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How to spot invoice scams that look like they mean business: Internet Scambusters #280

Invoice scams -- bills for goods and services you've never ordered or received -- rake in billions of dollars for fraudsters every year.

Oftentimes they look like the genuine article but are actually phony. They're not invoices but offers -- what the law calls "solicitations" -- that you can ignore. Other times they are genuine but either overcharge you or add items you didn't get.

This week, we explain five of the most common types of invoice scams and show you how to protect yourself. They're not difficult to spot or avoid -- if you know what you're looking for.

Invoice scams: 5 tricks fraudsters use to get your money

Invoice scams, where you get billed either for something you haven't bought or for massively more than you thought, succeed mainly because people don't look too closely when they receive them or because they unknowingly gave the scammer the right to charge whatever he wants.

These invoice scams come in a variety of guises. Here are the five main groups to watch out for.

Invoice scam #1: Directory listings.

There are many variations of the directory invoice scam. Most seem to be a bill for a listing in the "Yellow Pages." They look official, using the Yellow Pages name and the "walking fingers" logo. But neither of these is a registered trademark -- anyone can use them.

The scammers might include a clipping of a previous ad -- taken from a legitimate directory -- with "Renewal" printed on the invoice. And sometimes they might even print a directory, to keep it legal, but it's usually poor quality, with limited circulation.

Another invoice scam appears to be a bill for listing your name in a "worthy" publication of VIPs -- college alumni or executive listings, that sort of thing. The scammer might send an invoice but the cute ones say the listing is free if you sign and return the "notification."

What you're actually doing is agreeing to buy the high-price directory when it's printed. It'll be delivered "per your order" and you'll have to pay.

Action: Spike these scammers by scrutinizing any directory "invoice." Read every word. Check the name with any directory you've previously advertised in. Look for the words "This is not a bill. It is a solicitation."

Invoice scam # 2: Domain renewal notices.

We've written about this invoice [domain name scam](#) in the past, but it's becoming increasingly common as more of us register our names or create websites.

A few months before the domain registration is about to expire, you get a "renewal notice" from an official sounding "registry" via snail mail and/or email, warning that if you don't pay you'll lose the domain name.

Oftentimes they say you need to re-register for a lengthy period or suggest added services you must have. Whatever the "come-on," they always charge inflated prices and, if you pay, may or may not renew your domain registration.

Action: Sidestep this scam by shredding the notice. The only legitimate renewal notice comes from the company you registered your domain name through in the first place. Keep a note of their name handy.

Invoice scam #3: Paying through the nose.

There are a number of invoice scams where you either get overcharged for a service you paid for or where some of the items or work you pay for is never done.

Favorites are locksmiths who rescue you after you lock yourself out of your car or home. You're in such a panic at the time, you either don't ask the charge or sign a document that commits you to extras.

A cruel variation is the invoice presented to you at the front door of your new home when the furniture arrives. It's for way more than you thought you agreed and the mover threatens to confiscate your furniture if you don't pay.

Another common trick is for auto repair shops to bill you for work and parts they didn't provide.

Action: Avoid these scams by only using reputable businesses for these important jobs and never sign a document you haven't read from beginning to end, no matter how much of a hurry you're in.

Invoice scam #4: Magazine subscriptions.

You get an invoice for renewing a magazine subscription. If you already receive the publication, you may think nothing of it and pay up. If you're suspicious and read more closely, you'll find it's actually inviting you to subscribe.

It doesn't come from the publisher but a third party subscription service who may or may not be legit. Sometimes, there's an offer to supply a free copy but you still must give your credit card details for a full subscription "which you can cancel at any time."

Your card, of course, will be charged and you might get the magazine, but you'll pay way more than you need to and find it difficult to cancel -- the scammers don't give you a phone number.

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Invoice scam #4: Magazine subscriptions.

Action: Don't be fooled. Read the "invoice." Don't pay if you're not a subscriber or if it's not a genuine renewal notice from the publisher. If you want to try a magazine, visit its website or get a subscription card from inside a current issue.

You can find out more about magazine subscription scams in our article: [Scammers Send Fake Renewal Notices for Magazine Subscriptions](#).

Invoice scam #5: Mystery office supplies.

An invoice scammer was recently convicted of sending phony invoices for non-existent fluorescent lighting to hundreds of US businesses. He cleared \$700,000 before he got caught.

The reason is simple: busy accounts departments and inefficient firms assume if they get a bill, they must have ordered the goods.

More sophisticated tricksters make sales calls to companies to collect names of decision makers that they then include on the invoice to make it appear legit. Others send unordered, low-quality office supplies together with an invoice for an inflated sum.

Action: The solution is simple -- issue purchase order numbers for all purchases and check all invoices against the original orders. Be wary of anything else.

Let's recap on what we've learned here:

- Just because something looks official or genuine doesn't mean it is.
- Read everything before you sign.
- Use reputable businesses; if it's a new name, check them out.
- And give yourself a pat on the back every time you spot an invoice scam and save your money!