consider how much you’re likely to earn in a career before you opt to spend $15,000 to $30,000 or more for a private vocational school? There’s lots of information available on wages for various occupations, and the education level required for each profession to help you decide.

However, selecting a career by the salary you could earn shouldn’t be the only consideration. If it was, there’d be many more students studying petroleum engineering. PayScale, a salary data collection firm, identified petroleum engineering as the highest-paying career for those with bachelor’s degrees. Starting median salary: $97,000 a year. (See the other top-paying careers at www.payscale.com/best-colleges/degrees.asp.) Instead, career guidance counselors suggest you consider a career that matches your interests, abilities, and personality traits.

Here are some Web sites where you can research careers and occupations:

- California Career Zone, www.cacareerzone.org
- California Employment Development Department, Labor Market Information, (Click on “Career information” tab at the top.) www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov
- California Reality Check allows you to research typical salaries for a variety of careers, www.californiarealitycheck.com

For information on student financial aid, including loans and grants, consult the following:

- Cal Grants, www.calgrants.org
- California Student Aid Commission, www.csac.ca.gov

Before deciding on a private career or vocational school, consider whether your local community college may have the same certificate or degree program you seek at a lower cost. Visit www.cccapply.org to explore educational programs at 112 community colleges throughout the State.
Going to the gas station is always full of surprises. The never-ending price shifts keep you guessing: What’s it going to cost this time? That simple question is taking on a new dimension lately as some stations have begun posting different prices for cash and credit.

If you see two different prices for the same thing, you want to pay the lower price. In order to get the lower price, you have to pay in cash. With prices approaching $4 a gallon, that means you’ll need $60 or so in cash to fill up your tank. And if you have to pay the higher price just for using the credit card you’ve always used, well, you’re not going to be happy.

Under State law, a retailer cannot charge a fee for using a credit card. The merchant can, however, offer a discount for paying in cash. At gas stations, typical cash discounts are 5 to 10 cents a gallon, which is roughly the cost of processing the credit card, according to industry estimates. If the gas station uses the credit price as its base price (even if that price changes frequently) but offers a lower price for paying in cash, it is within the law. The bottom line is that you’re still paying more for using plastic.

One chain of gas stations in California does not accept credit cards at all, and charges a fee for using debit cards. You’ll be asked to approve the fee when you swipe your card at the pay terminal. If you do not agree to accept the fee, you will not be allowed to use the card. At these stations, if you use cash instead of a debit card, you are still getting a cash discount, although the difference is usually under a dollar.

The entire business may leave you feeling angry at the gas station retailers, but those folks say they’re taking a hit, too. The National Association of Convenience Store Owners (NACSO) (80 percent of all retail fuel is sold at convenience stores) say the credit card company charges them a percentage of the total sale (something around 2 percent), so that the higher the gas price, the more in dollars the retailer pays in card fees.
Here’s a simplified example, drawn from NACSO data: If gas is $4 per gallon (including taxes and fees) and you buy 20 gallons, you pay $80 with your credit card. The store makes about 15 cents per gallon for a total of $3, and pays half of that, $1.60 in credit card processing fees. Operating expenses and depreciation take another chunk, leaving the retailer with a profit of 2 to 3 cents per gallon, roughly 2 percent. High markups on snacks, sodas, and other in-store items make up for low returns on fuel, so the retailer could be making a higher profit on the bag of chips and the candy bar than on the gas you buy.

Paying with a debit card is a different matter. The retailer pays a lower fee (up to 24 cents per transaction) if you use a debit card with a PIN to pay for your purchases at the gas station and anywhere else. The amount of the so-called “swipe fee” was limited by the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. The new limit, set by the Federal Reserve, became effective October 1, 2011. On an average debit transaction of $38, the previous fee would have been as high as 44 cents, according to the Fed.

Retailers said the higher swipe fees resulted in higher costs to consumers because the retailer added the fee to the price of the products it sold. With the lower swipe fee, will consumers see retailer prices drop? That remains to be seen, but the cash discount may be one response to that change.

