

CONSUMER ADVISORY

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By Attorney General Tom Miller

First You Win, Then You Lose

Prize, sweepstakes and international lottery scams

This must be your lucky day! Even though you didn't enter any drawing, you've been notified that you won something big—perhaps cash or a prize. All you have to do is pay some sort of processing or handling fee, advance taxes or entry fee, and it's all yours.

It'll be your *unlucky* day if you send any money. If someone asks you to pay in advance, wire money after receiving a "winnings" check, disclose account information, or buy something to better your chances of winning, it's a scam.

Don't Pay to Collect Prize

Legitimate sweepstakes and contests don't cost money to enter, and don't seek advance payment from winners to collect winnings. If you receive a check and someone asks you to send money through a wire transfer service, it is likely an international scam. The check may appear legitimate—even to a financial institution—but will eventually bounce. If you wired money to someone while waiting for the check to clear, which could take weeks, you're responsible for the money you wired. And as soon as someone picks up the wired funds, the money is gone.

Purchases Don't Push the Odds of Winning

It's illegal to specify or even suggest that a purchase will increase your odds of winning something. Those who conduct or market a sweepstakes contest must disclose that entering is free, no purchase is necessary, and must disclose the odds of winning a prize. Further, they must indicate the nature and value of the prize. The sweepstakes disclosure should also include information about the start and end dates of the contest, and how contestants can enter. Be sure to look for this information in writing.

International Lottery Scams

International lottery scams appear through email, direct mail and phone calls. The interstate or international sale of lottery tickets by mail or by telephone violates state and federal laws. There is no guarantee that a foreign lottery solicitor is actually entering lotteries on your behalf—these are often straight scams to take your money. It's possible that solicitors who ask you to pay through bank account or credit numbers will steal funds or make unauthorized charges from your account.

Protect Personal Information

If someone asks for personal information such as a driver's license or Social Security number for "tax purposes," don't provide it, as you will pay taxes directly to the government or the sweepstakes company will withhold the appropriate taxes on winnings. Most companies will seek nothing more than basic information such as your name, address and telephone number. And no legitimate company will ask you for bank account or credit card numbers.

Do Research

Use a familiar Internet search engine to research a company that claims you won something. In addition to entering the company name into a search engine, add the word "scam" or "complaint" to see what comes up. If you're not comfortable doing the research, ask someone you trust to help you.