

International Scams:

Tips to avoid becoming a victim

While the Internet has opened up a world of opportunities for commerce and communication, it has also provided scam artists with an unlimited number of potential victims. Many of the scams that technologically savvy con artists use are variations of those that have been around for many years. Below are some of the cross border scams that are gaining in popularity along with tips on how you can avoid becoming a victim.

FOREIGN LOTTERIES

In foreign lottery scams, you receive an email claiming that you are the winner of a foreign lottery. All you need to do to claim your prize is send money to pay the taxes, insurance, or processing or customs fees. Sometimes, you will be asked to provide a bank account number so the funds can be deposited. In reality, your bank account is likely to be depleted. In the end, you end up shelling out your hard earned money for “winnings” you will never receive.

Keep in mind:

- All foreign lotteries are against the law.
- It's extremely unlikely that you would win a foreign lottery and no inside track for winning a foreign lottery exists.
- If you buy even one foreign lottery ticket, it's likely that you will receive more bogus offers for lottery or investment “opportunities.”
- Once you give away your personal information such as a bank account or credit card number, you open yourself up to identity theft.

“NIGERIAN” FOREIGN MONEY OFFERS

The “Nigerian” scam got its name from e-mails that supposedly came from Nigerian “officials” claiming they needed help getting money from their country.

Today, people claiming to be officials, businessmen or surviving relatives of former government officials in countries around the world send countless offers via e-mail, attempting to convince consumers that they will transfer thousands of dollars into your bank account if you will just pay a fee or “taxes” to help them access their money. If you respond to the initial offer, you may receive documents that look “official.” Unfortunately, you will get more e-mails asking you to send more money to cover transaction and transfer costs, attorney's fees, blank letterhead and your bank account numbers and other sensitive, personal information.

Subsequent communications sometimes even try to encourage consumers to travel to another country to complete the transaction. This can be extremely dangerous — according to the U.S. State Department, people who have taken this action have been beaten, subjected to threats and extortion, and in some cases, murdered.

Keep in mind:

- It is highly unlikely that a stranger would randomly select you to share in thousands of dollars.
- Don't respond to solicitation from people who need your help getting money out of their country. No matter how emotional or genuine the story might sound.

CHECK OVERPAYMENT SCAMS

In check overpayment scams, the con artist responds to an item you may have for sale online. They send you a check payable for more than the agreed upon price along with a reason why they are writing the check for more. They ask that you deposit the amount in your bank account and wire or transfer the extra amount to a foreign account. The scammer vanishes after the money is deposited. At that point, the check bounces and you are required to pay for the entire amount.

Keep in mind:

- Often, these scam artists pose as potential buyers from a foreign country.
- They may also pretend to be a business owner needing financial agents in the U.S. and in exchange they promise a commission.
- No matter how convincing the story, it is highly unlikely that you will benefit from one of these overpayment scams.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM CROSS-BORDER SCAMS

- Remind yourself to ignore the promises of strangers.
- Try not to display your e-mail address in public.
- Consider using two e-mail addresses: one for personal messages and the other for newsgroups and chat rooms.
- If you get an e-mail or pop-up message that asks for personal or financial information, do not reply or click the link in the message.
- Be cautious about opening any attachment or downloading any files from e-mails.
- Use anti-virus software and a firewall, and keep them up to date.
- Avoid e-mailing personal or financial information.
- Review credit card and bank statements as soon as you receive them to check for unauthorized charges.

RESOURCES

If you think you have responded to a cross border scam, you can file a complaint at www.econsumer.gov, a project of 20 countries in the International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network. If you receive material in the mail of what appears to be foreign lottery information, give it to your local postmaster.

The Federal Trade Commission is also equipped to deal with questions and complaints regarding spam. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues please visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357).

The Consumer Protection Division of the Indiana Attorney General's Office works to safeguard the rights of Indiana citizens every day. If you have questions or complaints regarding cross-border scams or other consumer issues, contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division at 800-382-5516.