On the other hand, banking industry representatives have said the new limit on swipe fees is forcing them to impose other fees on consumers to make up for the $6 billion in revenue they’re losing under the new limit.

HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO SAVE MONEY ON GAS:

**Shop around for best gas prices. Check these Web sites.**

- GasBuddy www.gasbuddy.com (selected cities)
- Motor Trend www.motortrend.com/gas_prices/31/california/
- Automotive.com, www.automotive.com

**Use less gas. Boost fuel economy with some simple changes.**

- www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt064.shtm

**Take advantage of discounts**

- Use per-gallon discounts from retailers such as grocery stores.
- Use credit cards that offer discounts or cash back.
- Buy gas at membership-type retailers.
- Pay cash.
When we think about identity theft, we might think strangers are stealing identities and running up bills, but the reality can be closer to home. A new study from ID Analytics found that about 500,000 children under 18 have had their identities stolen by a parent. In addition, more than two million elderly parents have had their identity stolen by an adult child. Add to that ID theft by an angry ex or roommate, and you have a problem that can be costly in both financial and emotional ways.
Dr. Stephen Coggeshall, Chief Technology officer of ID Analytics, says, “The realities of familial identity theft are far worse than anything you see in a soap opera. It is the ultimate in family betrayal.”

Although other kinds of identity theft have decreased over the past five years, so-called “friendly fraud,” has not, according to a 2011 report by Javelin Strategy and Research. The 2011 Identity Fraud Survey Report showed that friendly fraud has stayed a steady problem with 14 percent of U.S. fraud victims reporting that they knew the person who had stolen their personal information. Researchers further found that consumers between the ages of 25 and 34 were hit the hardest.

Javelin has found that friendly fraud often consists of opening accounts in the other person’s name using his or her Social Security number. If the Social Security number belongs to a minor, the adult who opens the account will use a fake birthdate on the credit application. The credit issuer may not verify the birthdate or may be shown fake documents. In either case, the fraud may go on for years and not be discovered until the child is old enough to apply for his or her own credit. By then, considerable damage has been done to his or her credit history.

When a person discovers he or she is a victim of identity theft, experts recommend filing a police report. When the thief is a family member, however, the victim may be reluctant to get the authorities involved. Without a police report, the credit bureaus may refuse to erase fraudulent information from the victim’s file. The victim may be stuck paying off the debts just to clear his or her name.

The Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC) has advice for people who have been victims of identity theft by family or friends. According to the ITRC fact sheet, if you are a victim of identity theft by someone you know, you have three choices:

- File a police report (this is not the same as pressing charges against the person) and cooperate with law enforcement’s investigation.
- Work with the creditors to find out if a resolution can be made without police involvement.
- Pay the debt yourself and live with the consequences, including damage to your credit which will remain on your file for seven years.

The decision to contact the police when you discover a family member has stolen your identity is not an easy one to make. The victim (especially one whose identity was stolen as a minor) may feel that the thief had no choice or meant no harm. Other family members may pressure the victim not to report the crime. Experts say there may be a way out of this without involving the police if the imposter admits guilt and agrees to accept responsibility, but that may be difficult to pull off. Lacking a police report to back up the fraud claim, the victim may be forced to declare bankruptcy to get out from under the debt, but that carries consequences. The financial—and emotional—fallout could be considerable.

The Identity Theft Resource Center offers a sample letter that the imposter can use to transfer responsibility from the victim to the imposter. Some credit issuers will allow the imposter to accept responsibility for the bill, but many will not, the ITRC warns. The absence of a police report may be a problem. The creditor may send you an affidavit of fraud that the imposter will be asked to sign. The creditor may even demand that the bill be paid in full. More guidance on settling identity fraud without involving the police is available from the Identity Theft Resource Center. Call (888) 400-5530 or go online to www.idtheftcenter.org.

