

BBB’s 12 Scams of the Holidays

Better Business Bureau

When shopping or donating this holiday season, watch out for schemes trying to swipe your cash or steal your personal information.

You can avoid most of the scams on this list by taking a few simple precautions. Always exercise caution with social media ads promoting discounted items, holiday events, job opportunities, and donation requests, as well as direct messages from strangers. If you are asked to make a payment or donation by wire transfer, through a third party, or by prepaid debit or gift card, treat it as a red flag.

Be mindful of these scams that could cut into your holiday cheer

1. **Misleading social media ads -** As you scroll through your social media feed, you often see products advertised. Always research before you buy. BBB Scam Tracker receives daily reports of people paying for items that they never receive, getting charged monthly for a free trial they never signed up for, or receiving an item that is counterfeit or much different from the one advertised.

2. **Social media gift exchanges -** Each holiday season this scheme pops back up. The older version was called "Secret Sister." Newer versions of this scam revolve around exchanging bottles of wine or bourbon; another suggests purchasing $10 gifts online. Another twist asks you to submit your email to a list where participants get to pick a name and send money to strangers to "pay it forward." There is even a twist about "Secret Santa Dog" where you buy a $10 gift for your "secret dog." In all these versions, participants unwittingly share their personal information, along with that of their family members and friends, and are further tricked into buying and shipping gifts or money to unknown individuals. It's also an illegal pyramid scheme.

3. **Holiday apps -** Apple's App Store and Google Play list dozens of holiday-themed apps where children can video chat live with Santa, light the menorah, watch Santa feed live reindeer, track his sleigh on Christmas Eve, or relay their holiday wish lists. Review privacy policies to see what information will be collected. Be wary of free apps, as they can sometimes contain more advertising than apps that require a nominal fee.

4. **Fake toll collection texts -** If you’re planning to drive a long distance to visit family or take a vacation this holiday season, watch out for fake road toll collection texts, which have been on the rise this year. In this con, scammers impersonate a state road tollway collection service and text you saying you owe a road toll fee and provide a link to click to make your payment. If you receive a text, don’t click the link. Instead, if you think you may owe road tolls, verify your outstanding balance with the legitimate agency.

5. **Free gift cards -** Nothing brings good cheer like the word "FREE." Scammers have been known to take advantage of this weakness by sending bulk phishing emails requesting personal information to receive free gift cards. In some of these emails, scammers impersonate legitimate companies and promise gift cards to reward their loyal customers. They may also use pop-up ads or send text messages with links saying you were randomly selected as the winner of a prize.

6. **Temporary holiday jobs -** If you're looking for seasonal work this holiday season, keep an eye out for opportunities that seem too good to be true. Retailers typically hire seasonal workers to help meet the demands of holiday shoppers. Shippers and delivery services are top holiday employers because of the increase in online orders that need to be delivered before Christmas. Job seekers need to be wary of employment scams aimed at stealing money and personal information from job applicants.

7. **Impostor scams -** Impostor scams can take many forms, especially during the holiday season when you may be purchasing and returning gifts. When shopping online, be on the lookout for fake, look-alike websites created by scammers to trick people into downloading malware, making dead-end purchases, and sharing private information. If you're reaching out to a business on social media for customer support, watch out for fake social media accounts pretending to be a customer service representative for a business. When in doubt, go to the business's website and find their official social media handles, or use the information on the site to reach out.

8. **Fake charities -** The last few weeks of the year are a busy time for charitable donations. Donors are advised to look out for fraudulent charities and scammers pretending to be individuals in need. Avoid impromptu donation decisions to unfamiliar organizations. Responsible organizations will welcome a gift tomorrow as much as they do today.

9. **Fake shipping notifications -** More consumers making online purchases during the holidays leads to an increase in the number of notifications about shipping details from retailers and carriers. Scammers use this surge to send phishing emails and texts about package deliveries with links enclosed that may allow unwanted access to your private information or download malware onto your device. They may also try to trick people into paying new shipping fees. Never click a link in a text or email that you're not expecting. If you want to track a package, find the original email or text confirmation you received directly from the store and use that link.

10. **Advent calendars -** Each year, there are more and more advent calendars being sold, and many are in hot demand. In past years, BBB received reports to Scam Tracker about advent calendar ads on social media not delivering as promised. Some were not received, and others received inferior products or incomplete orders.

11. **Holiday wishlist items -** Low-priced luxury goods, jewelry, designer clothing, and electronics are almost always cheap counterfeits and knockoffs. The same applies to popular toys. Be very cautious when considering purchasing popular toys from resellers on Facebook Marketplace and other platforms.

12. **Puppy scams -** Many families may be considering adding a furry friend to their household this year. However, be on the lookout for scams. Many would-be pet owners turn to the internet to find their future cat or dog, but experts say a shocking 80% of sponsored pet advertisements may be fake. Be sure to see the pet in person before making a purchase.