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News

Scammers changing tactics to lure victims

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By Lavonne Upton, Journal Register News Service

Scammers can get to their victims anywhere. Even in the comfort of their own homes, victims can be targeted by a thief by night or day.

Victims may be lured by offers to buy goods listed on craigslist or eBay at above the asking price. Victims are often asked to send part of the money back by Western Union or wire transfer.

Other times, a crook will be bold enough to knock on a front door in the guise of a contractor, quoting a victim a price on new gutters, new siding or painting. All they want is a down payment with the rest of the money due upon completion of the work. The scammer will leave with the down payment, never to return to do the work.

Sgt. Joe Brian with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office has worked in the Computer Crimes Unit for 15 years.

"Scams have been going on since the Internet was created, and attempts are made daily," he said. Requests are sent in e-mails by the thousands, and "if they get one person to bite, it's worth their time."

"The victims are very trusting, looking for the best in people, not the worst," Brian said.

Along with the scams on eBay or craigslist, Brian reports another popular scam mostly targets senior citizens. They're told they've won \$5,000 but must send \$500 first in order to receive their winnings, he said.

"If (the scammers) get someone on the phone that's gullible enough, they'll keep pushing the limit as to the amount of money they ask for," Brian said.

Another criminal method is to send an e-mail as a friend, having lifted the victim's e-mail address and friend's name from Facebook, saying they're stuck in England, for example, and have been robbed. The crook will ask the victim to wire money so he or she can get home. The crook will ask the victim to write out a check to another name, saying he or she has to get a third party to cash it because his or her ID was stolen. The crook's true name is never known.

"Scams have been around forever, and change with changing technology," said Lt. Michael Lyczkowski, public information office for the Troy Police Department.

He said scams are not a huge problem in Troy, but the police department receives several hundred reports annually of the more common ones.

Brian and Lyczkowski said the majority of scams originate outside the country, and nothing can be done to prosecute them under their jurisdiction.

Brian warns people that, if their wireless Internet signal is not secured, anyone can use it from the driveway or road. That way, someone outside a home can use the homeowner's computer as a server that can be traced back to the victim, or use the computer to store illegal materials.

If death threats or bomb threats are made from an Internet protocol address, or pornography is accessed through a computer, these acts will be traced to a victim's house by the authorities.

Brian strongly suggests people access their wireless router's Web site for instructions on how to create a password and secure Internet connections.

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