

Regional Column

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Don't let gift cards become a scammer's payday

Most of us have picked up a gift card at some point. They're a quick and easy way to celebrate a birthday, say thank you, or mark a special occasion. Unfortunately, scammers are increasingly using gift cards to steal money, and older Western Australians are among those being hit the hardest.

One of the biggest concerns is romance scams. These fraudsters can spend weeks or even months building trust and developing what feels like a genuine relationship before asking victims for financial help.

Others take a different approach, pretending to be from a government agency, a business or even a CEO or manager from your workplace. They might claim gift cards are needed to pay bills, fees, taxes or some other urgent expense. Investment scammers have also been known to use the same tactic.

One woman lost more than \$17,000 a few weeks after starting a new job. Believing she was following instructions from her company's CEO, she purchased Apple and Microsoft gift cards over three days before becoming suspicious and discovering the emails were fake.

Cases like this show how scammers use publicly available information and professional networking sites to impersonate CEOs and senior executives. They often target employees and create a sense of urgency to pressure them into buying gift cards.

Another woman lost \$77,000 after sending gift cards to someone posing as her overseas love-interest. Despite being warned by store staff, she continued sending the gift cards because she thought she could trust the person who had requested them. A man in his late 70s' lost around \$50,000 in a similar scam.

Consumer Protection has been working with major retailers for many years to help prevent these scams. Stores have been encouraged to display warning signs and train staff to be aware and speak with customers who are buying large numbers of gift cards.

However, scammers continue to adapt. Some now coach victims on what to tell staff if they are questioned. Victims may be instructed to say the cards are for a family member, a birthday or another special occasion. They are also sometimes told to visit several different stores to avoid raising suspicion.

Once victims' hand over the gift card serial numbers, scammers quickly sell or use the cards, leaving victims with little chance of recovering their money.

Don't assume a person you are dealing with on the phone or online is who they say they are. Many of these criminals operate from overseas and are highly skilled at what they do. They can even make calls appear as though they're coming from an Australian phone number.

It's important to know that no legitimate employer, business or government agency will ask for payments using gift cards. Treat any unexpected request for gift cards, whether it comes from a supposed boss, family member or online partner, with caution until it can be verified in person.

If you work in retail and someone tries to buy an unusual amount of gift cards, talk to your manager or ask the customer to talk to Consumer Protection.

You can report scams and scam attempts to WA ScamNet via the website (scamnet.wa.gov.au) or call 1300 30 40 54 or email consumer@lgirs.wa.gov.au