

Your Rights

When Scam Artists Come Calling

What you need to know to protect yourself

By Kimberly Yavorski

Government officials estimate that thousands of people are victims of telemarketing fraud every day at a cost to consumers of up to \$40 billion per year. Fraudulent mail offers account for millions more. In today's increasingly technological world, phone and mail sales are commonplace, and credit cards are the fastest, easiest method of payment. Although convenient, this also opens the door for scam artists to get into your home. Offers via mail and phone can end up costing you your life savings. And, remember, if an offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Some telemarketing schemes seem obvious—when you are offered something for nothing. But recovery room schemes are more devious. A double scam, recovery rooms contact victims of telemarketing and mail fraud (often claiming to be working with authorities or as an agent in a class

action suit) and promise to regain losses for a fee paid in advance. This may be the same company that perpetrated the scam, or one that purchased or traded your name from a list of fraud victims (these lists may even include how much you have spent on telemarketing scams).

How to Handle Phone Solicitations

Take your time making decisions. If you think a call is from a

company you may want to do business with, ask for a number to call them back, or ask for information in writing. You can use the excuse that you are busy now, but will get back to them at a time more convenient for you. A legitimate company will honor your requests.

Go on the offensive. Courtney Yelle, Director of Consumer Protection in Bucks County, advises that you ask callers: "Why are



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you calling me?" You want to control the conversation. Continue to ask "why?" until you are satisfied with the answers or decide to end the call.

Just hang up. Don't worry about being rude. As Joel Landsberg, Chief Investigator of Consumer Affairs for Montgomery County, explains, "Telemarketing is an unnecessary intrusion into everyone's lives. You don't have to be polite. They are intruding on you in your home. You may miss an important or emergency phone call while the phone is tied up [talking to them]. They are

pany to confirm that the call was actually from a representative.

What Not to Do

Never provide any personal information (especially your credit card number, bank account number, Social Security number, or date of birth) to an unknown caller. A scam artist may be able to debit your bank account without your knowledge or later use the information to gain your trust. A good way to avoid this is to say, "I don't give personal information over the phone."

"Telemarketing is an unnecessary intrusion into your life. You may miss an important or emergency phone call while the phone is tied up."

—Joel Landsberg, Chief Investigator

taking up family time," he says. If you find it difficult to hang up on people, take advantage of the features of Caller ID.

Do your homework. Call the Better Business Bureau or Chamber of Commerce in the state the company is located in (but remember that a lack of complaints does not make the company legitimate), the National Fraud Information Center, or your local or regional Consumer Affairs Office. If you suspect a scam, contact your local or regional Consumer Affairs Office or the Pennsylvania Attorney General. If callers say they are from your credit card company, ask for a number to call them back. Check the information and if suspicious, call the com-

Never say "yes" unless you know what you are saying yes to. Some companies say they are taping your conversation for your protection, but later use the tape to "prove" that you agreed to a purchase. Credit card companies sell member lists to marketers who may charge your account with such a verbal agreement.

Never call to get information about a prize you have "won" unless you are sure of the cost of the call. A 900 number is always a toll call, and frequently costs several dollars a minute. Also, look at the area code listing in your phone book to see where you are calling. If the location is some distance from your home, you could incur substantial long-distance charges.

Never buy stock or other investments via mail or phone solicitations.

Never accept an offer that is only good now. A legitimate company will give you time to do your homework.

Never donate to callers saying they are soliciting for your police or fire association. Call your local police or fire department to check validity.

Never buy foreign lottery tickets

by phone, fax, mail, or e-mail. This is against federal law.

Never pay in advance for services such as credit repair or advance loans. Credit problems are best solved on your own, or with the assistance of nonprofit groups specializing in credit issues, at little or no cost. Likewise, credit protection services are unnecessary, as federal law limits your liability for charges on lost or stolen cards to \$50 per card.

How to Recognize Scam Artists

Watch out for the following telltale signs of the scam artist:

- Callers who do not identify themselves and the purpose of the call right away.
- Solicitations promising a "free gift" or stating that you have "won" something and have to pay a service or processing fee, or the cost of shipping and handling.
- Solicitations without the company name, address, and phone number clearly marked.
- Requests for your credit, bank account, or Social Security number to verify your eligibility in a sweepstakes or to "deposit money in your account," or to verify anything else (such as if your card will work after Jan. 1, 2000).
- A thank you for a contribution pledge you do not remember making.
- An offer of credit repair—at a price and/or with guaranteed results.
- A request from a legitimate-sounding charity with a sob story and a P.O. box instead of a street address. A legitimate charity provides information about its mission, tells how your money will be used, and provides proof that your donation is tax-deductible. Many fraudulent "charities" have names similar to well known ones.
- Telemarketing calls before 8:00 a.m. or after 9:00 p.m. (not permitted under law).
- Callers who use high-pressure tactics or are rude.
- Callers offering magazines for only

Next Month in Your Rights

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- Your Questions Answered.


x amount per week. This usually totals much more than the newsstand rate.

- Callers who say they cannot send you more info via the mail, will not put offers in writing, or will not give you a phone number to call them back.

If You Become a Victim ...

For mail fraud, contact the local postmaster or postal inspector. Obtain a Mail Fraud Complaint Questionnaire, available at all post offices, as well as informational pamphlets on mail fraud. Save the envelopes from the company and any other paperwork that can be used as evidence.

For any credit card scam, contact the Secret Service and your local police department. The numbers are in your phone book blue pages.

Notify all credit bureaus, and get a copy of your credit report to see if it has been affected, and start to correct any errors. 

Where to Turn for Help

In Pennsylvania

Attorney General Consumer
Protection Unit
Harrisburg
800-441-2555

Regional Offices in Pennsylvania

Allentown 610-821-6690
Ebensburg 814-949-7900
Erie 814-871-4371
Philadelphia 215-560-2414
Pittsburgh 412-565-5135
Scranton 570-963-4913

National Organizations

U.S. Postal
Inspection Service
800-372-8347

Consumer Response Center
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20580
202-FTC-HELP

National Fraud
Information Center
800-876-7060
www.fraud.org

To Verify Charitable Organizations

Philanthropic Advisory
Service,
Council of Better
Business Bureaus
4200 Wilson Blvd.
Ste. 800
Arlington, VA 22203
703-276-0100

National Charities
Information Bureau
19 Union Square West
6th Floor
New York, NY 10003
212-929-6300

Other Resources

The Consumers Resource
Handbook, which provides
more information and tips,
is available free of charge
by writing to:

Consumer Information
Center
Pueblo, CO 81009
888-8-PUEBLO
www.pueblo.gsa.gov