

PRESS RELEASE

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Something for Nothing? Think Again

"Too Good to be True" Offers Abound on Some Online Classified Websites

HARTFORD, March 21 -- Craigslist, Estia, Backpage, and other free classified websites have become popular online tools, but unfortunately, they may have also become breeding grounds for identity theft and scams, according to the Department of Consumer Protection. The agency received 142 complaints last year about "internet sales," which included complaints about classified ad transactions gone awry. One Connecticut woman recently responded to an ad on Estia.com for a free pure-bred puppy. She wired \$200 to the "seller" for shipping charges, only to be contacted again for another \$700 for a special carrier! While she didn't pursue it further, she's out \$200 for a non-existent "free" puppy.

If something seems like a scam, it probably is. If someone seems shady, they probably are. While it's important to pay attention to your "gut feelings," here are some other guidelines that anyone can employ to stay safer when shopping the online classifieds.

Create a separate email account

When responding to online classified listings, use a unique e-mail account that you set up for that purpose, one that doesn't have your full name attached to it. This can help prevent identity theft, as well as keep your other personal information safeguarded.

Avoid ALL "too good to be true" offers

Scammers use very enticing offers to get immediate attention, for example, free pure-bred pets, vintage cars sold for below value, super low-priced merchandise, job offers promising thousands of dollars per week working from home, and the like. Most of these are false ads, and will cost you dearly in return for your time and attention.

Do some "research"

If you see an online classified that appeals to you, look to see whether it has been posted for other states and cities as well. Check many ads, looking for similar or exact products, photos, and return email addresses. If the ad appears to be everywhere, it's possibly a scam, or at least very determined seller!

If the ad includes a phone number, call the number and speak with the person selling the item, ask for credentials and obtain enough information to verify that the posting is genuine.

Do an online search using some of the terms used in the classified ad; for example "craigslist free angora kitten." You may find that others before you have been scammed and have posted about it!

Protect your personal information

Don't give away any personal information on Craigslist such as credit card number, bank account, or social security number. Even when seeking employment, don't give out your social security number to any potential employer online. Save that for when you have visited the business and are sure it is legitimate. The same holds true for potential landlords or tenants.

Ask - How are you going to pay?

Avoid ANY purchase that involves wiring money. This is one scam tactic that is nearly universal. MoneyGram and Western Union type transaction are not redeemable, so use extra caution.

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A seller may try to convince you to use a supposedly secure "escrow service" to transfer and hold your money until the transaction has been completed. If the escrow service is associated with a company that you've never heard of or is based in a foreign country, don't proceed.

If you're doing the selling, avoid any transaction in which the buyer offers to send you MORE than you asked for. This is a tip-off to a fake check scam. You're asked to deposit the whole check to your account and wire back SOME of the money to the buyer. Even though it may take a few days to surface, the buyer's check will bounce and the buyer will disappear with any money that you wired. You're sure to lose money on this deal.

Don't keep your interaction secret

Always let a friend or family member know when you are communicating with people through online classifieds. Be sure that others know who you are going to meet, where you are meeting them, what you are meeting them for, and any other relevant information.

Don't go alone

When you go to meet someone that you contacted through an online ad, bring someone along with you. Although millions of exchanges take place with no issues, transactions arranged online can become cause for concern whenever they involve a stranger or new location. It's also best to meet in a public location rather than giving out your address or going to someone's private residence.

Do your part to prevent fraud

Classified sites try to discourage fraud by encouraging users to report suspicious and inappropriate postings. Use this tool to whenever you spot something questionable, to help reduce the risk for yourself and others!

While the internet has made it easier and more convenient for thieves to run their scams, it takes a willing participant for fraud to occur. You can greatly reduce your risk of fraud by steering clear of any offer that seems just too good to be true.

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