



Lottery, Contest and Sweepstakes Scams

Scam operators – often based outside the U.S. – are using the telephone, email, text messages, and direct mail to entice U.S. consumers to buy chances in high-stake foreign lotteries from as far away as Australia and Europe. These lottery solicitations violate U.S. law, 18 U.S. Code § 1953, which prohibits the cross-border sale or purchase of lottery tickets by phone or mail.

Legitimate sweepstakes or contests never ask you to pay for your own prize.

Federal law enforcement authorities are intercepting and destroying millions of foreign lottery mailings sent. However, there are solicitations that do get through according to the U.S. Postal Inspection Service.

Most promotions for foreign lotteries are likely to be phony. Many scam operators do not even buy the promised lottery tickets. Others buy some tickets, but keep the “winnings” for themselves. In addition, lottery hustlers use victims’ bank account numbers to make unauthorized withdrawals or their credit card numbers to run up additional charges.

The following are some words of caution for consumers who are thinking about responding to a foreign lottery:

- There are no “secret” systems for winning foreign lotteries.
- If you purchase one foreign lottery ticket, expect many more bogus offers for lottery or investment “opportunities.” Your name will be placed on “sucker lists” that fraudulent telemarketers buy and sell.
- Keep your credit card and bank account numbers to yourself. Scam artists often ask for them during an unsolicited sales pitch.



The bottom line: Ignore all mail and phone solicitations for foreign lottery promotions. If you receive what looks like “lottery” material from a foreign country, give it to your local postmaster.

Free prize

If you have won a “free” prize, you should not have to pay anything to get it. Legitimate sweepstakes or contests never ask you to pay for your own prize or buy something to boost your chance of winning. In a scam, though, the “winners” almost always are asked to pay to collect their prize or to enter another part of a contest.

If you enter contest drawings, especially at a public place like a mall or at an event, you will probably get many promotions in the mail, phone calls, and lots more spam. This is because the prize promoters often sell your personal information to outside advertisers.

How to protect yourself

If you get a notification that says you are a winner, or if you are thinking of entering a sweepstakes or prize drawing, here are some things to know:

- Always ask for their license number and licensing agency. All lotteries must be registered and licensed with a gaming commission or regulator. NEVER contact the people listed on the mailing or

the name given by the vendor as they may be associated with the scam.

- Legitimate contests do not ask you to pay anything to “improve” your chances of winning. (Raffles are different: with those, you are buying a chance to win a prize.)
- Real offers state the terms and conditions, including the rules, how to enter, and the odds of winning. Legitimate lottery companies will usually send winning notices by certified mail, Federal Express, UPS or DHL delivery services.
- Scam productions may ask you to send a check or money order, “wire” money to enter the contest or claim a prize or deposit a check.
 - This lets scammers get your money before you get the prize.
 - If you deposit the check given to you, it will bounce and you will owe your bank the money.
 - Wiring money is like sending cash; you cannot trace it and once sent you cannot get it back.
- Giving a prize promoter a family credit card or checking account number puts you on a “sucker” list. You will be contacted in the future, and you could be charged for a slew of unexpected products.
- Look up the routing numbers on the check given to see if the bank is located in the US or a different country or to see if it is a legitimate bank.
- A scammer will say, “I cannot cash in my winning lottery ticket because I am not a US citizen”. The truth is that you do not have to be a US citizen to claim a lottery prize.
- Some scammers use a toll-free number that tells you to call a “900” number to claim your prize. Calling “900” numbers costs money every minute.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact:

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