The California Office of Privacy Protection (COPP) offers a variety of resources and information for identity theft victims, including a checklist of steps victims should take once the theft has been discovered. Victims have specific rights under State law, but filing a police report is the key to getting the benefits of those rights, according to COPP. For help, call (866) 785-9663 or visit www.privacy.ca.gov.

**RESOURCES**

- Click on Help! I Think I’m a Victim of Identity Theft on the left side of the page.

Information sheet When Your Child’s Identity is Stolen includes sample letters you can send to the credit bureaus if you think your child may be a victim. *If You Are Me, Then Who Am I?* has tips for teens and college students and how to spot and prevent ID theft.


**RELATED ARTICLES**

- “Identity Theft Project: Giving Foster Kids a Better Start,” Consumer Connection, Fall 2011
PROTECT PETS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

For many of us, our pets are part of the family, and are included in holiday festivities. But it's important to remember that foods and decorations that we enjoy may be harmful — even deadly — to our furry friends.

The Humane Society of the United States offers these tips for a safe holiday season for you and your pets.

• A number of seasonal plants are potentially poisonous to pets if nibbled or eaten, including ivy, poinsettias, holly, and mistletoe. Also watch out for plant bulb kits with amaryllis and other plants in the lily family as well as narcissus and other plants in the daffodil family, which are popular gift items this time of year. This link will take you to a downloadable list of plants dangerous to pets: www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/plants_poisonous_to_pets.html.

• Keep holiday decorations away from pets. Tinsel, bows, ribbons, and wrapping paper can be tempting chew toys for pets, but can damage their digestive systems. Also keep tree ornaments high enough that they’re out of your pet’s reach.

• Provide your pet with a quiet, out-of-the-way room during holiday parties. Though some pets may enjoy socializing opportunities, others will be overwhelmed by the excitement and a house full of people.

• Chocolate can be hazardous, but also watch out for Xylitol, a common sweetener. And individually-wrapped candies are double trouble as some pets might eat both the candy and the wrapper.

• Avoid the urge to give your pets table scraps, especially bones. Bones easily splinter and can cause serious health problems, even death.

• If you are planning to take your pet with you when visiting friends and relatives during the holidays, be sure to contact your hosts in advance to find out if your pet is welcome. Because of the excitement during the holidays, it might be best to board your pet or hire a reputable pet sitter instead.

• Don’t leave candles unattended. Pets may accidentally knock them over and spill wax or start a fire.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has a list of human food items that are hazardous to pets at www.aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control/people-foods.aspx. These include coffee, caffeine, alcohol, avocado, macadamia nuts, grapes and raisins, yeast dough, undercooked meat and eggs, onions, garlic and chives, milk and salt.

Ingestion of some drugs and vitamins is also dangerous. Contact your veterinarian for more information. In addition, the Pet Poison Helpline at (800) 213-6680 is a 24-hour animal poison control service available for pet owners and veterinary professionals who require assistance with treating a potentially poisoned pet. The ASPCA also has a 24-hour poison help number at (888) 426-4435 (a fee may apply).
START A NEW ENERGY-EFFICIENT TRADITION: LED LIGHTS

The first strand of electric holiday lights was created in 1882 by Edward Johnson, a colleague of Thomas Edison. And for more than 100 years, these basic incandescent bulbs were the only decorative choice besides candles.

Today, we have another, more environmentally friendly option in light emitting diode (LED) lights. These cool-to-the-touch bulbs produce deep saturated color and far less heat than traditional lights.

They also use about 90 percent less electricity than incandescent bulbs, according to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). Less heat emitted means less money spent on electricity, and less fire danger. And because LED lights are cooler than incandescent bulbs, they reduce the risk of fire and personal injury.

LED lighting products can now be found in many major retail stores. They’re available in different shapes from globes to clusters to icicles. You can also buy LED lawn ornaments. Even California’s State Christmas Tree in front of the Capitol is decked out in LEDs.

