



Consumer Watch

A Monthly Newsletter from the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection

William M. Rubenstein, Commissioner

Dannel P. Malloy, Governor

www.ct.gov/dcp

Vol. 3, No. 4 November 2013

In This Issue

- 1 What to know about holiday shopping
- 2 Postcard scam still targeting consumers
- 2 Vacation destination scams
- 4 Campaign expenses and paid solicitors reap lion's share of 2012 charitable donations
- 4 Update on the medical marijuana program

Suggested Links

www.ct.gov/dcp

Our website offers the latest and most comprehensive information that we have on dozens of consumer-related topics!

www.smartconsumer.ct.gov

Basic information to protect yourself and avoid scams!

<https://www.elicense.ct.gov>

To verify a license, permit or registration, or to run a roster of licensees. Also, the place for online renewal!

Contact Us

www.ct.gov/dcp

dcp.communications@ct.gov

[Find us on facebook](#)



What to Know About Holiday Shopping in 2013

This year's holiday buying season is as short as it can possibly be, with the window between Black Friday and Christmas Day only 25 days. Last year was a full 32 days. Hanukkah begins this year on Nov. 28, the same day as Thanksgiving and one day before Black Friday. Various national industry groups are predicting that consumers will spend pretty much the same as last year, if not just a bit more. These two factors -- a short holiday buying season and dollar-conscious buyers -- have retailers planning to pull out all the stops to get your business.

Black Friday 2013 sales and deals are already online, and experts predict more all-weekend deals this year. Due to competition among major retailers, many retail

watchers predict that the best deals won't be on either Black Friday or Cyber Monday this year, but on Thanksgiving Day itself, as retailers vie for holiday shoppers.

DealNews.com, a website that tracks and reports on retail sale patterns, predicts that Thanksgiving Day deals will be best for smartphones (but probably not the new iPhone), phone apps and accessories, high-definition televisions, and video gaming (but not the new PS4 or Xbox One). On Black Friday, it predicts the best and greatest number of deals will be on laptops and data storage devices. Also, if Apple is going to offer an iPhone deal this season, experts are betting on Black Friday. Finally, kitchen appliances and gadgets will feature greatly that day. Cyber Monday is typically favored for deals on clothing and shoes. Experts predict that many apparel retailers will also offer their best "extra percentage off" coupons on this day as well.

Online shopping is expected to grow again, and more than 40% of consumers surveyed plan to use their smartphones to check prices or buy online while standing in line at the store.

More, page 3

From the Commissioner

As of this writing, the fall weather hasn't been too difficult on us, and that's a nice change from recent years. The holidays are once again on our doorstep, and with the irrepensible rise of mobile technology, this year there are still more opportunities for bargain hunters -- and scam artists. As you'll learn in our lead story, virus protection and secure practices can greatly reduce your risk of trouble. The promise of warmer weather may spark an urge to travel, but don't be led astray; our story on page 2 offers some good reminders. For many, year-end charitable giving is about to take center stage, and page 4 has some data that may get you to re-think where your donations will go. Applications for medical marijuana producers and dispensary facilities are due soon; we discuss that briefly on page 4. Stay tuned!



Happy Thanksgiving from all of us at DCP,

Bill Rubenstein

Fraud Doesn't Take Vacation – Postcard Scam Still Targeting Consumers

Although they have been widely publicized and criticized, and numerous state enforcement agencies are taking action against them, postcards and letters offering “travel deals” are still turning up in mailboxes, both in Connecticut and other states. (Due to the Department’s assertive stance against these tactics, postcards sent to some Connecticut residents invite them to “information sessions” across the border in Massachusetts).

Promotional postcards like the one shown here include images of planes and feature airline logos, yet most cards are from companies that have no relationship to the airlines at all.



Postcard recipients read that they’ve been selected to receive free or low-cost **air travel** and hotel lodging, and are urged to a toll-free number for more information. Actually, these offers are just gimmicks to get consumers to sign up for some form of travel club. Persons who call the number get invited to a “seminar” where attendees are subjected to hard-sell tactics for services and memberships costing thousands of dollars. The pressure to sign up or miss out is a sure signal to walk away! Travel clubs most usually have high up-front membership fees, and only deliver a limited choice of destinations or travel dates.

