

Fight get-rich-quick schemes

By Carolyn Tiller
Battalion Reporter

Want to get rich quick? Put an ad in a magazine; offer a sure-fire way to get rich by sending \$10 for some information. To all who send money, return this advice: Put an ad in a magazine just like this one and send the same advice.

Sound absurd? Every day people are taken by mail-order companies who promise the world and send a plastic globe.

Some common shams are misleading charities, get-rich-quick schemes, mail-order plant nurseries, free vacations and weight-loss gimmicks.

Charity fraud includes falsely represented ethnic groups or handicapped people in need.

A newer type of charity fraud has become more common lately. "A fast growing problem in charitable contributions today is the act of a charitable organization allowing a for-profit promoter to collect money in their name," said the February 1981 Houston Better Business Bureau publication "The Spokesman." "This type of solicitation has been going on for years, but now is becoming even more common. The promoter and the organization strike some agreement that the organization's name will be used by the promoter to raise funds."

The result is that the promoter reaps in a large percent of the profits.

Profits are offered to people, usually in exaggerated amounts, who want to work at home to "get rich."

An October 1980 U.S. Postal Inspection Service press release said, "The most common work-at-home schemes involve advertisements offering a large amount of income for stuffing envelopes. The promoter will require you to invest your money before you are sent any instructions."

Postal Inspector C.L. Woodard in Houston said, "The Postal Inspection Service has a very conservative effort going on right now to try and curb those."

Low-income people who need the extra money are usually the victims of these schemes. "The little old lady in tennis shoes can't afford to lose that money (the initial investment)," Woodard said.

Some people lose money in garden plants they send off for.

A BBB pamphlet "Consumer Tips on Mail-Order Shade Trees" said, "The ads generally proclaim 'amazing new discovery' or 'fabulous value.' Actually, the item offered is likely to be nothing more than a very small or common plant or even a weed."

The free vacation cliché usually involves a three-day, two-night glorious vacation in a resort city (Las Vegas). The package includes gaming allowances and fine hotel accommodations.

But there are catches: the allowance for gaming is available at inconvenient times; the hotel accommodations have severe restrictions on when they can be accommodated; the hotel may not be as "fine" as expected.

How to avoid being taken? "If it's something that you don't know and don't have any good information about," Woodard said "Then a person has to come to his own conclusion, but they should use their best sense."

LeRoy Balmain, executive director of the Brazos Valley Better Business Bureau, said, "If you don't know them, check with the Better Business Bureau. At least that's one of the places you can check because our business is maintaining info on these businesses as to whether they've had complaints or whether they've taken care of their complaints or even if they are in business here."

"We much rather have you call us and ask about a company than to wait and have a complaint because it takes much more time and staff time to handle a complaint that it does an inquiry."

For questions about free vacations, check the hotel and ask about the accommodations and reservations.

The Attorney General's office is another good place to check out companies before purchasing items.

But Woodard warns, "The very absence of a bad report can't be construed as a good report."

"If you had a transaction which involved mail in which you have been cheated, you first would contact the company and get them to make the offer good," Woodard said.

If that effort gets nowhere, contact the postal office and file a complaint. The complaint will be sent to the post office within the city of the suspected company. They will get the complaint to the postal inspectors. Another form will be sent to Washington, D.C.

The chief inspector of the Postal Inspection Service "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Woodard said, "That's the best advice you can give anybody."

Wonder how you got on that list anyway?

When something is bought, a company will keep the customers' names and addresses and sell them to companies who are in the business of compiling mail lists.

Getting off a list is "pretty much a lost cause," he said.

But there are some organizations that will try to get names off mailing lists: Direct Mail Marketing Association' Mail Preference Service at 6 East 43rd Street, New York, NY 10017 (ask for a "name removal" form). Or Mail Preference Service, 230 Park Avenue, New York, NY, 10017.



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