Don’t Be Scammed

A grandparent gets a frantic call from his grandson. “Hi, it’s Michael. I’m in trouble and need your help.” Being a kind and caring person, Grandpa asks what’s going on. Michael tells him he’s traveling and got arrested so he’s stranded far from home. “I don’t want mom or dad to know I’m in trouble. Could you wire me some money?” Love and concern will likely outweigh skepticism, and the grandparent sends the money through Western Union. By the time the grandparent calls Michael back and discovers he is not traveling and had not called, the money is long gone and chances of recovery are slim.

Like many, this scheme victimizes trusting people who are too often unquestioning. Many of us have been approached with an offer of a “free gift, vacation, or prize” that requires “postage, handling and a few other charges.” Although the details of each scam differ, keep the following tips in mind to avoid being a fraud victim:

• If contacted by phone or e-mail, always ask to see written material about any offer or charity. While not everything in written form is true, you have time to ask someone whose advice you trust to review it.
• Don’t respond to an offer you don’t thoroughly understand.
• Take time to make a decision. Legitimate companies will wait.
• Refrain from responding to employment advertisements which require payment up-front as many “work-at-home” schemes do.
• Never solely trust your caller ID; it can be manipulated by scammers.
• Don’t give out credit card numbers or other personal information unless you make the call. A common scam utilizes a caller from “the Security and Fraud Department” at Visa or MasterCard who already has your credit card number but needs the three-digit security code found on the back of the card in order to “verify that you still have your card.” Remember that Visa and MasterCard would have the security code, as they issued the credit card!
• Beware of businesses operated from post office boxes or mail drops or of dealing with people without a direct telephone line who are never there when you call.
• Be very wary of wiring money to someone you don’t know or giving a check or money order to a messenger coming to your home. They will have your money while you have no way to trace their whereabouts or your cash.
• If an “opportunity” appears too good to be true, it probably is. Legitimate business is not conducted in cash or on a street corner.
• Independently verify the legitimacy of any investment you consider.
• Check out unfamiliar companies and offers with the Better Business Bureau, State Attorney General’s Office, or the Consumer Guides and Protection at www.usa.gov.

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