



Public Service Announcement

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



January 20, 2010

MYSTERY/SECRET SHOPPER SCHEMES

The IC3 has been alerted to an increase in employment schemes pertaining to mystery/secret shopper positions. Many retail and service corporations hire evaluators to perform secret or random checks on themselves or their competitors, and fraudsters are capitalizing on this employment opportunity.

Victims have reported to the IC3 they were contacted via e-mail and U.S. mail to apply to be a mystery shopper. Applicants are asked to send a resume and are purportedly subject to an extensive background check before being accepted as a mystery shopper. The employees are sent a check with instructions to shop at a specified retailer for a specific length of time and spend a specific amount on merchandise from the store. The employees receive instructions to take note of the store's environment, color, payment procedures, gift items, and shopping/carrier bags and report back to the employer. The second evaluation is the ease and accuracy of wiring money from the retail location. The money to be wired is also included in the check sent to the employee. The remaining balance is the employee's payment for the completion of the assignment. After merchandise is purchased and money is wired, the employees are advised by the bank the check cashed was counterfeit, and they are responsible for the money lost in addition to bank fees incurred.

In other versions of the scheme, applicants are requested to provide bank account information to have money directly deposited into their accounts. The fraudster then has acquired access to these victims' accounts and can withdraw money, which makes the applicant a victim of identity theft.

Tips

Here are some tips you can use to avoid becoming a victim of employment schemes associated with mystery/secret shopping:

- Do not respond to unsolicited (spam) e-mail.
- Do not click on links contained within an unsolicited e-mail.
- Be cautious of e-mail claiming to contain pictures in attached files, as the files may contain viruses. Only open attachments from known senders. Virus scan all attachments, if possible.
- Avoid filling out forms contained in e-mail messages that ask for personal information.
- Always compare the link in the e-mail to the link you are actually directed to and determine if they match and will lead you to a legitimate site.
- There are legitimate mystery/secret shopper programs available. Research the legitimacy on companies hiring mystery shoppers. Legitimate companies will not charge an application fee and will accept applications on-line.
- No legitimate mystery/secret shopper program will send payment in advance and ask the employee to send a portion of it back.

Individuals who believe they have information pertaining to mystery/secret shopper schemes are encouraged to file a complaint at www.IC3.gov.