

“Where’s My Million Dollars?” America’s “Prize Promotion” Scams

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When I entered my friend Jason’s house he was shouting into his telephone, “Where’s my million dollars?” There was a pause, after which Jason insisted, “I want you to pay me the million dollars you promised me!” His face was red and he was angry.

To my shock, my senior friend, a former U.S. military intelligence officer, had been paying tens of thousands of dollars in “processing fees” to con artists that initially contacted him by mail with the “good news” of his fantastic winnings. After he mailed them checks for a few dollars, they contacted him by phone and told him to wire hundreds, then thousands, of dollars, to win his big prize, which he did. But the prize money never came. Now Jason is out tens of thousands of dollars, money he intended to leave to his children.

The Federal Trade Commission gets more than 10,000 consumer complaints annually about prize promotions. “Most of those consumers received letters or phone calls that suggested they were major prize winners, but later discovered they had to make purchases or pay hefty fees to claim them,” consumer reporter Asa Aarons wrote in the New York Daily News.

The U.S. Post Office warns that unscrupulous high pressure sales people “armed with sophisticated selling techniques designed to get you to send them money” are operating out of “boiler rooms,” and are out to defraud consumers.

In Jackson, Miss., Guy Robinson, supervisor of the U.S. Postal Inspection Services, told The Clarion-Ledger of a Canadian-based scam that sent lottery numbers through the mail to senior citizens in exchange for money.

“In a few weeks, someone notifies the person by phone and tells them that they have won millions of dollars in this lottery club and all they have to do is pay this specific amount to cover taxes and other expenses,” Robinson said. “They send their money in and receive nothing in return. This is a scam, and it’s illegal.”

After contacting Jason’s (not his real name) son to alert him to his father’s plight, I began going through the scores of letters Jason received weekly. According to postal authorities, there is a veritable blizzard of such letters in the mail targeting the elderly. To my knowledge, none of the following named outfits are involved in the Jason swindle. Their pitches, though, typify the prize come-ons being commonly employed.

One letter titled “Distribution Form 0110” came from Sterling, Gray & Associates, of P.O. 379047, Las Vegas, 89137. It began “Congratulations” and continued, “you were confirmed by a data audit for receipt of a check issued in your name.” This letter, from “Payments

Officer” Marc Adams, informed Jason of a “Maximum Award Opportunity” of \$798,497.18 and, oh, yes, requested an “assessment & processing fee” of \$19.50. The fine print below, however, indicated Jason’s payoff might be as little as 97 cents.

Another letter from the same outfit advised, “we have the pleasure of announcing to you that there is a check for cash just waiting to be sent directly to you. We are so thrilled for you...” This was signed by Michael Maldar of the “Cash Claim Department” and wanted another \$23.99 processing fee.

Not far from Sterling, Gray & Associates is “Chase M. Enterprises,” located at 10120 W. Flamingo Rd., #4, Las Vegas, NV 89147, which is not claiming to hand out \$798,000 but merely \$789,000. It wants \$23.47 returned in its pink envelope to the “Office of the Prize Director.” Their letter says if Jason doesn’t respond “within the allotted time frame” he will lose out. The fine print says Jason’s check might be for just 92 cents. This solicitation sounds very much like the Sterling, Gray, etc., request.

And what do you know, operating out of the very same suite and street address as Sterling, Gray, etc., is Kemper & Covington, which sent Jason an “Authorized Check Transfer Form” to release information details about \$997,997.97. It also said if he pays them \$19.79 he can claim his “guaranteed check” but does not state how much it is for. One certainly gets the impression that Suite #4 is a very crowded office.

Aggregate Merchants(AM) of 9030 W. Sahara Ave., #131, Las Vegas, NV 89117, wanted Jason to send his check for \$19.98 to them in their return envelope marked “Claim Document” with the words “Issue Check on Receipt.” Their letter said cash to be released is \$9,950. In another letter, AM’s Harold Jamesin sent Jason what appears to be a facsimile check for \$458,389 which he was requested to sign. It is stamped “Confirmed Winner Claim.” Of course, it only resembles a check. Oh, yes, and to send \$27.67. And so it goes:

Patrick McSorley of Premiere International, P.O. 95798, Las Vegas, NV, 89193, wants \$24 in return for receiving “full registry papers” to allow Jason to enjoy “unimpeded” entry into sweepstakes in the amount of \$1,150,000.

U.S. Sweepstakes Claims Compliance, of 8414 W. Farm Rd., Suite 180, Las Vegas, NV, 89131, sent Jason a letter with \$875,699 printed at the top and requesting a transfer fee of \$23.33.

AEDR Award Entry Directives Report, of 245 Eighth Ave., N.Y., 10011, notified Jason “of your eligibility for Entry to win the \$2 (Two) Million Dollars in available Guaranteed Cash and Award Prizes.” According to AEDR’s Robert Steadman, all Jason had to do was send in \$20 to receive the package that will tell him all about it.

Seniors, whose judgment may be clouded by medication or medical problems, should be wary of offers that sound too good to be true because they usually are.

Other red flags, according to the U.S. Postal Service, are when the sales person says:

You must decide immediately or the offer will expire.

You are just one of a few people eligible for the offer.

You must give a credit card number for “verification”.

You have won a prize but you must pay something before you receive it.

You must send money before you get any details of the deal in writing.

You are asked to trust the telemarketer.

Jason borrowed on his credit cards to raise the money he sent to those that swindled him. It will take him years to pay off his debt.

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