



Gift Cards are for Giving – Not for Scams

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MADISON, Wis. – This time of year, gift shopping is in full swing. Many consumers will choose to purchase a prepaid gift card for their friends or family members. Gift cards are popular because the buyer can choose how much money it is worth, and recipients can choose what they would like to spend that money on – but gift cards are also used in multiple ways by scammers and fraudsters. Whether giving or receiving a prepaid gift card this year, it is important that consumers know how to keep their money and identity safe.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) recommends keeping the following information in mind.

Avoid online gift card scams. These can take different forms, such as buying discounted gift cards or gift cards in “bulk”. These are often fake offers meant to trick you into paying the scammer or providing your personal information, but there is no gift card waiting for you at the end of the process.

- **DATCP’s tips:** Only buy a gift card directly from the retailer or authorized seller – especially if making your purchase online.

Check gift cards bought in-store for tampering. Thieves are known to tamper with gift cards displayed on kiosks or store shelves. They scan cards to record the card number, scratch off the security code, and then steal the funds after a legitimate consumer purchases it. They also place fake barcode stickers over the real card’s barcode so when someone buys the card, they are unknowingly activating a different gift card already in the scammer’s possession.

- **DATCP’s tips:** Only buy gift cards that are fully enclosed in packaging and unable to be swiped or scanned before being opened. Closely examine the barcode to check if a sticker has been placed over it. Inform the seller if it appears tampered with.

Know how to activate and use the card. Many cards activate automatically as soon as they are purchased, but others require the user to activate the card online or by calling a phone number. Pay attention to how you can check a card’s balance, as some scammers run fake “balance checking” websites that steal the card’s information as soon as it is entered.

- **DATCP’s tips:** Keep any terms and conditions and other information that comes with the card, and refer back to these as needed. Check whether your gift card has extra security measures such as registration with the issuer/retailer or a changeable PIN.

Treat your gift cards like cash, activate it only when you need to, and use it as soon as possible. If the card is lost, stolen, or unexpectedly low on funds, report it to the issuer right away.

For more information and consumer protection resources or to file a complaint, visit DATCP’s Consumer Protection webpage at ConsumerProtection.wi.gov or contact the Consumer Protection Hotline at (800) 422-7128 or DATCPHotline@wisconsin.gov.

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