



Scam Gram!

Keep the sharks at bay

A Consumer Action News Alert • March 2016 • www.consumer-action.org

SCAM GRAM is Consumer Action's monthly e-newsletter alerting you to the dirtiest players in the world of tech fraud, credit card scams, ID theft and general con-artistry. Don't be fooled by liars, cheats and crooks—wise up with SCAM GRAM!

There's fraud in your future

[CNNMoney](#) sent two investigative journalists to search for the woman who is the face of one of the longest-running and biggest cons in history—the mysterious “psychic” Maria Duval. The con starts when a victim receives a personalized letter from the questionable clairvoyant, who claims to be able to help them win the lottery, overcome an illness or get out of debt. According to CNN, Duval chooses her victims based on “sucker lists,” which contain “personal details, like names and addresses from data brokers that typically sell the information to marketers or retailers.” Duval's shockingly intimate opening letter often leads to an ongoing correspondence and to victims, many of them elderly, very low-income or suffering from mental illness, repeatedly sending money for her “services.” But who is Duval? According to the report, she's probably just the face of a larger international operation, which the U.S. Postal Inspection Service credits with one of the biggest cases of mail fraud in history. Shockingly, authorities haven't been able to shut the scam down despite the fact that it's been occurring for over 20 years, claimed over a million [victims](#) and spanned more than a dozen countries. Hopefully the CNN series will generate some good leads and, ultimately, some closure for the many unfortunate victims of the devious Duval.

Second verse, same as the first

They say that lightning doesn't strike twice, but when it comes to scams against seniors, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) has [found that](#) “victims of fraudulent money-making schemes like bogus timeshare investments and in-home business opportunities” seem *more* likely to experience a repeat—the second time around by swindlers promising to help them recoup their losses (for a fee, of course). Sadly, these “asset recovery programs” are simply an additional means of milking the targets out of money. The CFPB offers three tips to help you avoid this type of follow-up fraud: Never pay for a money recovery service that hasn't been performed; understand that you can file a consumer complaint yourself (for free) through the CFPB and many other government agencies (you don't need to pay a private

company or individual); and speak up if you have any reservations about a financial transaction (ask family members, friends or even [Consumer Action](#) whether or not an offer seems legit).

See right through your CEO

If the CEO of your company sent an email telling you to mail her a copy of employee W-2s (assuming you had access to them), would you see through it and recognize it as a scam? In a recent [case](#), a Snapchat employee took the bait and sent the documents, compromising the identities of hundreds of the photo sharing company's employees. Unfortunately, this employee isn't alone in falling for the "CEO scam," which has become increasingly popular as criminals realize that they can steal the personal data of hundreds or thousands of workers in one fell swoop. According to *Fortune*, the technique [has bilked](#) companies out of more than \$2 billion (with one company alone losing \$90 million) and claimed 12,000 victims around the world. The goal of the scammers appears to be tax fraud, as W-2 information can be used to file tax returns under victims' names. Perhaps the scam has been particularly successful because when your CEO requests something, you typically comply (no questions asked).

Spotting scams in ethnic communities

Last month Consumer Action participated in a [panel](#) hosted by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and New America Media (a coalition of over 3,000 ethnic news organizations) on spotting and avoiding scams in ethnic communities. Immigrants and those who do not speak English as a first language are often the targets of fraudulent job offers, bogus immigration assistance (one particularly bizarre [case](#) involved adult adoptions as a pathway to U.S. citizenship), shady housing deals and more. Issues with language barriers often come into play. "A common type of scam happens when buying a car," said Consumer Action's Rose Chan. "The sellers push the buyer to sign the contract very fast so that the buyer doesn't have time to review it. A lot of times they slip in extra services that the buyer didn't agree to, or set a higher price for the car than the (amount) the buyer agreed to pay." The good news? The FTC gives immigrants and other vulnerable consumers helpful [advice](#) (in multiple languages) on avoiding scams. For instance, don't pay to obtain employment or other information related to a job; use a lawyer rather than a notario (notary public) for legal help; get immigration assistance from an official government (.gov) website; and be careful to protect your passport and other important documents.

How low will they go?

Love sick. Scammers have sunk to some pretty amazing lows, but one Tinder user may have [outdone them all](#) when he used the dating app to solicit thousands of dollars with a bogus sob story about a relative with cancer. Sadly, one of the sympathetic women who gave the scammer money was moved to do so because she was a cancer survivor herself.

Makes us want to puke. Apparently, some Uber drivers have been [planting vomit](#) in their vehicles to charge riders a \$200 "cleanup" fee, which they then pocket. The (sober at the time) riders have begun reporting the disturbing phenomenon, which begs the question: Where are the drivers getting the upchuck? Actually, we don't want to know.

Ground control to Major Tom. It seems like Nigerian princes are everywhere, but did you know that

there's a Nigerian astronaut who has been [trapped in a space station](#) high above this blue planet for over a decade? He's somehow able to send you emails, and he needs your money to get back to earth! We say, leave him in orbit.

Trumped up education. Small hands aren't the only thing The Donald has to worry about. Trump is now facing [three lawsuits](#) alleging he defrauded thousands of students who attended his unlicensed for-profit "university" (which really turned out to be a series of worthless real estate workshops).

Cult red-handed. One polygamous group seems to [believe](#) you can never have too many wives, or too many food stamps. The fringe religious sect's leaders have been accused of encouraging followers to illegally give millions of dollars to church-run stores through a massive food stamp money laundering scheme. Shame on them—food stamp fraud jeopardizes subsidies for families that really need food.

Tips!

- **A 50 percent chance of fraud.** A [new study](#) reveals that the popular classifieds website Craigslist only catches and flags about half of the scam rental listings posted, making it even more important that you meet with anyone you're considering renting from in person, view the place in question, maybe talk to a neighbor or two, and sign a lease before forking over the money for that new apartment.
- **A really smart phone.** Samsung's newest Galaxy model has incorporated caller ID and spam protection through the Whitepages website. If you hate cold callers, you might want to [check it out](#).
- **Just hang up!** If you purchased health insurance through the Health Insurance Marketplace (created under the Affordable Care Act), you're required to report coverage on your taxes, or you could be fined. The Health Insurance Marketplace, however, will [never call](#) and prompt you to purchase insurance (or pay a fine). If you get a call, it's a scammer looking to steal your financial information.

Thanks for reading SCAM GRAM and, as always, feel free to send us your questions, comments and tips. [Click here to email us](#).

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