Better Business Bureau Releases Top Scams of 2012

Each year, the Better Business Bureau publishes a list of the most reported consumer scams. Read the summaries below and be sure not to fall for last year’s most popular scams.

**Fake Check Scam** – Scammers offer to pay consumers to drive around with the scammer’s business logo on the consumer’s car? The scammer usually demands up-front payment to help defray the cost of materials, but the scammer promises that the money will be paid back in the first pay period. When the check comes, it either bounces or cannot be deposited because it is a fake.

**Grandparent Scams** – You receive a phone call from your grandson claiming that he has been arrested while traveling in Mexico or Canada. He has no money to pay bail, so he needs you to wire him some cash, and fast. Has your grandson really been arrested? Double check; the odds are he is safe at home. If you get a call like this, don’t overreact, and take some time to call family member to verify the story. Even if the story is true, your grandson will still be in jail in 15 minutes, after you’ve had a chance to follow up with his family and friends.

**Mystery Shopping Scam** – “Businesses” offer to pay consumers to shop at their stores and write reviews of the service they received. Easy money, right? Think twice. Scammers are trying to trick you. You should never pay to be a mystery shopper, and you should never wire your own money, even if you are asked to “evaluate” money wiring services. Check out Mysteryshop.org, which is a legitimate site offering these types of opportunities.

**Nonexistent loans** – Need a loan? Scammers claim to offer loans with “no strings attached,” and with “no credit check needed.” Scammers also ask for a deposit from you up front to secure the loan. Don’t fall for it. Most, if not all, legitimate loans require some sort of credit check, which is how the lender determines the interest rates that will apply.

**“President Obama will pay your utility bills”** – During the Presidential campaign, emails were sent to millions of Americans claiming that President Obama would pay for their utility bills. While this sounds unbelievable, it speaks to a larger issue. You should never click a link or open an attachment on an email from an unknown sender, even if it looks official. Scammers can infect your computer with a virus and retrieve personal information from your hard drive.

**Jamaican Lottery Scam** – You just won $2 million in the Jamaican lottery! Just pay $3,000 upfront to cover fees and taxes, and the money is yours. Not so fast. You can’t win a lottery that you didn’t enter, and it is illegal to play a foreign lottery. Also, you should never pay a fee or buy anything in return for a promise that you have won a prize. Hang up and file a phone fraud report.
Fake Facebook Messages and Tweets – If you are a Twitter user, you may receive a message from a friend that an embarrassing photo of you has been posted on Facebook. The message contains a link to the Facebook photo. Click it, and you might get a virus. Be sure to follow up with your friends to verify the story, and don’t click these links!

Sandy Storm Chasers – After a natural disaster, everyone with a truck and a hammer claims to be a contractor, and may offer you a very competitive rate. Several arrests were made after Hurricane Sandy because unlicensed and uninsured workers were offering to do work that they were not qualified to do. In an emergency, it’s tempting to skip reference checks, but that’s never a good idea. Next time search BBB.org and your local licensing authority to be sure that the contractor carries the required license and insurance.

Newtown Charity Scams – Within hours of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary, fake charity pages showed up on the internet and social media websites. The FBI has arrested one fraudster and law enforcement is investigating others. When you consider donating to a charity, be sure that the organization is legitimate. You can investigate charities through the BBB’s tips for donors at www.give.org, or at www.charitynavigator.org.

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.