



# CONSUMER NEWS

## SAN DIEGO CITY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

### 'TIS THE SEASON TO BE WARY: PROTECT YOURSELF FROM HOLIDAY SCAMS

December 2014

The holidays are a time for decking the halls and spending time with family. But there is also a dark side to the season: scammers come out to prey on unsuspecting holiday shoppers. There are some new scams cropping up this year, but you can take steps to protect yourself to help ensure a merry holiday season.

#### *GIFT CARD SCAM*

Gift cards are a favorite present for the holidays, and are fast becoming a target of con artists. Be on the lookout for a new scheme.

Thieves are going into stores, finding the gift card rack and then secretly copying the numbers off the cards, sometimes scratching off the security codes. The thieves can then check online or call the 1-800 number to see if someone has purchased the cards and activated them. As soon as the card is active, the crooks go on a shopping spree online. By the time you try to use the card the money is long gone.

#### *→ How To Protect Yourself*

Before you buy a gift card, inspect the card to make sure that the packaging has not been tampered with and that the activation code has not been scratched off. Also, if possible ask the store clerk for a gift card that has been kept behind the counter rather than one that has been placed out on a rack. Be sure to include a gift receipt with any gift card, it may help with a

replacement card if the card was compromised.

#### *PACKAGE THEFT*

With more and more people shopping online during the holiday season, thieves are on the lookout for unattended packages. While you probably wouldn't leave a package in an unlocked car, many people still have packages delivered to their doorstep that sit until they get home. Crooks are banking on this. They actually follow delivery trucks into neighborhoods and wait to snatch delivered packages.

#### *→ How To Protect Yourself*

The solution is to require a signature for a package to be delivered. Or if you know that you are not going to be home you can always have the package held at the nearest service location so that you can pick it up at your convenience.

#### *DELIVERY NOTICE SCAM*

The holiday season is a busy time for delivery companies such as Federal Express and United Parcel Service. This scam begins with a notice on your doorstep that there was an attempt to deliver a package and you were not there. When you call the number listed to arrange for delivery, the person answering requires you to provide personal information in order to confirm the order.

#### *→ How To Protect Yourself*

No delivery service needs any personal information from someone to whom they're delivering a package. If they ask for such information, it's a scam. No delivery service needs your Social Security number or credit card number for you to receive a package.

#### *MALL AUTO BREAK-INS*

When holiday shopping at the mall, many people use their car to store gifts as they continue to shop. Beware—thieves are watching the parking lot and targeting those cars for break-in once the shoppers head back into the mall.

#### *→ How To Protect Yourself*

The San Diego Police Department is recommending that shoppers move their cars if they plan to store gifts and do more shopping. That way, no would-be thief will see the shopper leave gifts in an unattended car.

#### *DON'T FALL FOR FAKE WEBSITES*

Many will be shopping online this season for the latest toys and gadgets. It's important to remember that scammers are adept at creating phony websites that appear to be selling much-desired items at enticing prices. Merely because a scammer is good at using search engine optimizing techniques to

make his website appear high on a Google or Bing search, does not mean that it's legitimate.

→ *How To Protect Yourself*

The old axiom holds true: If the deal sounds too good to be true, it generally is. To stay safe, limit your online purchases to established companies with which you are familiar.

#### *SHOPPING OVERCHARGES*

Every year, the County Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures inspects thousands of businesses to make sure all the machines and devices that scan, weigh and measure the things people buy are charging consumers accurately. Last year, county inspectors say one out of every five stores inspected (20%) had overcharges, at nearly \$3 per error on average. It may not sound like much, but just multiply that by holiday shopping.

→ *How To Protect Yourself*

Take sales advertisements with you when shopping to verify prices. Always check receipts right away, before leaving the store. Immediately notify store management of any price discrepancies. Stores cannot legally charge more than their lowest advertised, posted or quoted price for an item.

To report overcharges you can't resolve with a store, call County Weights and Measures at 1-888-TRUE SCAN (1-888-878-3722) or email to [sdcawm@sdcounty.ca.gov](mailto:sdcawm@sdcounty.ca.gov).

---

---

**San Diego  
City Attorney's Office  
Consumer and Environmental  
Protection Unit  
(619) 533-5600**

---

---

Newsletter written by Kristine Lorenz.

.....

The information provided in this newsletter is intended to convey general information and is not intended to be relied upon as legal advice.

.....

The San Diego City Attorney's Consumer & Environmental Protection Unit prosecutes criminal and civil violations of California's unfair competition and other consumer laws committed in the City of San Diego. The Unit maintains a Phone Hotline for consumers to report possible violations. You can reach the Hotline at **(619) 533-5600**.