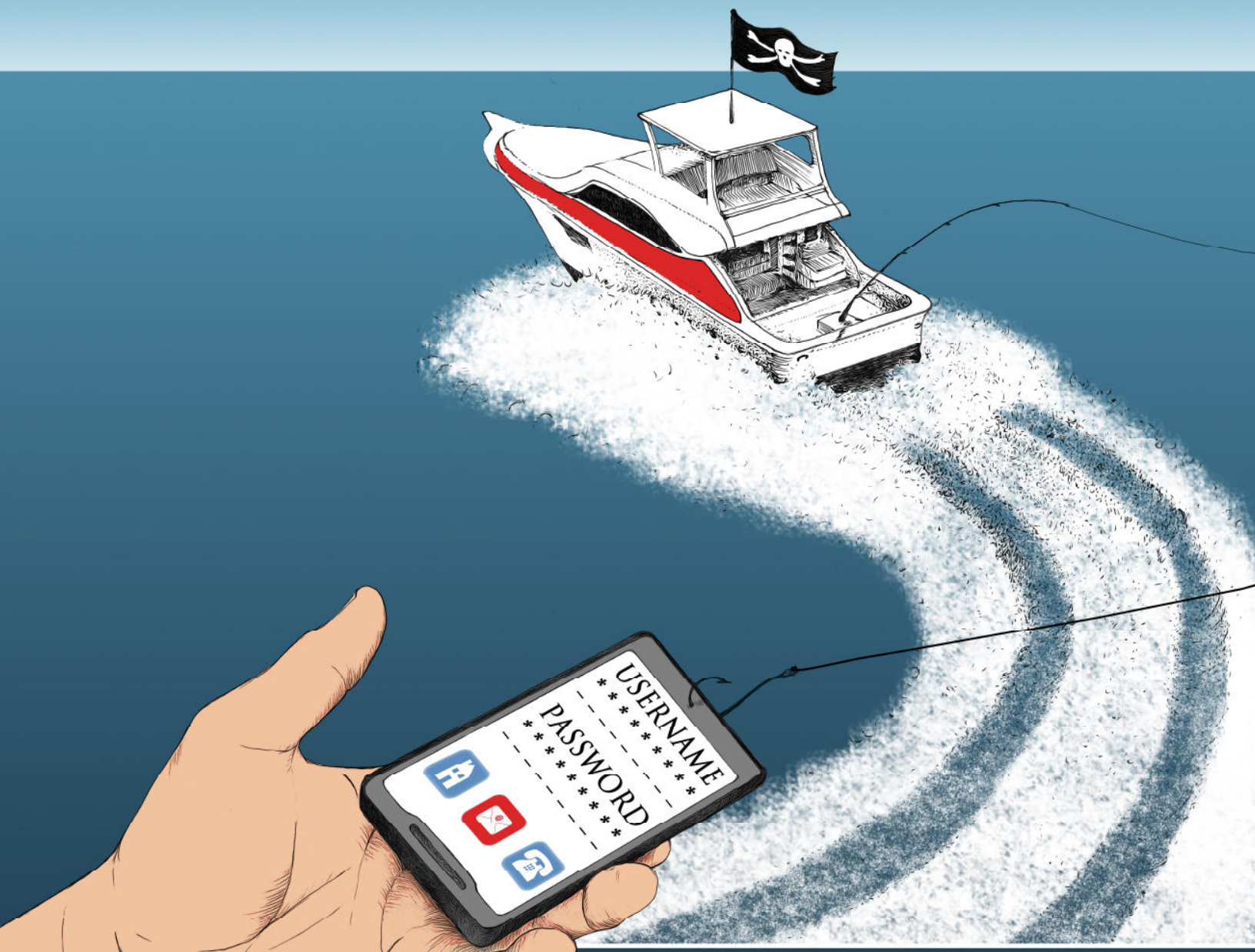
Gone Phishing

Identifying and Avoiding Consumer Scams



State of Maine
Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection
Dept of Professional and Financial Regulation

Downeaster Common Sense Guide

Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection

Toll-free Maine Consumer Assistance	**Maine Foreclosure Prevention Hotline**
1-800-332-8529 (1-800-DEBT-LAW)	1-888-NO-4-CLŌZ
TTY users call Maine relay 711	(1-888-664-2569)

www.Credit.Maine.gov

The Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection was established in 1975 to enforce a wide variety of consumer financial protection laws, including:

-Consumer Credit Code
-Truth-in-Lending Act
-Fair Credit Billing Act
-Truth-in-Leasing Act
-Fair Credit Reporting Act
-Fair Debt Collection Practices Act
-"Plain Language" Contract Law

The Bureau conducts periodic examinations of creditors to determine compliance with these laws, responds to consumer complaints and inquiries, and operates the state's foreclosure prevention hotline and housing counselor referral program. The Bureau also conducts educational seminars and provides speakers to advise consumers and creditors of their legal rights and responsibilities.

William N. Lund
Superintendent
July 2014

DOWNEASTER COMMON SENSE GUIDE: GONE PHISHING
IDENTIFYING AND AVOIDING CONSUMER SCAMS

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Maine residents can obtain additional free copies of this booklet by contacting the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection at 207-624-8527 or toll-free at 1-800-332-8529. Non-Maine residents may purchase the publication for $6 per copy, or at a volume discount of $4 per copy on orders of 50 or more. Shipping fees are included in the prices listed.

Dear Maine Consumers,

In Greek mythology, Eurystheus, King of Tiryns, sent the hero Hercules to slay the Lernaean Hydra — a 9-headed serpent. Each time Hercules lopped off one of the Hydra's heads, two new heads grew back in its place. How Hercules felt when the hydra's heads grew back is how our staff often feel when consumers ask, "Why can't you shut down these scams?"

Criminals often use prepaid "burner" phones to avoid being tracked and identified by law enforcement. The few scammers who are caught are usually sent to prison. Unfortunately, there are always others ready to take their place, waiting to separate you from your money.

Government agencies at both the state and federal levels stand ready to assist you if you become aware of a scam, are in the process of being victimized, or have been "taken." The best way to protect yourself is to become a savvy consumer, smarter than the criminals after your hard-earned money and able to detect scams from a mile away.

This guide is all about helping you defend yourself against being scammed. In the following pages, we describe tactics and hooks used by scammers, offer advice on how to protect yourself, and, if you've already been victimized, how to report the scam to the proper authorities. Take ownership of this multi-billion dollar rip-off and slash the amount of money lost to scams in the United States by becoming the first line of defense — hanging up, saying "No," shredding phony mail offers, and deleting questionable emails.

We hope you enjoy the material presented in this State of Maine publication. If you know of other Mainers who could benefit from reading this book, call our office (1-800-332-8529). We'll be pleased to send free copies to you or to family members, friends or co-workers living in Maine. Remember, KNOWLEDGE IS POWER!

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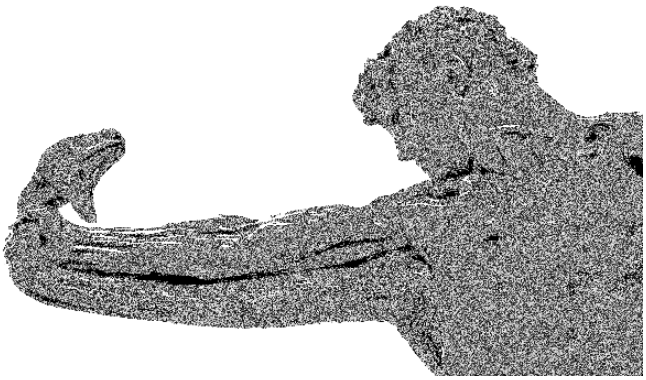


Cheat Sheet — Identifying Scams

For your convenience, here is a summary of the most common red-flags to help you identify scams:

- **Unsolicited Contact:** If you receive a phone call, e-mail, fax or advertisement from a person or company you're not familiar with, be wary. Many scammers use unsolicited messages to find victims.

- **Incomprehensible Investments:** Before agreeing to anything, make sure you understand what's being offered. Scammers will use your confusion to make themselves sound like experts. Ask questions and, if you need to, ask for help from someone you trust.

- **"Act Now!":** Scammers want you to act fast, before you have a chance to think or ask others for advice. Don't be pressured into making a quick decision.

- **Suspicious Payment Methods:** Many scammers ask for money to be sent via unstoppable or difficult-to-trace methods (e.g., wire transfer). Before sending money to a person or business you aren't familiar with, ask yourself "Why won't they let me use a different payment method?"

- **Paying Money to Get Money:** Many scammers ask victims to pay fees for "administrative costs" or "taxes" in exchange for a much larger sum of money. Never pay money to get money – it's a hallmark of financial scams.

