



## SCAMMERS THEY HAVE **YOU** IN THEIR SIGHTS

When American comedian W.C. Fields delivered his classic line: "Never give a sucker an even break," he was preaching to the converted. It is a code thousands, maybe millions, live and cheat by every day. And why not? It works very well for them, mainly because they have us. We are the suckers, the marks. And they are the scammers.

They have been out there forever and continue to prey on the naive, the unsuspecting, the gullible and the vulnerable. If we don't fit into any of these categories, there are plenty more that describe who and what we are, and all are flashing beacons to grifters and confidence tricksters. Being aware that this is the way of things doesn't, unfortunately, make us immune to the sting when it comes. There are so many variations of it, often set up by people in whom we are very likely to believe and trust simply because they seem genuine, decent, law-abiding citizens just like us. Usually, by the time it is realised that they aren't, they've taken our money or prized possessions and gone.

Nearly every night we see reports on news and current affairs programs telling of ordinary folk being conned, mainly by the unscrupulous, but very occasionally by well-meaning individuals who mis-managed the scheme they were originally promoting in good faith. The end result is the same - the losers have to live with the embarrassment, a feeling of bitterness and a large financial hole in their savings, if there are any left at all. This may never happen to you, but in the hopes of making sure it doesn't, I'd like to list a few of the current scams going around, just in case you weren't aware of them. Then, at least, you will be forewarned and can send the hustlers packing before they stick their grubby hands in your pockets.

To start with, what exactly is a scam? In simple terms, it is the offer of a desirable item, service, or a financial return for a less-than-average outlay. The reward is a juicy carrot which doesn't exist at all, will never be delivered in full, or is of much lower value than its cost. The gold coins that turn out to be plated base metal; a roof-restoration that was begun but never finished; shares in the Bahamas resort that was never built; these are just a few examples of tricks people fall for every day. The scammers will use any means to make contact, usually as a batch mail-out which targets every name on a list they have acquired - from the standard phone book, email address books they have managed to access, social media sites, anywhere, in fact, that your details are stored. They don't expect a 100% response, but just a few takers will be profitable for them. Then there are the more direct approaches when you can be conned into thinking they know you personally and that they truly care about your welfare. Someone may knock on your door, send a cleverly-worded email, or a snail-mail letter, and generally the prize they dangle has some intimate connection for the receiver. These scams are a real worry, because too many are totally fooled by them. Some of the following may already be familiar, but if you have the time I'd recommend at least a glimpse through all of them, just as a reminder to be vigilant.

## **The Investment Opportunity**

There are plenty going around and not all are scams. They can range from holiday resorts to tree plantations, shopping precincts to inventions, movies, gold mines, oyster farms, you name it. Most need large sums of money just to kick off and all are likely to be long-term proposals, so investors will have to wait quite a while before they see any return on their outlay. There might be different levels of investment, catering for people who have a little spare cash to the ones who can put in considerably more. Because of the large amounts involved, the proposers expect caution on the part of their targets and that individuals, couples and sometimes groups will talk it over before deciding whether to go in or not. So, it has to be presented in a really attractive way - a glossy prospectus in the mail box, a website with pages of photographs or artist's impressions, plus figures outlining cost projections and eventual financial benefits. It looks good, maybe spectacular and, aside from the profit which will be far and above anything that can be earned in the banks on the current rates of interest, think of the personal pride from being involved in such a scheme, the buzz from getting in on the ground floor and making it happen! Once attitude switches to this mode it becomes very personal and the enthusiasm generated can easily override cynicism and doubt. Please be exceptionally careful when considering this kind of investment. Even the genuine ones can go belly-up; the scams always will. I'll repeat what I've said before - check it out thoroughly, visit the proposed location where possible, consult your bank, investment adviser, accountant, or anyone whose opinion you value to see if they have further information before you take the plunge. Once you have, it may be too late to pull out. The bottom line - if you can't verify that the project is genuine, or you even suspect that it could have more than a few teething problems, be very wary of putting your money into it!

## **Congratulations ! You have won a Prize !**

Remember those letters from Readers Digest and book clubs? They actually gave you something, a free tit-bit with no obligation to follow up, but if you did there was a promise of much more. Perhaps you wouldn't win the big one, but there was enough along the way to keep you interested, and you actually got something worthwhile for your money. It wasn't illegal, or a scam, just a smart way to get buyers on board for however long they enjoyed the cruise. I subscribed to a couple in the past and never regretted it; I can almost guarantee, however, that whoever gets sucked into one of the latest scams, especially the online ones, will end up short of cash and with a bad taste in their mouths! Nobody gives away money for nothing. Except, perhaps, those who are naive enough to believe this prize-winning scam!

