

Why people fall victim to scams

May 20 2009



Email is an increasingly common method of sending scams.

(PhysOrg.com) -- The psychological reasons consumers may fall victim to mass marketed scams are revealed today in groundbreaking research.

The research, undertaken by the University of Exeter on behalf of the OFT, provides a valuable insight into why consumers fall victim to scams, as well as the psychological techniques used by scammers to con the UK public out of an estimated £3.5 billion every year.

Some of the key findings about victims of scams are that:

- up to 20% of the UK population could be particularly vulnerable to scams, with previous victims of a scam consistently more likely to show interest in responding again,
- a good background knowledge of the subject of a scam offer, such as experience of investments, may actually increase the risk of becoming a

victim through ‘over-confidence’,

- victims are not in general poor-decision makers, for example they may have successful business or professional careers, but tend to be unduly open to persuasion by others and less able to control their emotions,
- victims often keep their decision to respond to a scam offer private and avoid speaking about it with family or friends.

The research also found that many scams use a range of highly persuasive techniques. A common tactic is to seek to exploit basic human emotions such as excitement or fear to provoke a spontaneous ‘gut reaction’ to the scam offer. Such scams also abuse people’s trust of authority by making a scam look like a legitimate offer from a reputable business or official institution.

Professor Stephen Lea of the University of Exeter's School of Psychology, who led the research team, said: ‘Modern economic life is complicated and we have to use all sorts of short cuts and rules of thumb to navigate our way through it. Scammers take advantage of those necessary, everyday processes. This means that no-one is immune to being scammed. We need to be on our guard both for ourselves and for our friends and family. If you have any worries that something might be a [scam](#), you need to talk to someone else about it: It very likely is.’

The research findings will help to inform the joint OFT and Serious Organised Crime Agency’s National Strategy for tackling mass marketed fraud, in particular in developing more effective consumer awareness campaigns to help consumers recognise and resist scams.

Mike Haley OFT Director of Consumer Protection said: ‘This research provides valuable insight into the sophisticated, heartless and calculating psychological techniques used by scammers to exploit consumers. Scams

often have a devastating emotional as well as financial impact on victims. This research will help us to develop more effective methods to counter the scammers.’

Gareth Thomas, Consumer Minister, said: ‘These findings show it is not just the vulnerable but the financially savvy too who are at real risk of falling victim to [scammers](#). Trading Standards Scambuster teams are working hard to highlight the dangers of scams across the country. They have already saved [consumers](#) more than £3 million and seized £2 million in criminal assets.’

The report can be downloaded at www.offt.gov.uk

Provided by University of Exeter ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Why people fall victim to scams (2009, May 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-05-people-fall-victim-scams.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.