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Computer Theft Hurts The WELL

by [Chris Gaither](#)

12:30 p.m. Aug. 3, 1999 PDT

A computer loaded with customer credit card numbers has been swiped from GST Whole Earth Networks' San Francisco office.



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Among those vulnerable to credit card fraud are some longstanding members of [The WELL](#), one of the Internet's first online communities. The WELL has no ISP of its own, and many members were grandfathered in to Whole Earth's WeNet service through a series of takeovers.

No fraudulent use of the cards has been reported. The information was encrypted, according to GST.

"That's great," Gail Ann Williams, executive director of The WELL, said of the encryption. "That's the ultimate defense we all dream of."

About 2,700 of The WELL's 7,000 customers use the WeNet ISP, according to Andrew Ross, vice president of marketing for Salon.com, The WELL's parent company. GST Telecommunications, [WeNet's](#) parent company, would not comment or answer questions about the theft Tuesday, saying they were too busy preparing an annual earnings announcement.

However, on Monday the company issued a release saying that credit card companies were immediately notified of the theft.

Jennifer Powell, a member of The WELL since 1993, said the bank canceled her husband's credit card as a precautionary measure. She is thankful that no fraud has been reported, but she said her husband must now update payment information with every service paid for with that credit card.

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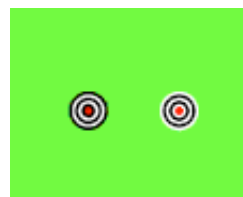
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"It's not severe, but it's a pain," she said.

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The WELL provided Internet service until 1996, when it split off its ISP division. Whole Networks then took over the division, and GST Telecommunications took over Whole Networks, bringing along some of The WELL's customers for the ride.

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