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# BUSINESS

## Tips to keep money safe when you travel

By Eileen Alf Powell  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - Nothing can spoil a vacation quicker than losing your money or credit cards - or falling victim to a thief. A few simple steps before you head out the door can help protect your cash, cards and personal information while you're traveling.

Paul Stephens, a policy analyst with the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse in San Diego, notes that people spend a lot of time planning their trips, from buying guidebooks to finding just the right beach outfits. But "their eyes glaze over" when the subject of keeping money safe comes up, he said.

"Why not take a few minutes to do something that could potentially save your vacation?" Stephens asked. In most cases, the precautions are so

simple that "they can go on your to-do list with 'buy suntan lotion' and everything else," he added.

The top recommendation from Stephens is to clean out your wallet.

"Remove unnecessary credit cards, your Social Security card and any other unneeded documents that could compromise your identity if lost or stolen while you're on vacation," he said.

Then make a photocopy of the cards you've decided to take along and keep it in a secure location with you (not in your wallet) or leave it with a trusted relative or friend back home, Stephens said.

"Now you know who you need to contact and how to reach them if your wallet is missing," he said.

Travelers should never leave their wallets or any identifying documents

in their hotel rooms when they're not there, he added.

"Use a hotel safe, when available," Stephens said. "Or keep your wallet and documents with you at all times."

Stephens also recommends people leave their debit cards at home when they hit the road, either in the United States or abroad.

"Say you're carrying a debit card and it falls out of your pocket at the beach, or you leave it in a store after making a purchase," he said. "If it falls into the wrong hands, they can wipe out your bank account in a matter of hours."

It can take several weeks to sort out debit card problems with financial institutions, potentially ruining a vacation in the interim, he said.

"You're much better off with a credit card," he added. "You're not out the

money ... while you're getting it sorted out."

Nancy Dunnan, a consumer finance expert who is editor of the TravelSmart newsletter, urges travelers to adopt what she calls a "divide and conquer" strategy.

"Your natural reflex is to put everything in one place, but it's better to have your main credit card in one place and your backup card in another," she said. "That way, if a thief gets one - or you lose something - you have an alternative."

The same applies to cash, Dunnan said.

"Every time you pay for something, a pickpocket sees where your cash is held," she noted. So she recommends travelers stash their cash in different pockets, in different parts of a purse, socks, in a tote, in the hotel safe.



ILLUSTRATION/JIM HUNT

## Enron's lessons are lost on some investors

By Ellen Simon  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - If you've spent this past week thinking about Kenneth Lay, Enron Corp.'s founder and a convicted felon who died Wednesday at 64, turn your thoughts to something more constructive: your own portfolio.

The lessons of the Enron debacle, which wiped out more than \$60 billion in market value and almost \$2.1 billion in pension plans, were clear, yet investors continue to make some of the same mistakes that lost them money and sleep when Enron imploded.

Some of the lessons we should have learned

- Don't bet the house on any company, especially the one you work for.

Remember the Enron line-man whose \$348,000 worth of company stock in his 401(k) dwindled to \$1,200? Similar stories from Enron were everywhere after the company's 2001 bankruptcy filing. Still, when human resources consultant Hewitt Associates Inc. surveyed 401(k) plans in 2005, more than one in four workers held half or more of their total 401(k) balance in their employers' stock.

If you work for a company, your future is already tied to its future. Business and life being what they are, your company's future is by no means a safe bet.

## LA fast food feud

By Betty Pleasant

WAVE NEWSPAPERS

LOS ANGELES - It's David and Goliath in the valley of Elah all over again. This time it's a lone little black fast-food franchisee doing battle against the corporate mega-giant McDonald's in the U.S. Central District Court.

Discovery, depositions and the exchange of documents are currently under way in a multimillion-dollar lawsuit filed by Bob Johnson, a McDonald's franchisee for more than 25 years, against Delaware-based McDonald's Corp. charging it with alleged fraud, unfair trade practices and breach of contract.

Johnson ("David" in this scenario) is a rather large figure himself. He owns 10 franchises - a hefty portion of the total number in the African-American community - including two in Los Angeles International Airport terminals.

Johnson has enlisted the services of attorney Robert Zarco, a recognized slayer of franchise giants



PHOTO/CURTIS WILSON

Ella Martin (left) and Kim Roundtree turned their online search for mates into Solace Consulting, a dating service that specializes in matching African American clients.

## The matchmakers

Consultants bring black singles together for companionship, love

By Erica Singleton

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Are you single? That is the first question Solace Consulting co-owners Kim Roundtree and Ella Martin ask visitors who walk into their office.

The brochure for their newly-launched business asks, "are you single, attractive, but selective?" There is no mistaking their focus.

Though the name doesn't say it, Solace Consulting is a matchmaking service, offering to bring two hearts together.

"People want confidentiality. I picked the name Solace, because it doesn't seem date related," Roundtree said. "I also liked what the word means, calm, cool, at peace; a place of wholeness."

