

Beware of the '419' scammers who want to give you millions

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BY [Ed Duggan](#)

Local businesses are having run-ins with e-mailed Nigerian 419 advance fee scams, according to the [U.S. Secret Service](#).

Secret Service agent William Lowe, assistant to the special agent in charge at the Miami field office and supervisor of the local Organized Fraud Task Force, said U.S. businesses and individuals are ripped off by the scammers to the tune of \$500 million to \$1 billion a year.

But the number is just a "guesstimate" because many people conned out of their savings are too ashamed to admit they were taken in and many never report their losses, he said.

The scams got the "419" moniker from the former 419 section of the Nigerian Criminal Code, but they actually owe their origin to the Spanish Prisoner scam that was active in the 1920s. In



Bob and Jane Bloom of Ink & Toner USA received altered Wal-Mart money orders as part of a scam.

Photo: Mark Freerks

that scam, European con artists would call people in the United States, saying the son of a prominent family was imprisoned and that they would pay handsomely for help with his release. Of course, there was no son, no prisoner and no wealthy family to pay millions - just a con artist needing fees, bribes and expenses to execute the con.

There are currently several e-mail variations of the 419 scam. They range from employment and contract overbilling scams to phony inheritances, fake lottery winnings and purchase overpayments.

The classic scam appears in an e-mail, saying Nigerian contracts have been overbilled by millions of dollars and the windfall is waiting for you at a bank - but you need an insider's help to claim it. The scammer frequently represents himself as a Nigerian bank or government employee who can approve the deal.

One Web site that exposes and fights the scams estimates that the hundreds of thousands of 419ers comprise the third- to fifth-largest industry in Nigeria.

Bob and Jane Bloom, owners of [Ink & Toner USA](#) in West Palm Beach, had a run in with some 419ers.

"We do not take any foreign orders, but we received a couple of large orders inside the U.S. for ink cartridges and other merchandise," Bob Bloom said. "Unlike most customers, they wanted only new merchandise, not the more economical refilled cartridges."

There were other red flags:

- Everything was done via e-mail.
- The buyer was in Maryland. Why buy from a dealer in Florida?
- The grammar and spelling in the e-mails was poor.
- The first-time buyer was paying with a \$55,000 cashier's check.

"We strongly suspected from the first that it was a scam, but wanted to see just how far it would go," Jane Bloom said.

They received the check and contacted the bank, which verified it was a forgery.

Another 419er sent the Blooms 10 Wal-Mart money orders for \$950 each over the Florida Relay, a service for the deaf. When presented at a Wal-Mart store for verification, they turned out to be real Wal-Mart money orders but each was originally bought for less than \$5 and had been chemically washed and altered to reflect the higher numbers.

The Blooms, who never lost a penny to the scammers, use their experiences to teach other Ink & Toner USA owners.

The Secret Service recently broke up a Miami operation that used the same ordering technique with phony checks.

A 22-year-old woman from Trinidad & Tobago answered an employment ad - she thought she was working in Miami for a diamond dealer in Switzerland - and was sent packages of cashier's checks and money orders, which she sent to various businesses as payment for goods ordered by others. She kept a small percentage of everything that came to her via Western Union and forwarded the rest to her "employer."

"We intercepted two packages sent to her, each of which had about \$500,000 in counterfeit checks and money orders," the Secret Service's Lowe said.

The next week, two more packages with about the same amounts arrived and were intercepted in Miami.

The 22-year-old was astonished that she was part of a scam and broke down crying, saying that she had become romantically involved with her "diamond dealer" employer. She was considered a victim and was not charged with a crime.

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