MID·ILLINI CREDIT UNION
WHERE DIFFERENT | IS BETTER

Sometimes, ATM and Debit cards stop working when they become demagnetized. If this happens to you, call Mid-Illini Credit Union (MICU) at 309.661.1166 to order a replacement card.

NOTE: There is a $5 fee for a replacement card.

How does a card become demagnetized and how can I prevent it?

Nothing is more frustrating than trying to swipe a credit card through a reader and have it not work. When credit card machines won't read a card, it could be because the card has been demagnetized.

Unlike the old days when credit cards were run through a roller onto a 3-page carbon receipt, today's cards are read by means of a magnetic strip on the reverse side. This magnetic strip contains tiny bits of iron arranged in binary form which communicate important information about the card and the card holder. When the card is placed too close to a magnetic source, the iron particles become demagnetized and will no longer be readable by a machine. When this happens, the card must be replaced with a new one. Since there is a $5 charge for a replacement card, the best policy is to prevent your card from becoming demagnetized in the first place.

Common ways that credit cards become demagnetized:

Those of us who worked retail were puzzled at why credit cards kept in eel skin wallets were more prone to demagnetizing than wallets of cowhide, and the answer ended up being much simpler than we expected. Turns out the culprit wasn't the eel skin itself, but the tiny magnet found in the clasps of those eel skin wallets and billfolds. Because eel skin is much thinner than leather, the magnet didn't have too far to go to scramble all that important data. Magnets erase the data stored on your credit card by realigning all those iron particles and making them unreadable.

Ways you can prevent your cards from becoming demagnetized:

Clearly, you should try to avoid keeping your cards near items with magnets in them. These include obvious magnets such as refrigerator magnets or magnetic closures on wallets, but also include less obvious magnets such as the ones found in speakers and regular television sets. Cell phones and security scanning devices will also scramble a credit card.

While magnets are the most common way of destroying stored data, carelessness can also ruin the magnetic strip on a card.

Men seem to have more problems with this than women, but only because of the difference in wallet styles. Most women's billfolds have dividers to keep credit cards separated from each other, while men's wallets tend not to. Storing cards back to back can erase or damage the magnetic strip and render them unreadable.