General Fraud Prevention Tips

As a kid, I was taught to avoid talking to strangers, especially if they were offering free candy out of the back of their windowless panel van. In fact, if a stranger was following me, I was taught to yell, “Stranger danger,” and immediately find the nearest trustworthy adult. You may have been taught similar lessons.

However, as we age, we are much more willing to talk to a complete stranger who calls or emails us out of the blue; at the very least, we stop to consider what they have to say. Even if they are offering us “candy” (in the form of a lottery scam, or a too-good-to-be-true investment opportunity), our first instinct is rarely to high-tail it in the opposite direction. As I research and talk about consumer scams and fraud, I am amazed at how often those lessons from our youth are forgotten, and how easily unwary consumers slip into a scammer’s trap.

We would do well to remember the training we received as kids: be wary of strangers, get as much information as you can, and find a trustworthy adult to talk to. Here are some general consumer protection tips to help avoid becoming the next victim when faced with “stranger danger.”

- **Safeguard your personal information.** While your name, bank account information, and social security number may not appear to be worth a lot of money on paper, I can assure you that this is some of the most valuable information you own. It’s what most scammers are trying their hardest to get their hands on. Do not give out any of your personal or financial information to a stranger, especially if they contacted you out of the blue.

- **Trust your instincts; if something feels wrong, seek help.** There are countless stories in the news about consumers being told they have won a foreign lottery they didn’t enter, awarded a government grant they didn’t apply for, or offered a “can’t lose” investment opportunity. Experience and financial horror stories have taught us that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Verify the information you have been given and follow up on it. Do your own research to make sure the offer is legitimate. In the end, if you doubt the authenticity of a prize, award, or product, you should not spend any money until you have satisfied all of your doubts.

- **Don’t talk to strangers.** Telemarketing fraud is running rampant, and it can only occur if you stay on the line. The best advice: hang up! No good can come from talking on the phone with a fraudster who just wants to get at your hard-earned money. These type of scammers believe that if they can just keep you talking, you will get wrapped into their pitch and your money is as good as theirs. Don’t give in to their emotional appeals or their high-pressure tactics. It is not impolite to hang up on them, it is just plain smart.
• **Be aware of your surroundings.** You should get into the habit of reconciling all credit and bank accounts on a monthly basis, if not weekly. You should also check your credit report on a regular basis. By visiting www.annualcreditreport.com, you can access all 3 credit reporting agencies. Each agency allows you to check your credit report once a year for free. If you stagger your inquiries, this means that you can check your credit report once every four months. Regularly checking your accounts and credit report allows you to stay current on all of your income and out-go. If someone has used your account fraudulently or stolen your identity and opened new lines of credit, you will be able to spot it right away. Finally, if you are receiving denial letters from credit card companies or lenders, and you have not attempted to open any new lines of credit, take it as a warning sign and contact a credit reporting agency immediately.

• If you become a victim, make sure you report it to local law enforcement and your local consumer protection agency.

For more information on consumer fraud and scams, including helpful preventative tips and contact information for other community resources, contact Stetson University College of Law’s Elder Consumer Protection Program by e-mail at elderconsumers@law.stetson.edu, or by telephone at (727) 562-7888.