

CONSUMER ALERT

Providing consumers with knowledge to make informed decisions

A Publication of the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs

Philip S. Porter, Administrator/Consumer Advocate

Be Wary of Con Artists and Crooks This Holiday Season

“Tis the season to be jolly!” With all of the warmth and happiness that comes with the Holiday season, it is hard to imagine that there are people out there trying to steal the spirit of the season. But, they are there!

The Holiday season is one of the busiest times of year for con artist and crooks. Therefore, the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs has dedicated this issue of *Consumer Alert* to informing you of necessary precautions that we should all take during this busy time of year.

“Christmas is a time of increased scams,” warns Brandolyn Pinkston, Deputy, Public Information and Education for the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs. Pinkston further states to enjoy the season, yes, but, realize that a host of con artists and disreputable charities are working overtime to separate South Carolinians from their money.

Groups that camouflage themselves as charities become increasingly popular this time of year. Sometimes, disreputable charities will mimic well-known charities. By making the names somewhat familiar, people are often tricked. Prior to making a donation, you should ask for written information, including the charity’s name,

address, and telephone number.

Consumers should also know the difference between “tax exempt” and “tax deductible” prior to making a contribution to charity. Tax exempt means the organization does not have to pay taxes. Tax deductible means you can deduct your contribution on your federal income tax return. Even though an organization is tax exempt, your contribution may not be tax deductible. If deductibility is important to you, ask for a receipt showing the amount of your contribution and stating that it is tax deductible.

Beware of organizations that use meaningless terms to suggest they are tax exempt charities. For example, the fact that an organization has a “tax I.D. number” does not mean it is charity: all nonprofit and for profit organizations must have tax I.D. numbers. An invoice that tells you to “keep this receipt for your records” does not mean your donation is tax deductible or the organization is tax exempt.

Consumers should avoid cash gifts that can be lost or stolen. For security and tax record purposes, it is best to pay by check. Use the official full name of the charity on your check. Avoid solicitors who want to send a courier or use an overnight delivery service to pick up your donation.

Another concern during the Holiday season is thieves. Don’t let your holiday season be ruined by pickpockets, robbers, burglars, and

thieves. Police warn that robbers and burglars cannot steal what they do not see. To prevent pickpocketing, keep your wallet concealed when you are shopping and place your packages in your trunk. Also, if you are leaving home for the Holiday season, put yourself in the place of a burglar and take necessary precautions to secure your home from the burglar’s point of view.

There are countless tips to warn consumers about this the Holiday season. The most practical efforts to prevent con artists and crooks from disrupting your Holiday season is by using good, common sense.



CONSUMER CRUSADER

SAYS:

“ Consider it a free gift if a seller sends you clothing, cookware or any other merchandise thorough the mail that you did not order.”

CONTENTS

Holiday Con Artists and Crooks.....	1
You and Your Phone Bill.....	2
Holiday Shopping Online.....	2
The Nigerian Scam.....	2

YOU AND YOUR PHONE BILL

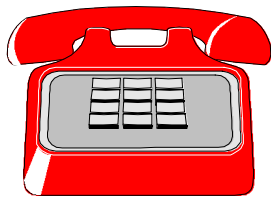
Did you know that some long distance carriers still list a discontinued charge in their monthly bills?

On the long-distance portion of consumers' telephone bills, there may be a presubscribed interexchange carrier charge (PICC) that should not be there.

The **PICC** may have different names including:

- 1- National Access Fee
- 2- Presubscribed Interexchange Carrier Charge
- 3- Presubscribed Line Charge
- 4- Regulatory Related Charge
- 5- Carrier Line Charge.

Any consumers in South Carolina who continue to find a surcharge of **\$1.50, \$1.51, \$1.04** or any other amount related to "access fees" on the long-distance portion of their telephone bill should contact their long-distance carrier, and request that the charge be removed, as well as, a refund or bill credit for these charges back to July 1, 2000. In addition, consumers are also asked to contact the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs at 734-4200, toll free 1-800-922-1594, or by e-mail at scadvocate@dca.state.sc.us to help us determine which companies are continuing to charge this fee.



Brandolyn Thomas Pinkston.....Deputy
Public Information & Education
Sherry Gore King.....Education Coordinator
Shana Kinard.....Newsletter Editor



Holiday Shopping Online

What are you in the market for this holiday season? Whether it a toy for a tot, an antique, or even a tree, you are sure to find what you are in search of online. Shopping online is a safe and easy alternative for consumers as long as certain precautions are taken.

Know your vendor: You should have a familiarity with the company with which you are dealing.

Protect your privacy: Web sellers often collect information about you to market back to you or share with other companies. The result can be that you are bombarded with advertising you may not want. In most cases, your password, credit card number, and shipping information are the only information a vendor should require to take your order. Do not shop from a vendor that wants more information than you are comfortable providing.

Pay with a credit card: Other payment options simply do not offer the same consumer protections. Some credit card issuers offer extended warranties or other advantages for credit card purchases. And if the product does not arrive on time or if you are not satisfied and choose to return it, you can dispute your vendor's charges. In addition, if you have an unauthorized charge on your credit card bill, your liability under federal law is limited to \$50.

Order only on a secure server: Buy only from web vendors that protect your financial information when you order online. To confirm that you are on a secure server, look for an unbroken key or a padlock at the bottom of the browser window. These symbols mean that the information you are sending is encrypted - turned into a secret code - for online transmission.

Track your purchase: When ordering online, print out and file any records related to the transaction. Save a printout of the web pages with the seller's name, address and telephone number; a description of what you ordered; the seller's legal terms; and any e-mail messages to or from the sender.

Problems: If you had an unsatisfactory online shopping experience, the best course of action is to contact the retailer. If you are

dissatisfied with the way the matter was handled, do not use that vendor again. If problems can not be solved you can visit or call the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs at 1-800-922-1594.

Source: Federal Trade Commission

SCAMS

The Nigerian Scam

Small businesses get dozens of pieces of mail every day, much of which can be discarded. Many small businesses are getting some very curious mail from the country of Nigeria. "Unfortunately, this mail is just the sort that should be discarded," stated Phil Porter.

"There is an organization of con men operating out of the African country of Nigeria and they are operating numerous swindles throughout Europe and the United States," said Porter. One of the cons that is being used more and more is solicitation for the use of letterhead or bank account numbers from a business.

Porter said that the pitch goes something like this: Prince "so and so" of a Nigerian government ministry indicates that he has obtained your businesses name through the Chamber of Commerce or through some other source and is contacting you because of your reputation for reliability. It seems there is a pot of money, say \$30,000,000, that is available because of an "Over-invoiced Gas Project" on the African continent. The contractor has been paid in full, and various important parties just do not know what to do with all that money. That is where you come in. They need the "collaboration" of a foreign firm to claim the fund for both parties' "mutual benefit," requiring the use of your firm's letterhead or bank account or both. For providing this information, you will get a share of the \$30,000,000, as much as 35%. All you need to do is run all this money through your bank account. **WRONG!**

"I urge small businesses not to respond at all to these solicitations. As with prize and gift scams, the con persons probably make and share data bases recording the identify of anyone who shows the least amount of interest in the letter. If you call or write them, you will get more letters for months or years", Porter said. "The best thing to do is to put them in the trash."

