

### **Age-Old Scam Acquires New Life**

One of the nation's longest-running scams is taking on new twists, reports the Better Business Bureau. Known as Nigerian letter scams, these frauds reach intended victims by fax, letter or e-mail. The sender, who claims to be a government official or member of a royal family, requests assistance in transferring millions of dollars of excess money out of Nigeria and promises to pay the person for his or her help. The message is always of an urgent, private nature. Those willing to assist are asked to provide their banking account number and Social Security number, birth date, or other personal information. Or they are asked to send money to the letter-sender for taxes and various fees. Victims never see their money again, and the con artist obtains the ability to empty their bank account and/or steal their identity. Folks laugh at the insanity of falling for such a fraud, but the FBI reports annual losses of millions of dollars to these schemes. Some victims have actually been lured to Nigeria, where they were imprisoned. Variations of this con are attracting the attention of a new batch of victims. BBBs advise people to be leery of the following:

- Beneficiary of a will: An e-mail claims that you are the named beneficiary in a will, to inherit an estate worth a million or more. Your personal financial information is needed to prove that you are the beneficiary and to speed the transfer of your inheritance;
- Bogus cashier checks: People who have advertised an item for sale on the Internet are contacted by an interested buyer from Africa or another country, who sends a counterfeit cashier check or international money order for an amount much larger than the asking price. His explanation varies as to why the amount is that large. Nonetheless, the seller is asked to deposit the check into their banking account, and wire the difference to the purchaser. Those victims that do not wait for the bank to verify the legitimacy of the check, and wire the money as requested, can end up losing thousands of dollars. Be aware that it can take a week or more for banks to receive word that a check is fake.
- Donation solicitations: Some e-mails request to fight an evil government or dictatorship in Africa. The sender requests the recipient's bank account in order to withdraw the donation directly from the bank and obtain immediate access to the much-needed contribution.
- Fake web sites: The scam artist sets up a fake online bank and deposits the millions of dollars referenced in his pitch. When the victim starts expressing doubt about the existence or size of the fund transfer that is to take place, he is directed to the site, which shows a multi-million dollar deposit. Consumers can take steps to protect themselves against the Nigerian letter scam and its variations. If you receive a letter from Nigeria, or any other country, asking you to send personal or banking information, do not reply! The BBB suggests you immediately delete or throw away any such correspondence. If you have already responded to such a plea, or if you know someone who is corresponding in this scheme, contact the U.S. Secret Service as soon as possible (phone: 202.406.5572 or e-mail [419.fcd@uss.treas.gov](mailto:419.fcd@uss.treas.gov)). Ignore individuals representing themselves as foreign government officials asking for your help in placing large sums of money in overseas bank accounts. Be leery when strangers are eager to place unexpected, large amounts of money at your disposal, in exchange for your bank account number or other personal or financial information. Cashier checks and money orders can be counterfeit. When a stranger sends a check or money offer to purchase a product or service from you, consult with your bank about the time it will take to verify the check, and wait for the funds to clear.