- **"Deal of a Lifetime":** Watch out for promises of high returns with little or no risk. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Without risk, there is no reward.

- **"Trust Me":** Scammers often ask potential victims to wire money or reveal personal information based on trust. Ask yourself, "Do I really know who this is? Why should I trust an unsolicited offer from a stranger?"

- **"Tell No One About This Deal":** Many victims report scammers instructed them to keep a potential "deal" secret. Trust your family and friends. The more people you tell the pitch to, the better the chance someone will be able to determine whether it's a scam.

Take a deep breath, pause, and ask questions. Don't act impulsively! Guard your personal information (date of birth, street or mailing addresses, Social Security number and bank account numbers) – especially during initial calls. Ask for the caller's full name, email address, the legal name of the company (as registered with the Maine Secretary of State's Corporation Division), the company's physical and mailing addresses, and their State of Maine license or registration number. If they refuse, don't do business with them! If they comply, call the appropriate government agency (see pg. 31) to determine if the business and their sales pitch are legitimate.

Table of Contents

The Working Tools of Scammers 1

- Phishing and Vishing
- High Pressure Tactics
- Funds Transfers
- Spoofing and VOIP
- Fake Feds
- Mass Marketing
- In-Person Scams

Identity Theft 7

- Methods and Preventative Measures
- Credit Reports

Hook, Line and Sinker: Common Scams 12

- 419 Scams
- Advance Fee Fraud
- Catfishing (Dating Scams)
- Aggressive Debt Collection
- Debt Relief/Management Scams
- Facebook Scams
- Fake Check Scams
- Foreclosure Rescue Scams
- Foreign Exchange Fraud
- Grandparent Scams (Imposter Scams)
- Investment Scams
- IRS Scams
- Lottery and Sweepstakes Scams
- Mystery Shopper Scams
- Illegal Payday Loans
- Precious Metal Scams
- Rent-a-Creep (Home Repair/Paving Scams)
- Security Officer Scams
- Tech Support Scams
- Timeshare Scams
- Travel and Vacation Scams
- Utility Billing Scams
- Verification of Account Number Scams

Glossary of Additional Terms, Sample Forms and Resource Listings 27

The Art of Persuasion

Consumers fall prey to scammers for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's a matter of timing. Perhaps the victim was going through a rough patch and the call or email arrived at the right moment. Others respond to seemingly legitimate opportunities, or genuinely want to help a person in need. Most scams don't succeed because the victims are gullible. They succeed because the scammers are organized, practiced, and ruthless. They know what to say to get you to act.

For a scam to be successful, it needs willing victims. If a consumer isn't willing to participate, there's little a scammer can do to force them. There are several tactics scammers may use to convince victims to participate:

- **Trust**: Many scams don't rely on a victim trusting the scammer, they rely on the scammer placing trust in a victim. If someone shows trust in you, you are more likely to trust them — and more likely to take risks when dealing with them.

- **Likeability**: You're more likely to do something for someone you like than for someone you don't. Scammers often put on friendly faces and treat victims as confidants. Don't expect them to look or act like criminals until it's too late.

- **Reciprocation**: If someone does something for you, you're more likely to do something for them. Scammers sometimes give gifts or make offers in exchange for something from a victim.

- **Rarity**: The desire for something rare can be a powerful impulse. Scammers often claim an offer or deal will no longer be available if the victim doesn't act immediately.

- **Proof**: Testimonials from other consumers who have "profited" from participation in a scam may put a victim's mind at ease before they decide to hand over money. Such endorsements are usually fictional, coming from people in on the scam.

- **Authority**: Scammers want victims to act without thinking. It's much easier for a con artist to get a victim to act if the scammer appears to have expertise or credentials, or appears to be employed by a legitimate organization or government agency.

"Trust not too much to appearances."

-Virgil (37 B.C.)

The Working Tools of Scammers

Unfortunately, there is no way to completely protect yourself from scammers. Knowledge is your best defense. It pays to be informed. By familiarizing yourself with the tools and techniques presented here, you'll be well on your way to becoming an expert scam detector.

PHISHING

One of the most common tricks in the scammer's playbook is **phishing**: impersonating a person or business to trick victims into revealing private information. Phishing scams are usually encountered via email. **Vishing** (phishing scams committed by telephone) and **smishing** (phishing scams committed by text message) are becoming common as well.

Phishing e-mails are often designed to mimic messages from real companies you *might* have an account with. They are usually polished, including graphics and language meant to convince you the communication is legitimate. There are, however, some red flags to help you identify phishing messages:

- **Spelling:** Be suspicious of poor spelling. Phishing messages sent from outside the U.S. frequently contain misspellings and grammatical errors.
- **Hidden Sender**: If the sender's e-mail address is hidden, don't trust the message. (Tip: Reveal hidden e-mail addresses by hitting "reply all.")
- **Date Format**: If a message from an American company contains dates, be sure the date begins with the month. If the date begins with the day, the e-mail may be from outside of the country — a tipoff if the company says it is in the United States.
- **Generic Greetings:** Most legitimate companies address consumers by name in email messages. If a message has a generic greeting such as "Dear Customer," there's a good chance that it's a phishing scam.
  - ➢ While most scammers send out generic messages, some may research you to gain your trust. Beware these so-called "**spear phishing**" scams.
- **Requests for Personal Information**: If an unsolicited email requests personal information, it's probably a phishing scam.

Were You Aware?

If a phishing scam targets a CEO or business person, it's called "whaling."

- **Email Address:** Many phishing e-mails come from accounts chosen to mimic those of legitimate companies (*i.e.*, "Alerts@XYZ.co.uk" vs "Service@XYZ.com"). Be sure that the email address that sent the message matches company the email is "from."

- **Forged Links**: Just because a link contains a name you recognize doesn't mean it links to a real company. Move your mouse over the link to show where it points to. Does the address match up with the email address of the sender? If not, don't click on the link.

  - If you follow a link, watch out! Although you may land on a website with pictures and branding from a real company, the page could be a well-made fake.

If you receive a phishing email, beware of attachments. Some scammers attach malicious software (**malware**), such as viruses or **spyware** (software that gathers information from your computer without your knowledge), which activates when you open the attachment.

High Pressure Tactics

High pressure tactics are designed to make you act before you think. There are lots of ways for a scammer to put pressure on you, but they all have one thing in common: they push you to act NOW. In some scams, the criminal will offer a "special discount" on a product or service for a *very* limited amount of time. They may threaten to take you to court or have you arrested unless you do what they want immediately, or warn you that something bad will happen if you don't take action.

If someone unfamiliar wants you to do something immediately, stop, take a deep breath and remember these guidelines:

- **Identify the Company.** Make sure you know who's calling. If you don't know the caller's name, company and/or product, ask for it and write it down. If the caller won't identify themselves, hang up.

- **Command the Conversation.** Remember, they called you and are taking up your time. Don't be afraid to ask questions and don't be intimidated. Be assertive!

- **Stop Them Early.** The longer a call lasts, the harder it is to end. If the caller raises their voice, has an arrogant tone, or doesn't

care that you're not interested, find a way to end the conversation or hang up.

- **Be Cautious.** Ask for written descriptions of services, charges and refund policies. Don't let them pressure you into providing information like addresses, Social Security numbers, date of birth, credit card information or bank account numbers.

- **Trust Your Gut.** If something feels wrong, it probably is. End the call as soon as possible.

Funds Transfers

Electronic funds transfers (EFTs) are exchanges or transfers of money through computer-based systems. EFTs, particularly **wire transfers**, are quick, easy ways to send cash. As such, they're a favorite tool of scam artists. Because wire transfers move fast and are difficult to reverse, scammers often ask consumers to use them — taking the money, making an untraceable cash deposit at their bank, and disappearing before the victim realizes what happened. It's nearly impossible to recover to recover money sent to a scammer by wire transfer.

To protect yourself from scams using wire transfers and other types of funds transfers:

- **Beware of High Pressure Tactics.** See pg. 2.

- **Know Who You're Sending Money To.** Never send money to someone you don't know, even if they try to entice you with deals, sales, or claims you've won a prize. If someone says they know you and asks you to send money, confirm it in person or through a separate (known) phone number or e-mail address.

- **Don't Accept Overpayments.** If you're selling an item, never accept an overpayment. If the sender asks you to return the excess by wire transfer, it may be a **fake check scam** (pg. 14).

A Note About Wired Funds

A reoccurring theme in this guide is to be wary of high-pressure solicitors pitching "too-good-to-be-true" offers and demanding wired funds. The money-transmitting industry, which allows consumers to wire funds from supermarkets, department stores, and drug stores to friends or relatives in far-away places, provides a great service. At their retail transmission locations, these businesses do a good job of warning consumers to not fall prey to scammers asking for wired funds. It's not the service that's at issue, it's occasional reckless use.

