

Beware too-good-to-be-true deals of 'phoner toner pirates'

"They're hitting everyone right now--no one is safe," said Brian McKay, staff attorney for the Business Technology Association.

Light bulbs used to be the big office-supply scam items, but now toner is what con artists are using to bilk businesses out of millions of dollars. These "phoner toner pirates," as they're called in the industry, are hitting major corporations, small businesses, government agencies, churches, universities, physicians' offices--any business that uses a copier.

The most common scenario is when a person calls a business to determine what type of copier it uses. Scammers prey on new employees, volunteers or anyone likely to give out the information. They're looking for the "weak link," said Phil Tiberio of Eastern Office Supply in Schenectady. The caller is usually very friendly. He might state that he doesn't want to sell you anything; he is just taking a survey. It seems like harmless information to give out to a stranger on the phone--which is why hundreds of people fall into this trap.

Once the fraudulent telemarketer has the information about the copier, he waits a few days or a week and calls back. This time, he might represent himself as the copier service dealer, armed with specific information on the company's copier. In the case of some of Tiberio's customers, phoner toner pirates called up representing themselves as the warehouse for Eastern Office Supply. They said they were having a closeout sale on toner and that they could offer the company a great deal. The callers are smooth and convincing. When Tiberio's customers called him up asking about these phone calls, he put together a handout to alert them to fraudulent telemarketing practices.

The phoner toner pirates will ship the company second-grade toner, with only a couple of cartridges per case, instead of the normal number that a customer expects in a case. And the price is sky-high, as much as \$400, giving the scammer a 600 to 700 percent profit. The scammers count on these invoices slipping through the cracks in the accounting department and being paid. "They're just hoping that it does go through the system, which it just flies under the radar," Tiberio said.

The type of toner a copier uses varies depending on the number of copies per minute it produces, so it is important to use the right toner.

"If you put the wrong toner in the copier, it can really have negative effects on the reliability, durability and life of the copier," said Tim Seeley of Seeley Office Systems in Glens Falls.

Attorney McKay notes that if a business uses toner from a phoner toner pirate and it damages the copier, the service contract with the copier service company could be voided.

To guard against this, many copier service companies are including toner in the maintenance agreement. Seeley emphasized that there are companies that provide legitimate products, but that it can be difficult for businesses to distinguish them from fraudulent companies.

Phoner toner pirates disguise themselves well. They use post office boxes and do not give out their phone numbers. The label on their packages is from the toner company, and a shipping company ships out the boxes with that label, unaware of the scam. "It's literally like getting a package from a ghost," McKay said.

There are ways to guard against these scams. Employee education is important. Employees and volunteers should not give information about a company's equipment to anyone over the phone. If a salesman wants to do business with your company, tell him to develop a relationship in person.

David Lurie, sales director for Mohawk Office Products Inc. in Schenectady, suggests that businesses buy supplies locally and develop a relationship with their suppliers. Businesses should know the physical location of their suppliers and know that they will be there to provide service when needed.

Lurie said a quick way to tell if the person on the other end of the phone is trying to scam you is to say the call is being traced, which will make a con artist hang up promptly or say, "I'll take inventory and I'll call you back." Fraudulent telemarketers will not give out their phone numbers.

Telemarketers are required to abide by the Federal Trade Commission's Telemarketing Sales Rule. Familiarize your employees with this rule (www.ftc.gov) so they know how to spot a scam.

If you receive a call from a fraudulent telemarketer, report it. **The Business Technology Association** (www.bta.org) and the FTC are working to put a halt to the phoner toner pirates and other office-supply scams.

THANKS FOR BEING AWARE! REMEMBER IF YOU KNOW YOUR SUPPLIER YOU KNOW WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO! ALSO EDUCATE YOUR EMPLOYEES ABOUT GIVING INFO OUT!