

Office Supply Scams

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High-pressure sales techniques have been used to scare victims into paying large sums for unwanted products for years. In an article I published in 1989 in a discontinued publication (INTEREX, a magazine for HP3000 minicomputer users) and in a copy on my own Web site, I told the story of a classic attempted fraud using high-pressure intimidation tactics. Readers today are still at risk from such frauds, so here's a shortened version of my article with some new reference material.

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The story begins in 1985 in Montreal with an innocent-looking product- information card from a company I shall call Reckwoll Industries. The card advertised a special anti-static cleaning spray for video display terminals. My boss, the VP of operations, filled in his name and sent the card in.

Some weeks later, my boss got a phone call from Reckwoll Industries; a friendly salesman explained that he'd be most pleased to send us some samples of the spray for evaluation. My boss said that one can would be sufficient, thank you. Alas, said the salesman, they couldn't send us only one can--they'd send us a box full of 16 cans--but never fear, we could just return the unused cans with no obligation. My boss insisted that he didn't WANT 16 cans, he only wanted one--and we'd even pay for it, too. Sorry, said the salesman, can't be done; 16 or none. Grudgingly, my boss agreed to receive the box of spray cans for evaluation.

When the box of spray cans arrived, we were surprised to find that they were plain, pale blue cans with no brand name at all; they were just labeled 'CRT ANTI-STATIC SPRAY CLEANER' and had a block of text referring to US government standards. We took a sample out and tried it on a screen. It left a terrible film on the glass which was hard to clean off even with considerable polishing. We decided that we wouldn't need the rest of the cans. At that point, we realized that there were no indications on the cans or on the shipping container to indicate where to return the materials. We shrugged and put the box away.

A few days later, my boss showed me the invoice that had arrived in the mail. The 16 cans were billed at \$750--more than \$40 each. When the salesman called a few days later, he got an earful from my boss, who told him what he could do with his \$40 cans. However, the salesman suddenly turned nasty. "Pay us right now," he said, "or we'll sue you- -and I'm sure your company wouldn't appreciate that, now, would it?" Alarmed, my French-speaking boss handed the call over to me because my English was better.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I said, only it was ruder than 'sweetheart', "you don't have a purchase order. Go away."

We didn't hear from them for a week or so, but then a mysterious little box from Reckwoll addressed to my boss appeared in the mail. It was about 6 inches high and a couple of inches square; it contained a glass mug. What could this be? We put that box away with the spray cans.

A little while later, we got an extraordinary document in the mail. It came from Florida, showed a hand-drawn shield with words something like ACME COLLECTION AGENCY, and threatened us in pseudo-legal language with court action to collect the money supposedly owing to Reckwoll Industries. We ignored the threats; nothing happened. We eventually found a company contact and forced him to accept the returned boxes by sending them via bailiff.

It seems that there are lots of schemes like this around. One of my friends had the same experience with photocopier toner; someone sent him more toner than his company could use in a decade--and billed them thousands of dollars. On another occasion, someone called me and said in an officious voice, "We're just checking on your photocopier; what model is it?" I asked, "Who are you?" and got a company name I'd never heard of. "I don't have a contract with you," I said--and the person hung up without a word.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has an excellent summary of such frauds that you should distribute to all the employees in your organization who are apt to handle orders for office supplies. It's called "Avoiding Office Supply Scams" and is available as a Web page< <http://business.ftc.gov/documents/bus24-avoiding-office-supply-scams> > and as a PDF file< <http://business.ftc.gov/documents/bus24-avoiding-office-supply-scams.pdf> > for easy distribution to your colleagues.

Oh--remember the mug? The FTC document reports that some scammers send a "gift" to enable blackmail: low-status employees can be frightened into concealing their "acceptance" of the gift for fear of being accused openly of corruption.

Be warned. And have a low-pressure summer.

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