"We're trying to unite people," said Martin.

After years of dating frustration and tired of the local club scene, Martin and Roundtree took their dating search to the Internet. Although both met their spouses online, their search identified a need in the black community.

"African Americans think they only have clubs and churches to go to in order to meet people," said Roundtree. "People just go to work and go home and those people need someone to work for them to help them find dates."

"I understand the process," said Martin, whose been married for almost five years. "You're tired of dating and you are just looking for a soul mate."

Even though online dating proved successful for the two, they do not automatically recommend

the process to others. "Online dating is hard. You go through a whole lot of mess to get something worthwhile," explained Roundtree, who met 70 men online before meeting her husband of three years. "People lie...they give you the wrong picture."

"And you know, when you start dating someone you are meeting that person's representative, not who they really are," added Martin, who was contacted by 100 men online before meeting her husband. "Plus it gets hard to keep up with all those people," said Martin. "I had to keep notes on whose who and make sure not to say the wrong person's name on a date. You have to keep things straight."

For two years Roundtree wanted to launch a service, but couldn't find a partner with the same vision. While working at a youth home she met Martin, discovered they had met their husbands on the same website, and found a partner.

"My husband asked me, 'why would someone want to pay for this, when we met each other for free,'" Roundtree said.

Despite her husband's reservations, Roundtree, who has a degree in social work and a master's in marriage and family therapy saw potential in Charlotte.

"I looked at other matchmakers and didn't find any geared toward blacks," she said. "One place guarantees 14 dates a year, I asked them, can you guarantee me 14 dates with black men? They could

not. That was all I needed to know."

Solace Consulting launched on June 24 at Gold Pepper Grill, and already the partners are setting up dates for clients. "We are trying to cater to black women, because they are the ones really having problems finding dates," said Martin. Solace does all the work. In addition to a questionnaire, personality profile, and photographs, Martin and Roundtree do background checks on criminal history and marital status. "What makes us better than an online service is that we give our clients personal interaction," said Roundtree. "We offer one on one service, and we do the legwork for them."

Even awkward first-date questions, like, do you have children, political affiliations, or if someone wears weave are included. The consultants determine dating goals, preference, and interests. If a client wants a dark skinned woman with long hair, no weave, non-smoker who likes sports, they will find that person. The only requirement is honesty.

"We have to ask a lot of questions to get the truth out," said Martin. "It's very specific, we ask more than their personality preferences, we also ask about what physical features they want."

Martin and Roundtree even attend the first date to make the introductions.

"It makes them more comfortable," said Martin. "We break the ice for them, and that makes it easier."

## FINANCIAL LITERACY

### What you don't know may hurt

Most of us "get" the basics of financial management. While it may not be our favorite pastime, we generally know the gist of balancing our checkbook, paying credit card bills and identifying retirement funds. But, for many, that's the extent of our financial comprehension.



GIRARDIE MERCER

In fact, most Americans fail to make the grade when their financial knowledge is tested beyond the ABC's of financial literacy. According to a 2006 study commissioned by Northwestern Mutual, Americans have little grasp of important - and relevant - financial matters that can affect their financial futures. In response to the study's questions, which test financial knowledge, the vast majority of the more than 1,000 study participants failed to get 80 percent correct - that's an F in school terms.

The study found that Americans score well when they're presented with a list of answers to questions that ask them to identify terms like asset allocation, diversified portfolio and IRA. However, when asked questions that delve a little deeper, Americans don't make the grade with issues such as:

- Bonds vs stocks: Most Americans erroneously say bonds provide better long-term protection against inflation and other adverse market conditions as opposed to stocks.

- Group insurance: Six in 10 wrongly believe they will be able to take their group life or disability policies with them should they leave their job.

- Nursing home costs: Most underestimate such expenses; while the average yearly cost is approximately \$75,000, most estimate the cost to be less than \$60,000. In addition, few protect themselves against these costs.

- College savings programs: Less than half know 529 plans are savings vehicles for funding education.

Yet these results raise another important concern that must be addressed: our children's knowledge of financial matters. Most parents know the importance of teaching their children how to manage money. In fact, two-thirds of teenagers look to their parents, not teachers or peers, to learn how to manage money and manage it.

### Kids and money

The JumpStart Coalition for Personal Financial Literacy has conducted national research underscoring that the average high school graduate also lacks basic personal finance skills and, therefore, struggle with everyday earning, spending, saving and investing.

The coalition's most recent biennial survey, released in April 2006, shows that nationally, 12th grade students are in trouble. Though they also understood fundamentals like asset allocation, at large, they correctly answered only 52.4 percent of the questions - or the equivalent of an F - a sure sign that students' lack of financial literacy remains an issue that affects all Americans.

The answer lies in education - both at home as well as at school. For Americans who want to take a proactive approach to building financial knowledge and change the cycle, utilize the wide array of financial resources available to get you on track.

GIRARDIE MERCER is a network representative with Northwestern Mutual Financial Network in Charlotte.