Each of us must make the decision on whether to wire funds as a result of a solicitation for goods or services. Most legitimate businesses accept credit or debit cards, and issuing banks are ready to step in to help if there is a dispute or fraudulent transaction.

- **Chose a Different Payment Method.** If you decide to send money to someone you don't know, keep control by using a check with a stop-payment feature.

Spoofing and VOIP

Many phones are equipped with Caller ID, a service which displays the phone number and/or name of a caller (sometimes offered as an optional service for an additional fee). Caller ID is a useful tool for screening calls, but it can't always be trusted. It's possible to "spoof" telephone numbers and names – making calls appear to be from individuals or companies other than the actual callers. Crooks seeking personal information often use Caller ID to hide their identities, making it appear they are calling from the government, a bank, or another organization.

Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) – Internet phone, texting and fax service — is also a popular method used by scammers to conceal their identities. Unlike spoofing, VOIP scams use internet phone numbers which have been set up with legitimate-sounding names.

Fake Feds

A call or email from a government agency is sure to get anyone's attention. Many scammers disguise themselves by using the names of well known federal agencies (*e.g.,* FBI, IRS, Federal Reserve Board), or by making up names that sound government-like (*e.g.,* "State National Credit Investigation Bureau").

Government agencies rarely, if ever, make initial contact with consumers by e-mail. It's too difficult to determine who email addresses belong to. If you receive an unexpected e-mail from a government agency, it's probably fake. If you receive a call out of the blue from someone claiming to represent a government agency, take down their information (name, phone number, etc.) and do some research. Contact the agency they claim to work for to determine if the call was legitimate. If you've encountered fake feds, consider filing a complaint with the U.S. Secret Service.

Mass Marketing

You encounter mass marketing encountered every day through e-mail, websites, television, radio, phone and mail. It's a useful tool for companies trying to reach consumers. Unfortunately, scammers use mass marketing as well. Mass marketing scams have two main characteristics: they attempt to rip off lots of people at once with minimal effort, and they depend on victims giving money in exchange for promises of goods or services which the scammers will not deliver.

Two types of mass marketing scams merit special mention. The first is **spam**: unsolicited e-mails sent out in the billions. Individuals, groups of spammers, or botnets (aka "zombie networks") — networks of computers infected

by malware — can all be behind these messages. Botnets are especially efficient at sending spam. Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific, with a population of roughly 50 people, is the largest source of spam in the world per capita due to malware infecting residents' computers[1].

Got Spam? Forward it to the Federal Trade Commission at **spam@uce.gov**

Robocalls, telephone calls placed by a computerized system delivering pre-recorded messages, also merit special mention. In and of themselves, robocalls are not illegal. Many are emergency announcements, political advertisements, or legitimate offers from companies.

One of the most infamous robocall scams is "Rachel" from Card Services. "Rachel" advises the listener to press a number on the phone's keypad if they're interesting in having their credit card's APR reduced, or a different number if they want the calls to stop. If you press any number, it tells the automated system it has reached a live person. Your number is then assigned to an aggressive telemarketer who tries to get you to pay for the company's non-existent service. Victims report being bullied into disclosing their Social Security numbers, dates of birth, full names and street addresses — raising concerns about identity theft..

[1]Sophos, LTD. (2008, March 10). *Pitcairn Islands relays most spam per person, reveals Sophos.* Retrieved from https://www.sophos.com/en-us/press-office/press-releases/2008/03/pitcairn.aspx

To protect yourself from mass marketing scams:

- **Watch for Spelling and Grammar Errors.** Legitimate companies rarely distribute misspelled or grammatically-incorrect mailings. If you receive such a mailing, be suspicious.
- **Guard Your Information.** Never give out sensitive personal or financial information to unsolicited callers.
- **Beware High-Pressure Tactics**: See page 2.
- **Ask For the Offer In Writing.** Interested in what the company has to offer? Ask them to give you the information, payment details, and terms in writing. Legitimate companies will be happy to provide it.
- **Get Detailed Information.** If you talked to someone over the phone, what was their name? Write down the company's name, street and mailing addresses, and any licenses or registrations they claim to hold.

Were You Aware?

"Spam" got its name from a sketch on *Monty Python's Flying Circus.*

- **Research the Business.** Make sure you know at least a little about the company before agreeing to anything. Do they have a good reputation? Have people complained about them? If so, what were they complaining about?

  - Don't believe everything you read. **Astroturfing** — posting fake reviews to improve a company's image — is not unheard of online.

It's always a good idea to check with state regulatory agencies before doing business with companies you're not familiar with. See **Consumer Resources** (pg. 31) for state regulators' contact information.

In-Person Scams

There's always a chance that you may run into a scammer in person. They might solicit in a public place, or even try to con you at home! To protect yourself from in-person scammers:

- **Take Down Information.** Before agreeing to do business, write down the business' name, address and phone number, as well as the name of the person with whom you spoke.

- **Check Them Out.** See **Research the Business** (pg. 6).

- **Stop Them before They Start.** It's much easier to stop a sales pitch before it starts than after it has begun. If you're not interested, tell them immediately and hold your ground. Don't be afraid to shut the door on the person.

- **Don't Let Them In.** If someone you don't know has solicited you, **do not** let them into your home. Apart from being potentially dangerous, it can be difficult to get them to leave once they're inside.

- **Don't Be Pressured.** Door-to-door con artists want you to act fast, before you have a chance to think about what you're doing. See **High Pressure Tactics**, pg. 2.

"Price is what you pay. Value is what you get."

-Warren Buffett

Identity Theft

Although identity theft has been around for a long time, it didn't burst onto the scene in a big way until the 1990s – fueled by an increase in remote payment methods (e.g., credit cards) and the relative ease of gathering personal information. Today, identity theft is a big business. In 2014, American consumer lost nearly $27.4 billion to identity theft[2].

As it applies to personal finance, identity theft comes in two types. The first is **name fraud**: when a crook uses a victim's information to open accounts, request credit cards or apply for loans. The second type is **account takeover**: when a criminal uses a consumer's information to gain access to an account, draining the victim's funds. A thief may obtain information in a number of ways, including:

- **Dumpster Diving**: Searching through trash for discarded credit card statements, cancelled checks, preapproved credit card offers, or other documents containing personal information.

- **Mail Theft**: The illegal interception of mail or other documents.

- **Shoulder Surfing**: Observing a person as they divulge personal information (e.g., watching someone enter their PIN at an ATM).

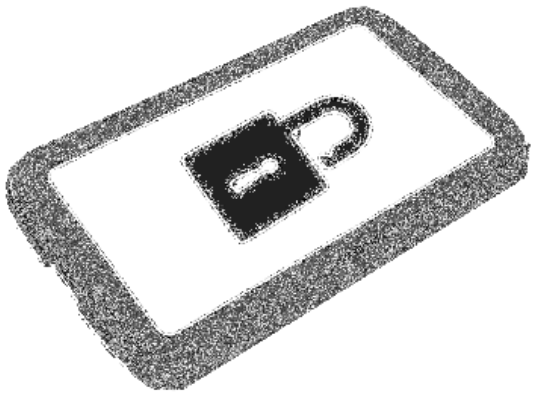
- **Pharming**: Redirecting Internet traffic from a legitimate website to a fake site that asks the victim to provide personal information.

- **Pretexting**: Creating a fake situation that increases the chance a victim will reveal personal information (see **Phishing**, pg. 1).

- **Skimming**: Using a card reader to capture account information encoded on the magnetic strip of a credit or debit card.

- **Data Breach**: When a business, government agency or other organization's electronic or written records are stolen or accessed by an unauthorized party.

- **Tombstoning**: Collecting information from cemeteries or obituaries to steal identities from the deceased.



[2]Harrell, E. Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2015). *Victims of identity theft, 2014*. (Report No. NCJ 248991). Retrieved from http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=5410.

Using stolen information, thieves can do anything from ordering magazine subscriptions to applying for victims' tax refunds. The most common type of identity theft is misuse of an existing account, specifically credit cards[3].

Unfortunately, most victims don't discover their identity has been stolen until long after the fact. Some find out when they receive a bill or collection notice for an item or service they didn't purchase. Others discover they've become victims after receiving notices from financial institutions, being served with legal process, or being denied credit. The best way to protect yourself from identity theft is to prevent criminals from obtaining your information in the first place. To help stamp out ID theft in Maine:

- Never reveal personal or financial information over the phone or Internet unless you initiated contact and are sure of the other party's identity.
- Before sharing information, ask why it's needed, how it will be protected, and what will happen if you don't share it. Don't share information unless it's absolutely necessary.
- Lock documents containing sensitive information in a safe place at home
- Shred anything containing personal or financial information before disposing of it, and don't leave your garbage can out overnight.
- Limit the amount of information that you carry with you. Remove Social Security cards and unnecessary forms of identification from your purse or wallet.
- Memorize Social Security numbers and passwords rather than writing them down.
- Watch how much you share online. Social networks are powerful tools for criminals looking for personal information.

