



Beware Scammers Targeting Grandparents

Double-Check Before Sending Money

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Fred held the phone close to his ear and listened carefully as the caller sobbed, “Grandpa, I need help!” Fred could barely understand the words spoken through the tears. “I . . . I . . .,” the caller went on, but the words were choked off as he took a breath.

“Who is this? Johnny? Is that you?” Fred’s only grandson, Johnny, lived nearby, with his parents, in Santa Barbara, California.



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The voice on the phone replied “Yes, grandpa, it’s Johnny. I did something stupid. Please don’t tell my folks, they’d kill me!”

“Ok, slow down, slow down, tell me what happened.” And with those words, Fred was hooked.

Fred is in his early seventies, married, with two sons. His older son, Michael, has two children, a boy and a girl, both teenagers. Michael’s son is named John. They’ve called him ‘Johnny,’ since the day he was born.

Johnny went on to explain, through the tears, that he had been instructed by his parents not to go out with his friends in Las Vegas where he was visiting. Instead of listening, he had gone out with a group of teenagers, one of them had been drinking and driving, they’d been in an accident, and now Johnny was in jail, needing cash for bail.

All Fred needed to do was send money via Western Union to pay the bail and get him out. Three thousand dollars would cover it.

Fred faced a dilemma. Call the parents? Or not? While many would automatically involve the parents, that isn't true of all grandparents. Some would choose to help their grandchildren get out of this jam. Under stress, we all do unexpected things.

Johnny pushed hard for Fred to send money as soon as possible so that he could get out. But Fred wasn't quite sure he shouldn't get his son Michael involved. Fred felt he should talk to Michael first.

He told Johnny he would call him back, but of course Johnny didn't have a phone number to give, so Johnny said he would call back in 10 minutes, and that he had to go because some thug in the jail wanted to use the phone and was threatening him. Then Johnny hung up. Fred didn't even get to ask where to find Johnny if he needed him.

By now Fred was panicking, so he called his son.

"Michael, how is your day going?" Fred aimed to direct the conversation around to Johnny, see what he could learn. And he wanted to know as quickly as possible. Michael told his Dad that he was enjoying a glorious sunny day packed with fun activities with his family.

"And what is Johnny up to today?" Fred asked. "Johnny? Oh, he's outside loading the bicycles on the back of the truck." Michael said breezily. But how could that be? Fred had just heard from Johnny himself in Las Vegas.

Fred tried to sound nonchalant as he asked, "Really, I thought he was out of town?"

"What? Johnny? No, I just sent him out to get the gear ready five minutes ago."

It took Fred a few seconds to process this. How could Johnny be at home in Santa Barbara, when he had just received the phone call from Las Vegas? Then the truth hit him forcefully, and Fred got angry. Angry with the scammer, and angry with himself for buying into the story he had been told. Fred certainly hadn't been expecting to be the prey in a con game.

Would Johnny call back? Sure enough, within just a few minutes of Fred hanging up with his son Michael, the phone rang. "Johnny" was calling back as promised. This time, Fred was determined to give him a piece of his mind, but Johnny hung up the instant he heard the tone in Fred's voice.

Many of my clients have been approached over the years with this particular scam. A con artist can sit down with a phone book and dial numbers all day long, telling the same story over and over, collecting an untold amount of cash. How many dozens of innocent people can a thief call in the course of a day? And how many need to fall for the scam for the thief to collect thousands of dollars in a day? It's shocking how much money a con artist can make tax free, sitting in the comfort of his own living room, talking on the phone.

In Fred's case, the caller asked for \$3,000. Transferred electronically. Untraceable. Disappearing into thin air.

Have you been scammed?

There are innumerable cons out there, and new ones are concocted every day. Unsolicited phone calls, strangers at the door, that nice person you met at the grocery store—the old saying, "You can't be too careful" has never been truer.

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