

Opinion: Use common sense to not be a victim

By Brian Uhler

All too often, we hear from people who have been victimized by some sort of scam. Before the Internet existed these “confidence scams” were frequently perpetuated through direct contact and bolstered by a victim who is too trusting. With the Internet and other technology, criminals have shifted their efforts so as to accomplish their rip-off over long distances and without direct contact.

Unfortunately, local law enforcement has limited capacity to track and ultimately prosecute such crimes. Foremost, the volume of these crimes is overwhelming, but from a practical standpoint it makes little sense to spend hundreds of investigative hours, costing thousands of taxpayer dollars for a crime involving small losses.

Our best offense against this type of crime is through education and prevention.



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Here are a few simple techniques to safeguard you from becoming a victim:

- Live with a healthy level of skepticism. If someone tells you they’ve inherited millions of dollars and they

need to post surety cash to recover the money, it's a lie. Have you ever heard of a "real" situation like this? The old adage, "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is" can help.

- Email with a real looking logo or from a company with whom you do business is not always legitimate. That email from PayPal, as an example, asking you to click a link (then asking you to verify security information) is probably from someone trying to steal your online identity. In response, consider signing-on to your PayPal account and checking for legitimate messages.
- Phone calls from unknown people should be treated like a stranger on the street. Suppose someone walked up to you and told you they were from your bank, used your name, and asked you to verify a personal identifying number (PIN) or credit card security code. You'd never give your sensitive information in these circumstances. Change this to a phone call with other "confidence building" questions in between and a confused victim will often give-up the PIN (or other data) – even when feeling uncomfortable inside. Legitimate businesses would never put you in this position. In this situation, you can say, "I'm busy right now, I'll call the bank in a couple minutes." Use the number you know, not the one provided by the caller.

Here's a recent scam in South Lake Tahoe that more than one person fell for:

Caller: Hi, I'm Robert, I'm calling from the _____ Court (fill in the blank). With whom am I speaking? (This caller uses good English.)

Victim: (Hearing "court" and with anxiety building, the caller answers) I'm Pat Smith.

Caller: I show an outstanding parking ticket and we're about to issue a warrant for your arrest. I want to

give you a chance to clear this up without the need for your arrest

Victim: Where was the ticket issued?

Caller: I'm sorry, I don't have those details, but if you take care of this now, it will cost you \$75, if your arrested this will cost you \$275.

Victim: (Fearing arrest) OK, what do I need to do?

Caller: I need you to get a green dot card at a local convenience store (caller continues to make arrangements to retrieve the prepaid card, which is as good as cash).

Another variation also recently used by crooks is to claim they are from the IRS. In these cases, tension causes victims to acquiesce, believing they are "getting off easy." Please be alert and avoid becoming a victim.

Brian Uhler is South Lake Tahoe's chief of police.