[3]Ibid.

A Note on Passwords

Passwords can be incredibly valuable to an identity thief, giving them instant access to sensitive information. Use strong passwords (at least 12 characters) containing a mix of upper and lowercase letters, numbers and symbols. Never share passwords between accounts and never include personal details like names, birthdays, or hometowns. That information is easy for thieves to find online.

Consider inverting your password, so that instead of something like "Coolguy_50," it reads "Coolguy_5005_yuglooC." Doing so can make a password very difficult to guess. Try alternating capital and lowercase letters, or adding capital letter in places other than the start of your password. You could also take a line from your favorite movie or lyrics from your favorite song, string together the first letters of each word and add some numbers. For example, "Only the ghosts in this house are glad we're here 1959" would become "OtGiThAgWh1959" – not an easy password to crack!

Credit Reports

The most effective way to detect identity theft is to check your credit reports. A credit report is a record of your financial history. It contains four types of data:

- **Identifying Information**: Data used to identify you and to differentiate you from other people with the same name, including your address, birthdate, social security number and employment information.

- **Trade Lines**: Information on your credit, including types of accounts, the dates your accounts were opened, loan amounts, balances, credit limits and payment history.

- **Credit Inquiries**: A list of everyone who has accessed your credit report in the last two years, including voluntary requests (made by you) and involuntary requests (made by lenders issuing pre-approved offers).

- **Public Records and Collections**: Bankruptcies, foreclosures, liens, judgments and other information gathered from courts, as well as information on overdue debts submitted by debt collectors.

It can be time-consuming to review and clean up a credit report, but it's worth the effort. If someone has opened accounts in your name, your credit report will list those accounts. You are entitled to a free credit report from each of the three major consumer reporting agencies (Transunion, Equifax, and Experian) once every twelve months. Request a single credit report every four months, changing agencies each time. When you receive your credit report, look it over carefully. Do you see anything unusual? Keep an eye out for accounts you don't recognize, debts you don't owe, addresses you've never lived at, employers you've never worked for and anything else unusual. These could be simple mistakes, or signs your identity has been stolen.

Order Your Free Credit Report

You can request a free copy of your credit report by phone, Internet or mail. If you make your request online, have your printer ready. After answering a series of personal financial questions to confirm your identity, your credit report(s) will appear on the computer screen.

Order by Phone

1-877-322-8228

Order Online

www.AnnualCreditReport.com

Order by Mail

Annual Credit Report Request Service
P.O. Box 105281
Atlanta, GA 30348-5281

(see pg. 29 for a request form)

You have the right to challenge errors or omissions on your credit reports. That doesn't mean a credit bureau will automatically make a change if you request one. The agency will conduct an investigation, and may require you to supply evidence supporting your request.

If you believe your identity has been stolen:

- Contact your financial institution(s) and place a fraud alert or freeze on any affected accounts. If you disclosed banking information to an unknown caller, **ACT IMMEDIATELY** — every second counts!

- File a report with law enforcement (local police department, county sheriff, or the Maine State Police). Keep a copy of the police report. It will be important for correcting your credit report and for stopping debt collectors calling about debts you don't owe.

- Place a **fraud alert** on your credit reports to tip off anyone who requests your credit history that you may be a victim.

- Place **file freezes** on your credit reports. A file freeze locks down your credit report, preventing consumer reporting agencies from releasing your information to a third party without your authorization. File freezes are free for Maine residents (see pg. 11).

- Contact the Federal Trade Commission's Identity Theft Hotline at 1-877-438-4338 (dial "0" to reach a customer service representative).

Pre-Approved Credit Offers

Thieves have been known to steal credit card applications from mail boxes. If you don't want these offers in your mailbox, opt-out!

Call 1-888-5-OPT-OUT
(1-888-567-8688)

The major consumer reporting agencies will remove your name from most credit card marketing lists.

Fraud Alerts

To place a fraud alert, contact Transunion, Equifax or Experian (see below). Report you've been a victim of identity theft, and ask the company to place the fraud alert on your credit file. No matter which agency you contact, it should forward your request to the other two credit bureaus.

Experian	**Equifax Consumer Fraud Div.**	**Transunion LLC**
P.O. Box 4500	P.O. Box 740256	P.O. Box 2000
Allen, TX 75013	Atlanta, GA 30374	Chester, PA 19022-2000
1-888-397-3742	1-800-766-0008	1-800-680-7289
www.experian.com/fraud	https://www.ai.equifax.com	https://fraud.transunion.com

Maine's New File Freeze Law

As of October 15, 2015, Maine consumers have the right to place free file freezes on their credit reports with each of the three major credit reporting agencies: Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. A file freeze may be placed by telephone, through the credit reporting agencies' secure websites, or in writing.

If you try to place a file freeze online or by phone, be prepared to provide personal information. The credit reporting agency will need it to confirm your identity. When writing, ask the agency to freeze your file under Maine's new file freeze law. Make sure to provide the credit reporting agency with your Social Security number, your date of birth, and your mailing and street addresses. Don't forget to sign the letter!

The credit reporting agency will mail you a personal identification number ("PIN"). The credit reporting agency will provide instructions for lifting the security freeze with your PIN. SAVE YOUR PIN. DO NOT LOSE IT. You will need it to remove the file freeze. Your file freeze will remain active until you tell the credit reporting agency to lift it. Under Maine law, there is no fee for freezing or unfreezing your credit file.

To place your free file freeze, contact:

Equifax	**Experian**	**TransUnion**
PO Box 105069	PO Box 4500	PO Box 2000
Atlanta, GA 30348	Allen, TX 75013	Chester, PA 19016
1-800-349-9960	1-888-397-3742	1-888-909-8872
www.freeze.equifax.com	www.experian.com/freeze	www.transunion.com/freeze

Need Help With Identity Theft?

If you're a victim of identity theft, consider visiting https://identitytheft.gov. Operated by the Federal Trade Commission, this website is a one-stop shop to help consumers report cases of, and recover from, identity theft. It offers tips on dealing with specific types of identity theft, advice for people affected by data breaches, and features an interactive checklist to walk you through the recovery process.

Hook, Line and Sinker: Common Scams

419 Scams (aka Nigerian Email)

"I'm a prince/businessman/traveler/soldier, and need your help! While in (country) I managed to get a hold of a large sum of money. I need a bank account to transfer the money to/cash to pay bribes to get the money released/funds to rescue a colleague or family member who is in distress. Would you help me by sending your bank account number/a wire transfer? If you do, I'll give you a cut of the profit/a reward, far more than the sum(s) you sent me. Can I trust you?"

If this sounds familiar, you've probably already encountered one of the oldest tricks in the book, the 419 scam (referring to the Nigerian Criminal Code article dealing with fraud). 419 scams are double trouble for victims. Not only do these scams pose a financial threat, the scammers often ask for more information that can be used to steal consumers' identities. Even scarier, in a few cases scammers have lured consumers to their country — only to cause physical harm to the travelers[4].

If you responded to a 419 scam, contact your financial institution immediately to close your account, and contact the FBI or U.S. Secret Service. If you revealed personal information, watch your credit report for unusual activity and consider placing a file freeze as there is a risk of identity theft.

809 and Missed Call Scams

809 scams rely on area codes set by the North America Number Plan. An **autodialer** (a machine or program that automatically places calls) rings a consumer's number, leaves a brief message and hangs up, maximizing the chance of a missed call. When consumers look at their caller IDs and call the number back, the trouble begins. The victim calls back on a premium line with charges up to $30/minute. When they receive their phone bill, the victim may find "**cramouflaged**" fees is addition to the exorbitant per-minute billing rate.

What makes consumers call the scammers back? Victims sometimes receive threats of pending litigation asking them to call the number to resolve the issue. If you receive unexpected demanding or threatening communications from another country, think twice about calling back! It can be difficult to

Cramouflage: Hiding fraudulent charges among real charges — from cram (to fill or stuff) and camouflage (to hide).

[4]Cauvin, H.E. (1999, November 11). Nigerian fraud syndicates set up shop in South Africa. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/11/business/international-business-nigerian-fraud-syndicates-set-up-shop-in-south-africa.html

reverse charges from telecommunication carriers outside the United States.

