

## **BEWARE OF THE NIGERIAN LETTER SCAM**

Several calls have been made to the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division inquiring about a fraud scheme that seems too obvious to dupe anyone. But be warned -- the scam artists who work advance fee fraud, sometimes known as the Nigerian letter scam, are often very creative and innovative.

Scam artists entice their victims into believing they have been singled out from the masses to share in multi-million dollar windfall profits for doing absolutely nothing. In such a scheme, a company or individual will typically receive an unsolicited letter by mail from a Nigerian claiming to be a senior civil servant. In the letter, the Nigerian will inform the recipient that he is seeking a reputable foreign company or individual into whose account he can deposit funds ranging from \$10 to \$60 million which the Nigerian government supposedly over-paid on a procurement contract.

Several factors are typical of Nigerian advance fee fraud:

- An urgent letter from an alleged Nigerian government official offers to transfer millions of dollars in "over-invoiced contract funds" into the victim's bank account.
- The victim is asked to provide blank company letterhead, bank account information, and telephone and fax numbers.
- Numerous documents with official-looking stamps, seals, and logos appearing to suggest the authenticity of the proposal.
- The confidentiality of the transaction is emphasized.
- Up-front or advance fees are requested for various taxes, attorney fees, transaction fees, or bribes.
- Travel to overseas locations is encouraged to complete the transaction.
- Offices in legitimate government buildings may be used by impostors posing as the real occupants or officials.
- A problem with the transaction is staged, and the victim is urged to provide a large sum of money to save the venture.

These con artists do not target a single company or individual, but rather send out mass mailings. They commonly prey on the elderly and on charitable organizations. The goal of the schemer is to delude the target into thinking he or she is being included in a very lucrative, although questionable, arrangement. The victim must be confident of the deal's potential for success so he or she will become the primary supporter and willingly contribute a large amount of money when the deal is threatened. Yes, when the deal is threatened because the con-within-the-con is that the scheme will be threatened to persuade the victim to provide a large sum of money to save the venture.

While transparent and even ridiculous to most, this type of scheme is becoming increasingly effective. This scam will eventually reach someone who, while skeptical, desperately wants the deal to be genuine. It is interesting to note there has been a strong resurgence of this scam in North Dakota at a time when these scam artists think disaster victims may be desperate for income.

It is easy to fall victim to a scam. Sometimes, it is impossible to tell a legitimate deal from an outright scam, especially if you do not seek outside help. Learn how to avoid the bad deals by educating yourself and following some basic, common sense principals. Always keep your private information private. Do not give your financial account numbers to strangers or companies with which you are not familiar. A scam artist can use this information to steal money from you just as easily as mugging you at gunpoint in a darkened alley.

If you receive an offer in the mail that sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Do not be tempted to believe the scam artist -- throw the letter away and avoid being a victim.