If you receive a similar promotional travel offer, be wary, read all the fine print, and avoid signing up for something you don’t want or can’t afford. Here are more tell-tell signs that a travel offer or prize might be a scam:

- *The prize company wants your credit card number:* If you won the trip, why do they need your credit card? They may say it’s to “verify” your identity or your prize. These are not people you know; do not give it out!
- *They cold-call, text, or email you out of the blue:* Before you do business with any company you don’t know, contact the Department of Consumer Protection here and in the company’s home state to check on complaints. You can also check with the Better Business Bureau, and finally, search online by entering the company name and the word “complaints” or “scam” and read the results.
- *They don’t give you specifics:* They promise you’ll stay at a “five-star” resort or cruise on a “luxury” ship. The more vague the promises, the less likely they will be true. Ask for specifics, and get them in writing. For example, find out the name of the cruise line and check it out. Ask for the name of the resort and verify that it is what they claim.
- *You get a robocall about it:* Robocalls from companies trying to sell you something are almost always illegal if you haven’t given the company written permission to call you. That’s true even if you haven’t signed up for the national [Do Not Call Registry](#).

If you think you may have been targeted by this travel scam, report it to the Department of Consumer Protection at dcp.frauds@ct.gov.



Vacation Destination Scams to Watch Out For

Even when you arrive at your vacation destination, be alert to these schemes, which have reportedly been on the rise.

Credit Card Confusion

While you’re drifting off to sleep after checking into your hotel room late at night the phone rings in your room. It’s the front desk asking you to verify some information. The caller apologizes for the late hour, but explains that some forms were left incomplete. She needs to confirm that the form she has is yours, and that the information is correct. She asks if the last four digits of your credit card are 5678.

You groggily reach for your wallet and pull out the card. When you tell her those are not the correct last four numbers, she sounds perplexed.

Holiday Shopping, *continued from page 1*

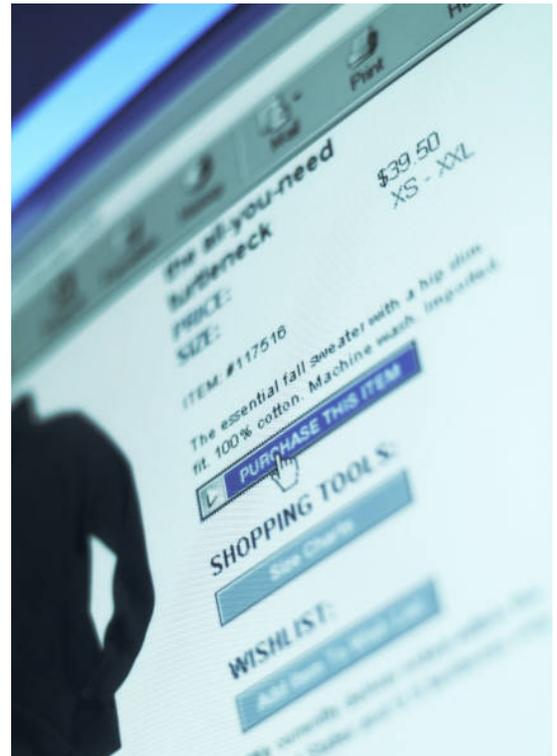
In fact, more than 25% of shoppers surveyed said they will rely more on mobile devices this year for their holiday shopping.

The convenience of online shopping is well understood, and smartphone users are taking it much further by making use of their Android and iPhone devices regularly to browse and buy. If you are one of the millions of online shoppers at home or on the phone, don't overlook the importance of protecting your identity and financial security.



- One way to avoid identity theft and fraud is to always **use familiar web sites**. On the whole, major retailer websites can be more reliable and safe than smaller, boutique sites. When possible, read reviews of the website online before you enter any personal or financial information.
- When shopping online, it's *important to make payments on a secure web site*. "SSL locked" is a critical feature. Look for a small icon of a padlock in the corner of the screen, and the URL (web address at the top of the screen should start with HTTPS, not just HTTP.
- Many sites offer PayPal or Bill Me Later, services that bill you directly and keep your information safe. Bill Me Later even offers payment options, such as not having to pay all at once, which can be handy when you're buying more expensive items. **Never make a payment to any seller directly through e-mail.**

- Legitimate sellers never need your full birth date or social security number, so don't ever share these online. If a retail site asks for this, find another seller. This one is probably a scam.
- Amazon and Target are examples of major retailers that offer store-specific apps. You may feel more secure using these, since no third party is involved; your information and transaction are kept just between you and that store.
- Use strong passwords for your online retail accounts. Write them down (without identifying what they are) and keep them tucked away in a safe place – not in your wallet or purse, which could get lost or stolen!
- **Good anti-virus and malware protection is a must. [Lookout](#) is a mobile security app for both Android or iPhone, and is available in a free, ad-supported version. A premium subscription is \$30 annually. The free version provides sufficient protection against current mobile malware threats and backs up your contacts, while the premium version adds cloud storage, a safe browser that blocks malicious links it detects, a privacy advisor for your apps, and remote lock and wipe. [Webroot SecureWeb](#) is another reputable app available free for both Android phones and iPhones ([through iTunes](#)). It offers an advanced mobile browser with URL filtering to protect your phone from malicious websites. Reviews of similar products can be found online – look for reviews by independent tech journals. If you haven't done so yet, buy yourself the gift of strong security for your home computer and mobile phone this holiday season!**