To protect yourself from 809 scams, watch out for calls from area codes in the Caribbean, including: the Dominican Republic (809), the British Virgin Islands (284), Grenada (473), Jamaica (876), and Bermuda (441), among others. Not sure if the call you received is from outside of the U.S.? Visit the North American Number Plan Administration (NANPA) at www.nanpa.com for a complete list of area codes used by NANP member countries.

Advance Fee Fraud

Advance fee fraud often targets people with poor credit histories turned down by local banks and credit unions for loans. These schemes also target consumers who need cash beyond what can be provided by personal loans ($1,000-$4,000) and who lack collateral (*e.g.*, homes, stocks/bonds, paid-off vehicles, etc.) to pledge as security.

In advance fee fraud scams, a con artist offers a consumer a loan in exchange for an up-front payment. Although the scammer may assure the victim that the company is located in the United States, the money sent by the victim is often directed out of the country. In addition to causing financial damage, advance fee scammers often ask for personal information which can be used to steal a consumer's identity (see **Identity Theft**, pg. 7).

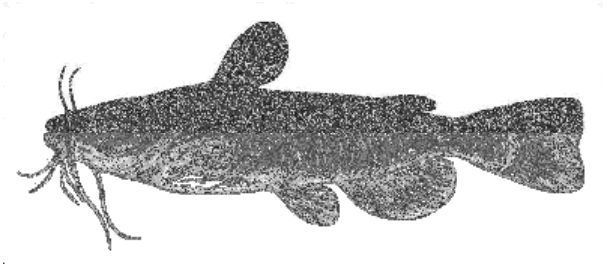
Requesting advance payments in exchange for consumer loans is illegal in both the U.S. and Canada. If you receive *any* offer of credit and are asked to pay a fee in advance, you are being scammed. If you believe you are a victim of advance fee fraud, file complaints with the Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). If you wired funds, also report the scam to the money transmitter (e.g., Western Union, Moneygram, GreenDot). In most cases there is little that can be done to recover money lost to advance fee fraud scams. Filing a complaint may help prevent others from becoming victims.

Catfishing (Dating Scams)

Millions of people flock to dating websites every year looking for love, making these sites attractive hunting grounds for con artists. Online, anyone can be whoever they want to be — the perfect cover for scammers.

Many dating scammers claim to be from the U.S., posing as successful businessmen or contractors traveling or working in another country. Although the scammers make through a dating site, they usual try to move the conversation to e-mail or instant messaging as fast as possible, in case the site detects and removes their account.

Eventually the conversations turn to money. The con artist may claim they need the consumer's banking information, or ply the



consumer with a sob story — a lost visa, unexpected travel expenses, a medical emergency, etc. If the victim doesn't send money immediately the tone of the conversation changes drastically. The scammer gets more direct, hounding the victim for what they really want — cash.

U.S. consumers lost more than $86 million to romance scams in 2014[5]. Don't become a statistic. If you met someone online who starts asking for money or financial data, stop communication immediately. If you believe you may be a victim of a dating scam, file complaints with the FTC, the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC[3]), and the Maine Attorney General's office. If you gave out sensitive financial information, contact your financial institution immediately and close your accounts (see **Identity Theft**, pg. 7).

Charity Scams

Every year, thousands of well-meaning Americans are scammed out of their hard-earned money by fake charities. Many scam artists take advantage of recent disasters, tugging at consumers heartstrings and enriching themselves with donations.

Most charities operating in Maine must obtain a license from the Charitable Solicitations Program at the Maine Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation (1-207-624-8603). Be an informed giver. Call, check, and verify before giving!

You Can't Con an Honest Man

The saying "you can't con an honest man" isn't entirely true. There are many scams that rely on generosity or kindness. However, scammers often rely on making consumers believe they have an unfair advantage over the con artist, tempting victims by offering a windfall at the crook's expense.

Fake Check Scams

In fake check scams, a consumer receives what appears to be a real check for a large sum. The scammer tells the consumer to wire some of the money be wired back to them as soon as possible, usually as a refund or for payment of "administrative costs" or "foreign taxes." The victim deposits the phony check and, once they see the money is available, wires the requested funds.

Just because money appears to be available after cashing a check doesn't mean the check is real. It can take time for the victim's bank to learn that the deposited check was drawn on a closed or non-existent foreign bank account. This can leave the consumer on the hook for both fees and money withdrawn against the check in addition to the cash sent to the scammer.

To identify fake checks, look for misspellings and thin or low quality paper. Don't accept payment by check from anyone you don't know. If you accept a check as payment, ask for a check drawn on a bank with local

[5]Internet Crime Complaint Center (2015). *2014 Internet Crime Report*. Retrieved from https://pdf.ic3.gov/2014_IC3Report.pdf

branches. Bring the check to one of those branches to find out if it's real. If you've fallen victim to a fake check scam, contact the Maine Office of the Attorney General and file complaints with the Federal Trade Commission and U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

Debt Collection, Aggressive/Phony

Recently, there has been an uptick in reports of debt collection scams — aggressive, unlicensed debt collectors calling for accounts not owed by the consumer. The callers are relentless. They bombard victims day and night, and aren't shy about calling the victims at work or disclosing information to neighbors, co-workers and supervisors. Common threats used by unlicensed debt collectors include jail, court suits, wage garnishment, and disclosure of debt to co-workers, friends, or family members.

The threats are empty. Unfortunately, some consumers wire funds to get the collectors to stop calling. While one company may stop trying to collect, they often sell the victim's information to new scammers who restart the process knowing the victim already paid one phony debt.

If you're unsure whether a debt is real, ask the collector to provide verification of the debt. You have the right to dispute debts and request verification within 30 days of receiving written notice of the debt from a collection agency. Also write down the name, address and phone number of the collection agency, and the name of the person you spoke with. Check with the Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection to find out if the collector holds a license to operate in Maine.

Debt Relief Scams

Many households struggle with excessive debt, including high credit card balances with excessive interest rates. Debt management service providers ("DMSPs") can provide safe credit counseling options for debtors. They may be able to help obtain debt settlement offers or rate reductions from creditors.

To operate in Maine, DMSPs must register with the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection. Unregistered, fraudulent DMSPs target consumers who are behind on loan payments and demand up-front fees in exchange for the promise of lower interest rates on credit cards, vehicle loans or personal loan accounts without actually providing a service. Victims often report sending a few hundred to several thousand dollars to unregistered debt management service providers before reporting the scam.

If a company is not registered and bonded, state regulators will have a difficult time getting your money back. The Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection's website lists all DMSPs registered by the State of Maine. Visit www.Credit.Maine.gov, click on "License Types," and select the debt management service provider roster. If the company contacting you isn't on the list, hang up! If an unregistered debt management service provider contacts you, call the Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection.

Foreclosure Rescue Scams

Foreclosure rescue scams hit consumers when they're already down. If your home is going into foreclosure, scammers may offer to help save your property, for a price. They guarantee they can obtain a loan modification or stop the foreclosure process.

Most foreclosure rescue scammers tell the consumer they must make up-front payments or let the company deposit their money into a (nonexistent) trust account. Know your rights. Debt management providers cannot charge clients until they have obtained a written offer of relief from the creditor, and the client has accepted the offer. The company must also provide disclose how the loan will change if the client accepts the offer, and tell the client how much they will be charged for the company's services.

If your home is in danger of foreclosure, call Maine's foreclosure prevention hotline at 1-888-NO-4-CLŌZ (1-888-664-2569) for referral to a free, Maine-based HUD-certified housing counselor. See also **Debt Relief Scams**, pg. 15.

"Make a habit of two things: to help; or at least to do no harm."

-Hippocrates

Foreign Exchange Fraud

Foreign exchange fraud is an investment scam (see pg. 18) in which a con artist convinces a victim they can expect a high return by trading currency on the foreign exchange market. Currency exchange trading is a zero-sum game. To make money on the foreign exchange market, someone else has to lose money. It's rare for an inexperienced investor to make money through currency trading.

Before investing in foreign currency, consult a financial professional. Check with the Maine Office of Securities (1-877-624-8551|www.investors.maine.gov) to determine whether the salesperson is licensed to operate in Maine, and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (1-866-366-2382|www.cftc.gov) for background on the business.

Fell for a scam? Watch out for more

If you do fall victim to a scam, watch out. Many scammers participate in **reloading** — scamming victims over and over until they are sucked dry financially. Your name may be added to a **"sucker" list** — a list of people who have been successfully solicited or scammed. They know that if you've been tricked once, they may be able to trick you again.

Government Grant Scams

Recently, a consumer received a grant offer from an organization calling itself the "Federal Treasury Department." The sender claimed they would provide a "$7,000 U.S. Government grant" within 48 hours if the consumer wired $200 up front. The scammers didn't realize their intended victim was an employee of the federal government, who immediately reported the scam!