Although LEDs may cost a little more up front, they provide perennial savings. Running LED lights on one six-foot tree for 12 hours per day for 40 days can save 90 percent or more in energy costs when compared to traditional incandescent lights. Mini incandescent lights will run you about $6.53 over this month-or-so period, while LED lights would only cost about 61 cents, says DOE.

LED holiday lights are more durable than incandescent bulbs, with lamps typically made out of solid plastic rather than glass. Considering their lifespan of about 20,000 hours (about 40 holiday seasons — a savings of hundreds of dollars over the years), it may be the last strand you ever have to buy.

CHRISTMAS TREE SAFETY

For many people, the start of the holiday season means setting up the Christmas tree. It’s critical to remember that cut trees are flammable.

Here are some standard safety tips to ensure your holiday doesn’t end up in flames:

- Buy a moist tree. At the tree lot, give it a good shake before making your purchase. If more than just a few needles fall, the tree is already dry.
- Keep it watered. A six-foot tree can consume a gallon of water every two days.
- Keep it at least three feet away from any heat source. This includes fireplaces, radiators, space heaters and, of course, candles.
- Be careful with lighting. Never connect more than three strands of lights together — this places added load on electrical wiring. Do not use large lights because they produce too much heat. Miniature holiday lights should be used, or consider using LED lights instead.

“You want to use LED or low heat-emitting lights,” says Ken Pmlott, Director of CalFire. “Even small mini lights can be dangerous, so it’s important not to connect more than three strands.”

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection also recommends recutting the trunk at least one inch above the old cut as soon as you get it home. This allows the tree to continue to pull moisture into its foliage. Also, dispose of the tree as soon as the holidays are over (preferably by recycling) because even a properly cared-for tree will eventually dry out.
BE ON GUARD WITH GIFT CARDS

With the holidays near, consumers should be aware that California has specific rules regarding one of the most popular presents of the shopping season: gift cards.

Did you know you can get a cash refund for gift cards when the balance is less than $10? That’s according to California Civil Code section 1749.5(b)(2). But you might have to tell the cashier that, because many retailers are unaware of this law.

Another important fact is that most gift cards cannot have an expiration date, although there are exceptions to this rule. To be exempt, gift certificates or gift cards must contain an expiration date printed in capital letters in at least 10-point type on the front of the card and must be one of the following:

• Distributed without charge under an awards, loyalty, or promotional program.

• Donated or sold below face value at a volume discount to employers or to nonprofit and charitable organizations for fund-raising purposes, if the expiration date is 30 days or less after the date of sale.

• Issued for perishable food products.

• Used with multiple sellers of good or services (such as a gift card good at some or all stores at a particular mall).
HOLIDAY SHOPPING SAFETY

The frenetic pace of the holidays can distract even the most careful consumer. But don’t let your jovial spirit cause you to let your guard down this season. Here are some shopping safety tips from Detective Kevin Coffey, a travel safety expert and a 23-year police veteran.

• A wallet should be carried in a front pant pocket, out of easy reach of a thief. Hold a purse close, with the opening facing you. When walking with another person, the purse should be held between you.

• Before you give any personal information to a business such as a store, ask how it will be used. If you’re not comfortable with the answers, shop elsewhere. (Or just refuse to provide the information.)

• When using an ATM or debit card, shield your card number and PIN so others don’t see them. The camera feature on many cell phones can be used to capture them. Use ATMs located in highly visible, well-lighted area. If it’s after dark, have someone accompany you. Avoid large cash withdrawals, and don’t count it on the spot — put it away and out of sight quickly. If you see anyone loitering near the machine who looks or acts suspicious, leave.

• When shopping online, read the merchant’s privacy policy and look for opportunities to opt out of information sharing. Only enter personal information on secure Web pages with “https” in the address bar and a padlock symbol at the bottom of the browser window.

• Always try to walk to and from your vehicle with another person. If you are shopping alone, consider walking near other shoppers in the parking lot. If you are shopping alone and leaving at night — particularly if you’re carrying several bundles — ask a security officer to accompany you to your car.

• Use bathrooms near the mall’s food court or other well-trafficked area.

