



National Consumer Protection Week: “Yes” Scams and a Closer Look at 2016 Telemarketing Complaint Numbers

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It's National Consumer Protection Week! The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) recognizes this annual campaign as a way to teach people about their consumer rights and to give them the tools they need to protect themselves from scams.

This week, DATCP will look at the top five consumer complaints from 2016, providing insight into the nature of the complaints and safety tips to follow throughout 2017.

Consumer Protection Week, Day One: Telemarketing

The number one consumer complaint to DATCP in 2016 was telemarketing. Telemarketing complaints spiked in 2016, up 45% from the previous year with 3,685 total complaints. While 2017 may still be young, telemarketing inquiries are already off to a busy start due to a recent rash of potential scam phone calls known as “yes” scams.

Consumers are reporting to DATCP that they have received calls out of the blue where a friendly voice asks “can you hear me?” (or a similar question). The call recipient’s first instinct could get the best of them, as their “yes” response may be recorded and used against them.

Con artists may be using these recordings of people saying “yes” to bill them for products or services they never actually agreed to.

DATCP’s Consumer Protection Hotline has heard from consumers in every corner of the state who are worried that they may have received one of these calls, and more than 75% of those who contacted DATCP have said “yes” during a suspicious call.

“We are asking potential victims to watch for suspicious charges on bills and credit card statements and to report back to us if they run into problems,” said Frank Frassetto, Division Administrator for Trade and Consumer Protection. “We are still trying to confirm how scammers may be using recorded ‘yes’ responses in these recent calls, so please share your experience with our agency through our hotline so that we can warn others.”

The best protection for consumers is to watch out for any unsolicited call that starts with a question, such as “Hi, is this ___?” or “Can you hear me?” Take a couple of seconds to decide whether to hang up or to reply with something along the lines of “Who is calling?” Remember that the caller may not necessarily open with the question, so stay on guard.

Looking back at the telemarketing complaints received in 2016, there were two major drivers in this category: “unknown” calls and imposter scams. Consumers reported thousands of phone numbers to DATCP as the supposed source of unwanted phone calls – unknown numbers were those that led nowhere when a return call was placed or that led to a nondescript message that provided no additional details about the caller. Because scammers can use technology to “spoof” their calls (make the caller ID read however they choose), it is possible that the actual call did not, in fact, originate from that line.

Imposter scams flooded phone lines across Wisconsin and the nation in 2016, with crooks seeking money or personal information from potential victims by falsely claiming to represent government agencies like the IRS or United States Treasury, credit card providers or computer tech support companies.

The best tips for consumers to avoid telemarketing rip offs are:

- Sign up for the Do Not Call registry to limit the number of unsolicited calls you receive from legitimate telemarketers. Law-abiding telemarketers will not purposely call a number on the Do Not Call registry, so if your number is on the list and you receive a sales call, it is likely not a company you would want to hire. Remember that criminals making fraudulent phone calls have no regard for any state or federal No Call laws.
- Don't trust your caller ID. Scammers can spoof this information, so never take the data on the readout as absolute if you receive a questionable call.
- Never press a button during a questionable unsolicited phone call, even if you are supposedly given an option to "be removed from the call list." Pressing a button may register your number as active in a caller's computer system, leading to additional calls.
- Never give out your personal or financial information in a phone call unless you initiated the contact. Legitimate companies don't call seeking those details.
- Don't wire money to someone you don't know. Funds sent via wire transfer or money card are practically impossible to track...when they are sent, they are as good as gone.

To learn more about telemarketing including your consumer rights, review our DATCP fact sheet: <https://datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Publications/Telemarketing976.aspx>.

If you receive questionable phone calls and are wondering about their legitimacy, contact DATCP's Consumer Protection Hotline at 1-800-422-7128 or via email: datcph hotline@wisconsin.gov.

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