Grant scams are a type of advance fee fraud (see pg. 13). Con artists will offer grants in exchange for upfront fees and disappear when they receive the money. Grants are non-repayable funding given to a person for a particular purpose (often research, higher education, or professional training). Grants, by their nature, are **free**. If you believe you've fallen victim to a government grant scam, file complaints with the Maine Office of the Attorney General and the Federal Trade Commission.

Impostor (Grandparent) Scams

Impostor scams are simple, yet devious. A consumer (usually elderly) will receive a call, text or other message from a con artist who claims to be a friend or relative (often a child or grandchild). The scammer asks for money, claiming to be in some kind of trouble. Occasionally other scammers impersonating authority figures such as lawyers, police officers or judges are involved, "validating" the first scammer's story.

Scammers can pull off imposter scams with little or no research. Many of these calls begin with something like "Guess who this is." Any response gives the scammer an instant identity without having to do any work. The scammers often ask questions during these calls, tricking victims into revealing personal information.

If you're contacted by someone claiming to be a friend or family member who needs a large sum of money, don't give away any information. Ask their name. If they give a generic answer (*e.g.,* "it's me" or "your grandson/granddaughter"), give them a name that no one in your family has. "Bill," for example. If they confirm they're "Bill," it's a scam. Also consider asking questions only the person claiming to be on the phone could know, such as "what's your mother's maiden name?" or "what's the name of your pet?" If they're unable to answer correctly, hang up.

If you've fallen victim to or been contacted by someone perpetrating an imposter scam, file complaints with the Maine Office of the

"No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of identity."

-Howard Phillips Lovecraft
Through the Gates of the Silver Key

Attorney General and the Federal Trade Commission or the Internet Crime Complaint Center (www.ic3.gov). If you provided financial information, contact your financial institution immediately to close your account.

Investment Scams

Imagine you've received a call from someone offering you an investment opportunity — the formation of a new company or something resulting from an event in the market. They might be vague on the details, but promise a high return on your investment with little or no risk. It sounds like a good deal, right? Not so fast. You may have just encountered an investment scam.

The higher the return you're expecting, the greater the risk associated with the investment. Be skeptical of anyone claiming differently, and don't be afraid to get a second opinion on investment opportunities before acting. Before committing, ask yourself, "do I understand the product being offered?" If the caller gets angry or is unwilling to wait for you to get a second opinion, hang up. Scammers want you to act immediately, before you get suspicious.

Before doing business with an investment professional, check with the Maine Office of Securities (1-877-624-8551 | www.investors.maine.gov) to determine whether the person offering the investment is licensed to operate in Maine and what type of services they can provide.

If you've fallen victim to an investment scam, file a complaint with the Maine Office of Securities. If you gave out personal information, see **Identity Theft,** pg. 7.

IRS Scams

IRS scammers claim to be Internal Revenue Service agents who need immediate access to a consumer's bank account(s) due to fraud or tax issues. The rattled consumers give the information to the "agent," who debits money from victim's account.

The IRS makes initial contact with consumers by mail, will not ask for untraceable or unstoppable payment methods, and will not involve police or other agencies in tax issues. If you think the IRS is trying to contact you, call them at 1-800-829-1040.

If you believe you've fallen victim to an IRS scam, contact the U.S. Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (1-800-366-4484) and file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission. In your complaint be sure to note that it is an IRS scam. If you were contacted via e-mail, forward the message to **phishing@irs.gov**. If you provided personal information, or if the caller knew personal details such as your Social Security number, see **Identity theft**, pg. 7.

Job Scams

Scammers sometimes place ads in local newspapers or create websites that, for a fee, "teach you the secrets" of applying for jobs or offer to link you up with the job of your dreams. These scams are often directed at people interested in finding jobs in state or federal government.

Information about U.S. Postal Service, local, state, and federal government jobs is free and available to anyone who's interested. Government agencies never charge application fees, and never guarantee they will hire anyone for a position. Watch out for ads that claim otherwise. If you believe you've fallen victim to a job scam, file a complaint with the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

Lottery and Sweepstakes Scams

Lottery scams are a type of advance fee fraud (see pg. 13). In lottery scams, a consumer receives an unexpected call, e-mail or letter informing them they have won a large sum of money in a foreign lottery. The scammer asks the victim to send money for "processing fees" or other charges before they release the winnings. It's not possible to win a lottery without purchasing a ticket! If you haven't purchased a ticket, you can't have won.

There are many variations on this con. Lottery scams can be fronts for aggressive sales pitches. The scammer may claim the consumer has won a free prize (such as a night at a hotel), before pressuring the victim to spend more than the value of what they've "won" on extra goods or services. Sometimes scammers claim the victim won a drawing which didn't require a ticket. Occasionally scammers offer to buy foreign lottery tickets for the victim.

If someone has contact you about entering or winning a foreign lottery, file complaints with the Maine Attorney General's office and the Federal Trade Commission. If you provided your bank account number or other financial data, contact your financial institution immediately to close your account.

Mystery Shopping Scams

Companies hire mystery shoppers to test service in retail stores. The companies instruct

Looking For a Job?

Federal Government

www.USAJobs.gov

U.S. Postal Service

www.USPS.com/Careers

Maine State Government

Bureau of Human Resources
4 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0004

1-207-624-7761
TTY: Call Maine Relay 711
www.Maine.gov/bhr/State_Jobs

Other Maine Jobs

Bureau of Employment Services
55 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0035

1-800-457-8883
TTY: Call Maine Relay 711
www.MaineCareerCenter.com

them to make a purchase at a store or restaurant and report on the quality of their experience. The consumer sometimes gets to keep the product purchased and, in some cases, a small payment as well.

Most legitimate mystery shopping positions are posted online. Avoid responding to mystery shopper advertisements encountered by email or newspaper — many of these aren't real. Never pay for mystery shopper "certification" (which is often worthless), for access to a directory of companies that hire mystery shoppers, or to be included in such a directory. Above all else, never respond to a mystery shopping opportunity which involves depositing a check or wiring funds in advance (see **Fake Check Scams**, pg. 14).

Mystery shopping can be fun, but it's rarely a gateway to riches. If you think you've fallen victim to a mystery shopping scam, file complaints with the Maine Office of the Attorney General and the Federal Trade Commission.

Illegal Payday Loans

Payday lenders offer a valuable service — helping consumers bridge short-term funding gaps. Because these loans offer high risk to lenders (greater than one in ten borrowers default on their loan), interest rates on payday loans are can be quite high. In Maine, payday lenders must maintain a license with the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection.

The maximum fee on payday loans of $500 or more in Maine is $25. Illegal loans offered by unlicensed internet-based lenders often feature interest rates in excess of 500% APR, and are virtually impossible for borrowers to repay. When a borrower gets behind on payments, unlicensed lenders often hire unlicensed debt collectors to harass the borrower into paying.

If you have taken out a payday loan with an unlicensed lender, file a complaint with the Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection. If the lender has access to your bank account, contact your financial institution immediately to shut the account down. See also **Debt Collection, Aggressive/Phony** (pg. 15).

For a list of licensed payday lenders, contact the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection. View a list by visiting the bureau's website at www.Credit.Maine.gov, clicking on "list of license types," and selecting the payday lender roster.

Precious Metal Scams

Precious metal scams are a type of **investment scam** (pg. 18). In one common variation, a "metal dealer" or "merchant" offers to sell stock or metals for 10-20% of the total price out of pocket, arranging a loan for the remaining amount. They discourage the victim from taking physical possession of the metals (which don't actually exist), or tell the victim the metals will be kept safe in a "bank" or other storage location.

There is no guarantee that the value of metals like gold, silver or platinum will hold steady or rise over time. As with any commodity, investment in precious metals carries risks.

Watch out for businesses guaranteeing high rates of return with no liability. Never agree to purchase precious metals without verifying the goods actually exist, and don't agree to a deal without knowing where the metals are physically located. Beware of companies unable or unwilling to provide proof of licensure.

Contact the Maine Office of Securities (1-877-624-8551|www.investors.maine.gov) and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (1-866-366-2382|www.cftc.gov) to determine whether a business is registered to deal in precious metals commodities in the United States. Be sure to consult a financial professional when considering investing in precious metals.

"Rent-a-Creep" (Home Repair/Paving Scams)

In rent-a-creep scams, homeowners get a knock on the door from a visitor claiming they have just finished a job and have materials left over. Would you like your roof repaired, your driveway paved or some other service at a discount? Sometimes the con artists offer to perform a "free" inspection, then fix any problems found for a fee. Unfortunately, the work and materials are both substandard and expensive, perhaps more so than the victim realizes until they need to get the con artist's handiwork repaired.

