

HIGH-PRESSURE SCAM

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP

Security Leader, INFOSEC Group, AtomicTangerine, Inc.

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High-pressure sales techniques have been used to scare victims into paying large sums for unwanted products. The shady dealings discussed in this month's column are only peripherally related to computers, but perhaps they'll be both entertaining and informative.

The story begins a few years ago 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; 24 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 boss handed the call over to me.

"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 the 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.

I did a little checking out of curiosity. The city phone book listed Reckwoll--in the same building as our offices. So it was a matter of moments to go downstairs and check the businesses listed on the letter board. No Reckwoll. I asked the building managers if they knew of Reckwoll; never heard of them. Had they ever been there? Absolutely not, said the manager with an offended air; he'd been there since the beginning, and there had never been a Reckwoll Industries office in the building.

I called the number again and noticed a hubbub of phones ringing in the 'office'; on a hunch, I suddenly asked the person on the phone, "Are you an answering service?" "Yes," she answered at once, and then stuttered, "Uh, no, no we're not--well, we're not supposed to say so." And then she hung up.

By this time, the scam was clear. These crooks sent innocent victims a few cans of cheap spray cleaner, invoiced them for outrageous amounts, and threatened them with legal action to persuade a few of them to pay up. Victims might pay if they feared that they'd get more trouble from their managers for getting the company embroiled in a lawsuit than for paying out horrendous amounts for a worthless product. From the crooks' point of view, all they had to do to make money was have more money paid than what they spent

in shipping cheap spray. Our best guess was that bulk purchases of non-name foam cleaner might cost a few dollars per can. At that rate, if 5% of the people paid up, Reckwoll would make a profit.

We called the Better Business Bureau to check our interpretation and found dozens of accusations of high-pressure sales tactics in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. No doubt you'll find the same sleazy operators in your part of the world, too. Don't let them fool you: you cannot be forced to pay for materials you didn't order. In any case, the last thing these people want is a court battle. It's not worth it to them; might provide unwelcome publicity--which is what I hope this column is doing.

What was the mug for? We guess it was a ploy to provide further pressure; maybe the crooks would have said accusingly, "Well, you accepted our gift, didn't you? You want us to tell your boss about that?" and so on. We did eventually locate a human being in whose name Reckwoll Industries was registered in Montreal; we sent him the cans, but he refused them. So our company hired a bailiff and delivered the stuff outside his apartment door and gave him a notarized statement washing our corporate hands of the mess.

One final comment: 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 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.

Be warned. And have a low-pressure summer.