

ROBO-CALLER FINED \$120 MILLION

I received an angry-sounding voice mail on my cellphone yesterday from a man, who demanded to know why I called him. Well, I didn't call him, but I suspect someone did, disguising their own call using my number. His phone number and my own looked very similar, differing only in the last two digits. This practice comes with a name, "neighbor spoofing". It seems like pretty much all the crooked telemarketers use it now. They operate on the theory you much more likely to answer a call from a number in your own locality, than a number from an area code three time zones away. Telemarketers know they can't make their pitch to you unless you answer the phone first.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency charged with regulating telephone service, reported complaints of neighbor-spoofing more than doubled in the first four months of 2018. So I was happy to read last week, the FCC fined a telemarketer, Adrian Abramovich, \$120 million for "malicious spoofing". The FCC investigation revealed Abramovich controlled telemarketing companies who placed 96 million robo-calls using neighbor-spoofed phone numbers. Anyone who answered those calls heard messages which sounded like they came from Trip Advisor, Hilton, Marriott, or Expedia, and encouraged the listener to "press 1" to hear about vacation deals. And if you did opt to press 1, you transferred to an overseas call center with live operators who sold vacation packages, frequently involving timeshares – but the offers had nothing to do with Trip Advisor, Expedia, Hilton, or Marriott.

The FCC first fined Abramovich in 2017, but he appealed the fine. He acknowledged responsibility for making the calls, but claimed they caused no harm. He lost the appeal. I considered it telling Mr. Abramovich sold timeshares, an industry which deserves a lot of skepticism anyway. In fact, on May 22, 2018, the Federal Trade Commission announced it banned a Florida company, Pro Timeshare Resales, from further business in the industry, and seized \$3 million from them. This company solicited mainly senior citizens to market their timeshares, charging \$2500 up front, and then doing nothing.

Until a technological solution to neighbor-spoofing or just plain spoofing comes along, we all need to use caution in answering calls from parties we don't know. My own practice is to screen calls by never answering the phone unless I recognize the number from my contacts. My operating theory is, if any call I don't answer is important, the caller will leave me a voice mail. So far, this works for me.

CLEAR WARNING COMES ALONG WITH PHONE CALL

Ed Goddard of Clinton related how he received a call which left little doubt as to whether it was a scam. Ed's Caller ID showed an incoming call, displaying the incoming number and the label, "illegal scam". The caller claimed to work for Microsoft, and warned Ed, Microsoft detected hackers trying to take over his computer. Ed wasn't going to fall for

this anyway, but the tip-off on his Caller ID firmed up his assessment of the call. We're not sure how the Caller ID came up with this label. Ed's phone service provider is Century Link, and I speculate their screening detected the call as coming from a number with previous complaints linked to it.

CABLE TV TELEMARKETER PROMISED NO OUTAGES

We receive a fair number of complaints on deceptive or outright phony cable TV sales pitches. Often these involve a door to door salesman offering big discounts to customers who agreed to switch providers, say from Mediacom to Direct TV. I'd be very reluctant to believe a door to door salesman pitching this switch.

But here's a new wrinkle on this cable TV theme. Lois Jellings of Clinton tells of a recent call she received. The caller claimed he worked for DISH, and offered an upgrade which guaranteed an end to DISH outages caused by heavy rain, snow, or storms. Lois was interested, because she did experience interruptions in her service during storms. She agreed to pay \$160, wrote a check, and mailed it to a Brooklyn, New York post office box, as the caller directed.

The next morning, Lois awoke to thunderstorm and no DISH service. That led Lois to realize she was scammed. She called DISH, who confirmed the man selling this "upgrade" did so without DISH authorization. Lois successfully placed a stop on the check, so did not lose any money. Lois warns readers to be wary of any telemarketer claiming to work for a cable company.

CONTACT SENIORS VS. CRIME

Let me know about scams, fraud, or other crookedness you run across. Most of what I learn, I learn from you. Contact me at Seniors vs. Crime, Clinton County Sheriff's Office, 563-242-9211 extension 4433, or email me at randymeier@gapa911.us.

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