There used to be a variation of this in Australia which I hope has now been stopped, but may still be in operation in other countries. It was advertised on TV, a simple game like the pea under the walnut - guess which shell it is under. They repeated the movements so frequently that only a fool would get it wrong and, of course, there was a chance to win big. The problem here was that entry was geared to mobile-phone users, in particular the number to text in order to register. There was a standard charge for this which was quite acceptable, but nobody realised the scam that was to follow. Not only did it cost the entrant in the competition for their initial SMS, but each time the advertisers texted *them*, they incurred that same charge and - you've guessed it - the text-backs were very, very frequent! So, overseas cousins, please watch out!

## **A Communication from Your Bank?**

Usually, this is an online contact, so if you do your banking over the Internet, don't be surprised to get one. The chances are you will take it as genuine, especially if it isn't regarded as spam by your security manager. We've had them before, and one came in the other day. A phone call to our local branch verified suspicions - it wasn't from the bank. The advice we were given next was most important: a) don't open it, just delete it; and b) it could be a request for information, most likely personal financial details of account numbers, etc, purportedly for updating or confirming records - the bank's comments: we never request customers' details in this way, so don't give

them out! It was an obvious scam, one we could quite easily have fallen for, a con many don't recognise until it is too late. If you receive a similar communication from your bank, contact your local branch or head office to confirm its authenticity BEFORE you comply with any of its requests.

### **You Are the Beneficiary of an Inheritance!**

Yeah, right! You are pretty sure you know most of your relatives, at least those still living, plus some who have already passed on; none of whom, to your knowledge, were anything even approaching rich. But – and here's where the con sucks you in – most believe in luck and have a romantic streak, so there is always a chance that there is someone in your distant past, a wealthy benefactor who kicked the bucket and left their money to future generations. According to the communication just received, you are one of those in line, maybe even the last survivor, and part or all of the tontine is legally yours for the claiming. So, where's the scam? It should become fairly clear once the conditions are outlined. There are certain procedures to follow, verifications of true identity to be made, maybe further research to be completed before the trustees can hand over the inheritance; and all of this red tape costs money to unfurl. Of course, the trustees can't be expected to foot the bill, but surely you as the beneficiary couldn't be so mean that you decline to contribute to your own fortune? Well, be mean, be scummy, don't hand over so much as a plastic cent, because you'll never see it again! Hang on to your money and leave it to someone more deserving than these mongrels when you die!

### **Collecting & Antiques**

It may be a little unfair to include this category on the scam list because there are many genuine people involved, both buyers and sellers. Unfortunately, there are some who use a rather vague and subjective definition of value when it comes to what a particular item is truly worth. The best advice I can give you is to decide whether what you are paying, or receiving if you are the seller, is satisfactory to you, personally. In effect, are you happy with the price? Collectors – remember that not everyone shares your passion for your particular area of interest. Antique enthusiasts – if you are into it purely for money, there may be others in competition with you whose knowledge may be far in excess of yours. For all of you, never mind what you are told is the market value – it is only ever worth what someone is prepared to pay for it, you included.

### **Batch emails**

I mentioned these in our Cyber Minefield article (Focus 10) and they are of great concern. These are the emails you may receive that usually include a direct link, supposedly to a web address that will inform you of some informative or beneficial information. If you open the attachment and check the recipients, you will often find that the same communication has been sent to a number of people, many of whom you may recognise as friends and family. Don't be fooled by this. These contacts may have been acquired by dubious means, and just because it seems like the sender is a close associate, don't accept that as gospel. If you take the risk of clicking on the link – I'd recommend that you definitely don't! – and are asked to forward personal information in the form of addresses, bank account details, date of birth, mother's maiden name, etc., simply exit and delete the email. The chances are that, if you comply with the requests, you will be regretting it later.

### **Mail order**

We've had this kind of scam for a long time and it usually involves snail-mail. Even when the purchase item is brand-named, something you can inspect an example of in a local store, there is no guarantee what you are ordering is the same or of equivalent value, or that you are going to receive it at all. What, in effect, you are doing if you comply, is trusting a nobody with your money in exchange for something that you may never receive. If the mail-order system is convenient and you like using it, test out the company offering the service with a small item of insignificant

value before purchasing something more costly. That way, you can see if it works the way you hoped it might. Just bear in mind, even though the seller might have a "no obligation, return for a full refund policy", it will still cost you for postage and packing to send it back. You will then have to add that to the price of the exercise.