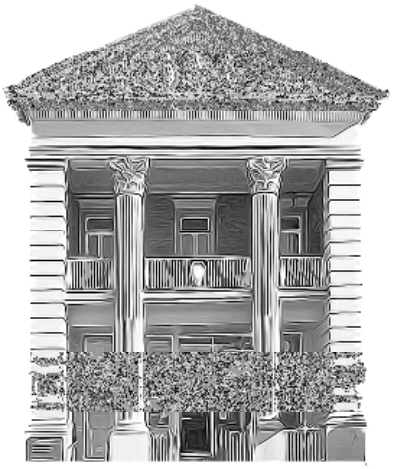
In Maine, door-to-door sellers of home repair services must hold a license with the Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation. They must also provide a written contract and a 3-day rescission period. Before agreeing to any kind of door-to-door repair service, ask to see the business' license. If they don't hold a license, don't do business with them! If the company cannot provide a license, write down the name and address of the business, the names of the employees, and their vehicles' license plate numbers.

If you've been contacted by a door-to-door home repair business and something feels wrong or you think it's a scam, contact your local police department. If you believe that you've fallen victim to a rent-a-creep scam, file a complaint with the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

Security Officer Scams

Years ago, an elderly woman received a call from a "bank security officer." He told her a teller at a local branch was stealing funds by "shorting" victims on cash withdrawals. The bank needed her help!

The woman agreed to assist, and the "security officer sent a taxi to bring her to the bank. When she arrived, a tall, stately man in a suit approached her in the parking lot. He



identified himself as the security officer, and handed her a paper bag. The officer instructed her to withdraw all the money from her savings account and to place it in the bag. After she withdrew the money, he would take it back to "bank headquarters" and count it. If any was missing, he would arrest the teller.

The woman did as she was told. She brought the bag back to the parking lot and began to hand it to the "security officer." Just before giving him the money, she asked if the security officer could arrange for a ride back to her home. The man hesitated, and disappeared to talk with someone on the other side of the parking lot. The woman went into the bank and asked the manager about the "security officer." The puzzled manager replied, "What security officer?" The man and his accomplice had disappeared.

If an unknown person contacts you with an unusual request, get their name and title. Follow-up by calling a published telephone number for their company to verify the request is legitimate. Never withdraw money and hand it to a person you aren't familiar with. If you've been contacted by or have fallen victim to a con artist posing as a security officer, get in touch with your local police department.

Tech Support Scams

Tech support scams have been around for years. A consumer receives a call from a scammer claiming to have detected a virus, malware, or other issue with the consumer's computer. After gaining your trust, the caller may have you perform a series of tasks to root-out the problem. Once you are convinced there is a serious issue, they ask for personal information, remote access to the computer, or trick you into installing harmful software.

If fake tech-support callers access a computer, they can get hold of stored information (*e.g.*, Social Security numbers, bank accounts, usernames, passwords and credit card numbers). In worst-case scenarios they may also install **spyware**: malicious software that allows the scammer future access to users' information.

If you believe you've fallen victim to a tech support scam, file complaints with the Maine Office of the Attorney General and the FTC, request a file freeze (see pg. 11), and watch your credit report. If you paid for bogus services by credit card, call your credit card provider. Notify them of your situation and ask them to reverse the charges. If you provided other financial information, contact your financial institution. Ask them to reverse any charges and close your account.

Change any passwords you gave out, and passwords for other accounts accessed from the affected computer (*e.g.*, family members accounts, e-mail, websites). Update your security software, scan your computer, and delete anything identified as potentially dangerous. If you do not have security software installed on your computer, contact your local computer retailer for recommendations. If you believe your identity has been stolen, see **Identity Theft**, pg. 7.

Timeshare Scams

In timeshare scams, a con artist convinces a consumer to buy an ownership stake in a timeshare. The deal becomes a nightmare when the victim discovers they sent money to a crook who didn't own the timeshare in question. Just because a deal looks good doesn't mean it's real. Timeshare scammers often take pictures of properties owned by other people and post them as their own. Sometimes they offer to help sell timeshares a consumer already owns for a hefty fee and without any guarantee.

Check out the company before agreeing to anything. Get all terms and conditions in writing before agreeing to do business with a timeshare company. Consider doing business only with companies that get paid only after selling the timeshare. If you believe you have fallen victim to a timeshare scam, file a complaint with the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

Unclaimed Property Scams

Who wouldn't love to wake up one morning and discover they found money they didn't realize they lost? Every state holds unclaimed funds in accounts with their treasurer's office, waiting for the rightful owners to claim their property. In Maine alone, millions of dollars of abandoned property are turned over to the state every year.

Unclaimed property may consist of balances from inactive bank accounts, gift certificates, money orders, safety deposit boxes, uncashed insurance checks, or funds from any number of other sources. In most cases you can search an abandoned property database for your name and, after filling out a few forms, claim your funds — for free!

In unclaimed property scams, con artists try to lure consumers into disclosing their name, address, date of birth and Social Security number to steal their identity. Sometimes they convince consumers to call a number with a Caribbean area code — charging exorbitant long distance fees (see **809 Scam**, pg. 12).

Scareware

When browsing the web one needs to be especially alert for **scareware**, automated programs designed to trick people into purchasing or downloading unnecessary and/or potentially dangerous software.

Scareware is frequently encountered through popups, e-mails and phony websites offering free security scans or claiming to have detected a virus or other malware. These alerts often look like they are being generated by the computer, when in fact they are only being displayed in the computer's browser.

Some scammers offer to find money the state is holding for a fee, only to never provide the service.

Visit www.maine.gov/treasurer/unclaimed property to search for unclaimed property held by the State of Maine. If you believe you may have unclaimed property outside Maine, visit the National Association of Unclaimed Property Administrators (NAUPA) at www.unclaimed.org.

Utility Billing Scams

In utility billing scams, a consumer receives a call claiming to be from a utility, and is warned they're behind on payments. The caller claims if the victim doesn't pay immediately — sometimes an amount several times the consumer's monthly bill — the victim's service will be terminated. Although utility scammers sometimes ask for credit card information, they're more likely to ask for prepaid cards, money orders, or wire transfers.

If you receive a call from a utility demanding immediate payment or else, don't panic. Hang up and call the utility directly, using a phone number found either on the utility's website or your phone book, to verify whether the call is legitimate. Remember, your utility will never require you to pay a bill with a prepaid card or wire transfer.

If you believe you've fallen victim to a utility billing scam, file complaints with the Maine Office of the Attorney General and the Federal Trade Commission, as well as your local law enforcement agency.

For more information on abandoned property, contact:

Office of the State Treasurer
Abandoned Property Division
39 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0039
1-888-283-2808 (Maine calls only)

Vacation Scams

Most vacation scams begin with an up-front deposit to hold a hotel, house, condo, or apartment. Often, photos of actual hotels or properties add legitimacy to the offer. Unfortunately, the entire vacation is ruined when the victims arrive at the airport or hotel, only to find no arrangements have been made. Others arrive at their destinations and encounter major undisclosed fees or upcharges. In some cases, con artists offer occupied homes as vacation rentals. When the victim knocks on the door, they find the startled (real) owner wondering why people are at his or her door with suitcases!

Watch out for claims you have won a free vacation, especially if you're asked to pay upfront fees. Be particularly wary if the company can't provide specifics on an offer. The vaguer they are, the greater the chance the offer is a fake. If you believe you've fallen for a vacation scam, file a complaint with the Maine Office of the Attorney General.

Verification of Bank Account Number Scams

Some time ago, a Maine resident called to

report an irregularity with his bank account. Check number 999 was showing a $200.00 withdrawal. That caught his attention. The consumer was in the 2000 number sequence with his checks. Check #999 had cleared for a different dollar amount quite some time ago. When pressed, he remembered a recent call from "his banker" asking to verify his checking account number. The caller asked him to read the numbers on the bottom of the check out loud over the phone. The consumer thought the call was strange, but wanted to comply with the bank's request.

The scammer used the information provided by the consumer to raid the victim's checking account by creating and depositing a demand draft — a type of check that doesn't require a signature from the account holder. Because the consumer notified authorities quickly, the demand draft was traced, the crook's account was frozen, and the funds were reversed back to the consumer.

If you believe you've run afoul of a verification of bank account number scam, contact the Maine Bureau of Financial Institutions.

Turning the Tables on Scammers

Received a call from a scammer? **Go on the offensive!** Try some of these comebacks...

Advance Fee Fraud

- "Just deduct the up-front payments you're asking for from the loan amount, and mail the rest to my post office box."