- Never buy anything or give any personal information over a public Wi-Fi network.
- Finally, as is the case in so many things, when buying online, if an offer seems too good to be true, it's probably not true.

Campaign Expenses and Paid Solicitors Reap Lion's Share of Charitable Donations in 2012

The Department of Consumer Protection's Public Charities Unit oversees charitable solicitation activities in Connecticut. For 2012, a total of 410 solicitation campaigns were completed and appropriately reported to the Department. Gross revenue collected from donors to these campaigns totaled \$198,462,186. Of this, paid solicitors and campaign expenses accounted for \$114,345,176. The charities themselves netted \$84,117,010.

Therefore, 58% of the monies donated went to paid solicitors and expenses, while only 42% went to the charities. There is no legally-mandated percentage of funds that solicitors must turn over to the charities for which they solicit money. The terms are worked out between the charity and the paid solicitor before the start of each fundraising campaign.

If you'd like more of your hard-earned dollar to benefit a cause you care about, you can find an organization that has set up better terms with its solicitors. Many charities are able to net a much higher share of their campaign contributions, and you can identify which ones they are. You can also check their performance record, so you can be assured that your contributions are well-spent.

First, go to ct.gov/dcp/verify and read how to look up a public charity in our database. Each charity's record will indicate if it is actively registered with us as the law requires. Also, if it used a paid solicitor on a recent campaign, its record will identify the solicitor and report the percentage of gross revenue guaranteed to go to the charity itself during the campaign. CharityNavigator.org should be your next stop, for a complete report on the charity's track record, including whether there have been warnings or complaints about its activities.

We hope you use this information to give wisely this year and every year!

Travel Scams, continued from page 2

She then asks if you could just read the card number to her, and you do. You're so tired you don't realize what you've done, and don't even flinch when she asks you to confirm the expiration date as well. The caller thanks you profusely, apologizes again and assures you that all the information is now straightened out. You go back to sleep, unaware that your card will be zeroed out by morning!

Never give your card number out over the phone at a hotel. Ask for the name of someone to speak to and tell the caller that you'll come down in the morning to straighten it out. Don't offer to call the desk from your room and then feel safe giving the card number. For all you know, the thief is calling from the temporarily unstaffed front desk.

Foreign Taxis – Stick with the Pros

Long lines at the taxi stand at your port of call? Watch for rogue operators who will be happy to step in and take you for a ride, so to speak. Never take a taxi ride from someone who is not in an official, metered taxi cab. Doing so risks not just your wallet -- but your safety. Scam artists posing as taxi drivers have made off with travelers' luggage, and have even brought unsuspecting tourists to deserted areas and robbed or assaulted them. At the very least, you are likely to be charged well above the fair rate.

Official taxis will have the car number and company marked on the outside, a registration and driver information card displayed on or near the dashboard, and will either display their prices or provide them when asked.

Hotel "Representatives" Offering Accommodations

Be wary of people who approach you offering hotel rooms. These scammers may wear a badge, carry a notebook or even have brochures about hotels. (It's likely, these are fakes too.) They'll offer a great rate and then offer to take you to the hotel. If you go along, you're in danger of losing your luggage, your wallet or worse.

When traveling, book your own reservations by phone or online and confirm your room rates with a credit card, preferably before leaving home. Make sure you get a confirmation number that you can show upon checking in. But if somehow you do arrive in a foreign place without a reservation, avoid these "representatives". Look for the nearest tourist information office or buy and consult a reputable travel guidebook.

Medical Marijuana Program Update

The Department issued "Requests for Applications" in September for persons and companies interested in becoming either a producer or a dispensary of medical marijuana. The due date for completed applications is November 15th.

Initially, the Department plans to award between three and five dispensary facility licenses and three producer licenses.

All licenses will be awarded on a competitive basis, based upon the RFA responses. It is anticipated that winners will be chosen and announced in early 2014. For up to date information on the program, be sure to visit:

www.ct.gov/dcp/mmp.