### **Builders and Renovators**

Having a home of your own can prove costly with regard to repairs and improvements. Receiving a flier in the junk mail offering a service you really need, and at a cheap rate, could seem an opportunity too good to pass up; the personal approach is even more appealing. A guy in work-clothes knocks on your door, says he is doing a job in the area and noticed your house needed a bit of attention - the gutters are rusting out, the front fence is falling down and the exterior could do with a re-paint before winter - and he can fix it all up at a bargain price. He might glance at a vehicle parked in the driveway with his firm's name painted on the side, so he seems genuine enough. If you decide to take him on, you'll find out which profession he excels in - renovations or scamming. Usually, the crooks will ask for a payment up front, in some instances before they've even started the work - for materials mainly, or the hire of special equipment. Be suspicious! Give them the cash and they could take it and run. A worse-case scenario is that they'll start the job, pulling down the gutter, or ripping out the fence, then disappear into the sunset. Not only will you be minus whatever you have given them, but you will then find yourself paying more to employ someone else to sort out the damage they have caused.

Another scam we heard of was driveway repair. A couple of "workmen" had been doing a job locally and they had some material left over. There was enough to make this particular drive like new, and they only wanted to recoup their costs. It turned out they were pulling the same scam all over the place to the extent where they made the six o'clock news and became known as the driveway bandits. Need I say that a kid with a barrow-load of gravel and a bucket of tar could have done a better job! Always remember that you are an employer who pays their wages - that is, AFTER they've done the job and the work is to your satisfaction. If they ask for any payment up front before they've even started work, think twice before handing over the cash.

Just as a post-script to the personal-approach scammers, these low-lifes frequently target the elderly and the disabled, many of whom tend to be naive and confused by financial matters, often to the point where they keep considerable sums of money in the house because they don't trust banks. A con-merchant paid a large amount on the spot is likely to believe that there is more where that came from and return later to break in and steal it. The more brazen won't even wait that long, as happened here recently - they noticed the little old lady taking money from a tin and simply grabbed it and bolted! To us, this is mean and despicable; to the scammer, it is simply taking care of business.

### **Telephone Scams**

Tele-marketers may phone offering ways to make and save money by paying for goods or a service that will be of benefit. To them and their employers, it definitely will be if you accept; but to you...? Listen to their spiel, by all means, then ask for a contact number so that you can call them back once you've thought about it. If they won't give you one, you'd have to wonder why, surely? Unless you know them, a voice on the end of the line could be anyone. If it is convenient to purchase goods or services over the phone, you be the one to make first contact, preferably on a number that can be found in any phone book. Be particularly wary of mobile numbers, especially if this is the only means of communication - land lines are a lot easier to trace. And whether you intend paying by credit card or directly from a bank account, just imagine what a thief can do once they have open access to either! If you are not sure you can trust the person you are talking to, don't give them your details - find a safer way to transact your business.

I had an instance when a man phoned claiming his company had made a drive-by inspection of properties and that my roof required attention. I replied: "Funny the person supposedly standing at the front of my house didn't see the sign." When the man on the line asked which sign, I said: "The one put up by the roof-restoration company which sorted out my roof only last week." The man went very quiet. So I added: "You're a con-merchant, aren't you? But have a nice day anyway." And I hung up.

### **On-line dating**

This may seem a strange inclusion, but it is very pertinent. I am mainly concerned for those who are lonely, or are finding lasting relationships hard to make. On-line chat can lead to great expectations, particularly when the prospect of marriage is broached. The danger with many of these associations is that no personal contact has been made - yet! That, seemingly, is the intention, but there might be a small problem - the other party, an attractive, desirable man or woman, doesn't have the money for the air-fare, plus visas etc also need to be taken care of. The financial hitches mount up and sometimes the requests blow out to thousands of dollars. By this time, the trusting souls have been sucked in and see no harm in financing their prospective spouse. After all, it will be worth it. Sure it will, for the scammer they send the money to, the face on the video call that they'll never see again! Please be careful lonely hearts.

### **Who is at Risk?**

Virtually anyone! Suckers come in all shapes and sizes and from every walk of life, but some are more vulnerable than others. People living alone are always going to be susceptible to the unsavoury element of society, especially when it comes to decision-making because they don't have the luxury of someone on hand from whom they can seek advice, or a second opinion. The elderly fall into this category, even the ones who still have a partner. They, at least, can discuss opportunities presented to them, but they can still get duped. The crux of the matter is usually money - the targets have it, and the scammers want it. Anyone who has savings can lose it to the con-merchants, and those without much spare but having a credit card are definitely in their sights. At the end of the day, we are all potentially at risk and need to be very wary, perhaps cynical. The best advice I can give: never trust anyone who says "Trust me."

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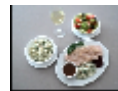
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