Aggressive/Phony Debt Collection

- "What is your Maine debt collector license number?"
  - (Hint: It must start with a DCL or a DCB, followed by a set of 3-4 numbers).
- "Tell me which sheriff's office will be serving me. I'll give them a call right after we hang up to verify. By the way, what is your name, and your company's full name and physical location?"

Credit Card APR Reduction Scam

- "I don't have a credit card."
- " I have no balance on my credit card and the APR is 0.00% for the next two years."

Imposter Scam

- "(Name), who you claim is in trouble in (country) is standing right next to me."

Investment Scams

- "This sounds like a fabulous investment opportunity. Why would you tell a complete stranger about it?" (Hang up)

IRS Scams

- "You're with the IRS? What's your physical location and direct phone number?"
- "I have a friend that works for the IRS. I want to double-check with him/her first."

Telemarketing Scams

- "Oh, my washer is overflowing. Hang on, I'll be right back!"
  - Leave the line open and find a good book to read. If they call back, don't answer. They'll eventually give up.
- "If this conversation is going to continue, I need your direct number, your company's physical address, your boss' name, and his or her direct number."

Security Officer Scam

- "If you're with my bank, why don't you know my account number?"

Glossary of Additional Terms

Adware: Software including advertisements, sometimes as pop-ups, which generate revenue for the software publisher.

Affinity Fraud: Fraud perpetrated by the leaders of a group against members of the same group (e.g., service clubs, religious groups).

Boiler Room: A room full of scammers using banks of telephones to call potential victims. Calls from boiler rooms are notoriously noisy because of all the background "chatter."

Clickbait: Content designed to attract visitors to click a link to a particular webpage.

Clickjacking: A technique used to trick web users into clicking a link directed to content other than content the link appears to point to.

Cookie: Cookie's are small packets of information put on a computer's hard drive every time that computer visits a website in order to save the user's personal information. While not inherently dangerous, cookies may be used to fraudulently gain personal information.

Dialer: Software used to connect to the internet via telephone or Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN). Dialers are often built into a computer's operating system, and are necessary to connect to the internet for those without broadband connections. Fraudulent dialers downloaded to a computer may redirect or override a built-in dialer, connecting a victim to the internet via premium-rate phone numbers.

Doxing: Researching and disseminating sensitive and/ or personally identifying information about an individual.

Hacker: A person who uses a computer to gain unauthorized access to data.

Hijacking (Computer): When a hacker takes control of a computer system. Hijacking can take many forms, ranging from resetting a browser's homepage to downloading malicious software or tampering with installed computer programs.

Key Logger: Software which records computer keystrokes in order to gather sensitive information.

Mousetrap (Java): A malicious web page which takes control of web browsers to prevent victims from leaving a website.

Ponzi Scheme: A situation in which an individual or organization pays old investors with money from new investors, in lieu of no actual profits. The infamous criminal actions of Bernie Madoff was built upon a Ponzi Scheme.

Pyramid Scheme: A business model in which victims are promised profit if they invite more victims to join and invest money.

Ransomware: A type of malware which restricts access to computer files or programs, demanding a ransom in order for the victim to regain access.

Screen logger: Software that secretly records images of a victim's computer screen in order to gather sensitive information.

Trojan Horse: An advertisement designed to draw customers by offering them money or something of value. After acceptance of the offer and signing a contract the victim is forced to spend a much larger sum than was offered to them.

Virus: Malicious software which may destroy data, steal information, or otherwise corrupt a computer system.

Worm: Malicious software which reproduces itself, spreading among computers in a network.

EQUIFAX Experian TransUnion

Annual Credit Report Request Form

You have the right to get a free copy of your credit file disclosure, commonly called a credit report, once every 12 months, from each of the nationwide consumer credit reporting companies, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion.

For instant access to your free credit report, visit www.annualcreditreport.com.

For more information on obtaining your free credit report, visit www.annualcreditreport.com or call 877-322-8228.

Use this form if you prefer to write request your credit report from one or all of the nationwide consumer credit reporting companies. The following information is required to process your request. Omission of any requested information may delay your request.

Once you complete your request, you must mail it to: Annual Credit Report Request Service, P.O. Box 105281, Atlanta, GA 30348.

[illegible]

Social Security Number: ___ - __ - ____

Date of Birth: __ / __ / ____ (month / day / year)

First Name: _____ M.I.: ___

Last Name: _____ JR, SR, III, etc.: ___

Current Mailing Address:

House Number: _____ Street Name: _____

Apartment Number / Private Mailbox: _____ For Puerto Rico Only: Print Urbanization Name: _____

City: _____ State: ___ ZipCode: _____

Previous Mailing Address (complete only if at current mailing address for less than two years):

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

PUBLICATIONS

Be sure to check out other free booklets from the
Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection:

- **Downeaster Common Sense Guide: Credit Reports and Credit Scores —** Learn the basics of credit, gain insight into how credit reporting and scoring work, and discover the impact your credit history has on your ability to borrow with this new publication from the Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection.

- **Downeaster Common Sense Guide: Finding, Buying and Keeping Your Maine Home** — This guide is a resource for first time homebuyers, and provides an overview of the mortgage lending process, types of mortgage lenders and loans, and other related topics.

- **Downeaster Common Sense Guide to Student Loans** — A comprehensive guide for the prospective college student on the world of educational loans. This book covers loan types, the FAFSA process, how to apply for scholarships and grants, and the rights of a student debtor in the repayment/collection process.

- **Downeaster Guide to Elder Financial Protection —** The "how-to" guide for Maine seniors who are interested in stopping unwanted telemarketing calls, pre-approved credit offers, and junk mail. This guide has sections on how to stop identity theft and how to recognize and stop elder financial exploitation.

These guides are free to Maine residents. Out-of-state orders are $6.00 each, or at a volume discount of $4.00/copy on orders of 50 or more (shipping included).

To order, call 1-800-332-8529 (in-state) or 1-207-624-8527 (outside of Maine).

Consumer Protection Resources

Maine Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection	1-800-332-8529 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Bureau of Insurance	1-800-300-5000 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Bureau of Financial Institutions	1-800-965-5235 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Office of Aging and Disability Services	1-800-262-2232 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Office of the Attorney General (Consumer Hotline)	1-800-436-2131 TTY 1-207-626-8865
Maine Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation	1-207-624-8603 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Office of Securities	1-877-624-8551 TTY Maine Relay 711
Maine Public Utilities Commission (Consumer Assistance Division)	1-800-452-4699 TTY 1-800-437-1220
Maine Real Estate Commission	1-207-624-8524 TTY Maine Relay 711
Commodity Futures Trading Commission	1-866-366-2382
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB)	1-855-411-2372 TTY 1-202-435-9742
Federal Reserve Consumer Hotline	1-888-851-1920
Federal Trade Commission Consumer Response Center	1-877-382-4357
Federal Trade Commission ID Theft Hotline **(after dialing, press "0" to reach a live operator)**	1-877-438-4338
Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA) Call Center	1-301-590-6500
Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC^3)	www.ic3.gov
National Credit Union Administration (NCUA)	1-800-755-1030
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs	1-800-729-5772
U.S. Postal Inspection Office — Portland, ME Field Office	1-877-876-2455

Maine Law Enforcement Resources

Maine Sheriff's Departments

Androscoggin	207-784-7361
Aroostook	207-532-3471
Cumberland	207-774-1444
Franklin	207-778-2680
Hancock	207-667-7575
Kennebec	207-623-3614
Knox	207-594-0429
Lincoln	207-882-7332
Oxford	207-743-9554
Penobscot	207-947-4585
Piscataquis	207-564-3304
Sagadahoc	207-443-8201
Somerset	207-474-9591
Waldo	207-338-6786
Washington	207-255-4422
York	207-324-1113

Federal Law Enforcement

FBI (Boston)	617-742-5533
FBI (Portland)	207-774-9322
U.S. Secret Service (Portland)	207-780-3493
U.S. Marshal (Portland)	207-780-3355

City Police Departments

Augusta Police Dept.	207-626-2370
Bangor Police Dept.	207-947-7382
Lewiston Police Dept.	207-513-3001
Portland Police Dept.	207-874-8575

Maine State Police

Augusta	207-624-7076 1-800-452-4664
Gray	207-756-3030 1-800-228-0857
Houlton	207-532-5400 1-800-924-2261
Orono	207-866-2122 1-800-432-7381

Maine Drug Enforcement Agency

Division One (Portland)	207-882-0370
Division Two (Houlton)	207-532-5170
Drug Tip Hotline	1-800-452-6457

NOTES

This book is not intended to be a complete discussion of all statutes applicable to consumer credit. If you require further information, consider contacting our agency or an attorney for additional help.

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Bureau of Consumer Credit Protection

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