

PHONY YELLOW PAGES BILLINGS

When we think "Yellow Pages," we think of our local telephone directory and the yellow pages full of businesses indexed by the goods or services they provide. But that familiarity with the Yellow Pages is giving scam artists a chance to steal your business's money for nothing. Watch out for Yellow Page solicitations cloaked as invoices.

There are several companies that send statements for yellow page advertisements that look like legitimate bills or invoices. Words like "renewal notice" or "amount due" appear on the notices, and these phony bills may be for several hundred dollars. The return address often includes a suite number to give the impression that the firm has a permanent address. But if you look at the so-called invoice carefully, it usually does not indicate a phone number to reach the company.

The bogus invoices look real. Most display the widely known "let your fingers do the walking" logo. They also may contain warnings that you will be left out of the directory if you do not pay immediately.

Businesses that pay the bills think they are paying for ads in the local telephone directory. Instead, the solicitations are for independent, regional yellow page directories, which are not connected to the major telephone companies. In addition, the directories often are placed in limited locations, such as hotels, service stations, and a few libraries, and do not reach the general public at large.

Read yellow pages bills and solicitations carefully. Most solicitations give no clue as to how many directories will be published, when they will be completed, or where they will be distributed. Many of the phony bills are also carefully devised to stay within the limits of the law by including a statement such as, "This is not a bill and you are under no obligation to pay the amount stated."

These phony yellow pages billings are targeted at businesses such as florists, attorneys, optometrists, and other businesses regularly advertising in the Yellow Pages, but any business is susceptible to this scam.

Phony billing scams are quite prevalent as scam artists try to take advantage of the tremendous volume of paperwork some businesses process. Be sure to read your mail carefully. Don't confuse fake billings with statements for regular yellow page listings. When in doubt, contact the company that carries your regular yellow pages listing. Verify that the renewal invoices have been mailed and clarify procedures for payment.

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division or the U.S. Postal Inspector, toll-free at 1-877-876-2455 or www.postalinspectors.uspis.gov.