• Park close to entrances. If prime spots are scarce, seek one that’s well-lighted or near a well-traveled roadway.

• Stow your purchases in the trunk. If these or other valuables are in plain view, you may return to find your car windows smashed and your purchases stolen.

• Have your keys ready when you approach your vehicle. Before entering, check that no one is hiding in the back seat.
The Skinny on Toning Shoes

Are you one of the consumers who bought into the hype and promises of “toning” athletic shoes?

If not, that’s good. It turns out that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) didn’t buy into the claims either. In September of 2011, it ordered Reebok International Ltd.— maker of EasyTone and RunTone shoes — to pay $25 million in customer refunds to settle charges of deceptive advertising.

According to the FTC complaint, Reebok made unsupported claims in advertisements that walking in its EasyTone shoes and running in its RunTone running shoes strengthen and tone key leg and buttock (gluteus maximus) muscles more than regular shoes. The FTC’s complaint also alleges that Reebok falsely claimed that walking in EasyTone footwear had been proven to lead to 28 percent more strength and tone in the buttock muscles, 11 percent more strength and tone in the hamstring muscles, and 11 percent more strength and tone in the calf muscles than regular walking shoes.

Under the settlement, Reebok is barred from:

- Making claims that toning shoes and other toning apparel are effective in strengthening muscles, or that using the footwear will result in a specific percentage or amount of muscle toning or strengthening, unless the claims are true and backed by scientific evidence;
- Making any health or fitness-related efficacy claims for toning shoes and other toning apparel unless the claims are true and backed by scientific evidence; and
- Misrepresenting any tests, studies, or research results regarding toning shoes and other toning apparel.

The FTC’s Web site at www.ftc.gov/reebok gives consumers the basic facts about the Reebok settlement and directs them to apply for a refund if they are eligible. You can also call the hotline at (202) 326-2852.

Exercise experts are not convinced of the shoes’ effectiveness either.

The American Council on Exercise (www.acefitness.org) commissioned a study at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse to test the effectiveness of the shoes and evaluate makers’ claims. Researchers compared people walking on a treadmill wearing a regular running shoe by New Balance and three brands of toning shoes: Skechers Shape-ups, Reebok EasyTone and MBT shoes from Masai Barefoot Technology. Researchers monitored each subject’s oxygen consumption, heart rate, ratings of perceived exertion and caloric expenditure. According to the study’s results, none of the toning shoes showed statistically significant increases in either exercise response or muscle activation. The study concludes that there is simply no evidence to support the claims that these shoes will help wearers exercise more intensely, burn more calories or improve muscle strength and tone.

Jim Rathlesberger, a consumer advocate staffing the California Board of Podiatric Medicine since 1989, offers this advice, which he and many others have learned the hard way: Ask your podiatric doctor before buying exercise footwear.
1. Suppose you have $100 in a savings account earning 2 percent a year. After five years, would you have more than $102, exactly $102, or less than $102?

2. Image that the interest rate on your savings account is 1 percent a year, and inflation is 2 percent a year. After one year, would the money in the account buy more than it does today, exactly the same, or less than today?

3. If interest rates rise, what typically happens to bond prices? Will the prices rise, fall, or stay the same, or is there no relationship?

4. True or false: A 15-year mortgage typically requires higher monthly payments than a 30-year mortgage, but the interest over the life of the loan will be less.

5. True or false: Buying a single company’s stock usually provides a safer return than a stock mutual fund.

Answers
1. More than $102
2. Less than today
3. Fall
4. True
5. False

FINRA, the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, is the largest regulator for all securities firms doing business in the United States. FINRA’s Investor Education Foundation offers a variety of education, resources, and tools for investors. Find the material at http://www.finra.org/Investors/index.htm

These questions were part of a nationwide state-by-state financial capability survey. This online version was answered by more than 28,000 people. On average, California residents answered 3.1 questions correctly. The national average was 2.99. For more details about the survey, go to http://www.usfinancialcapability.org/financial_quiz.html.

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