

# FTC Business Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

## When Yellow Pages Invoices Are Bogus

That mail invoice bearing the familiar “walking fingers” logo and the name “Yellow Pages” could be a camouflaged invitation to lose money.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Yellow Pages Integrated Media Association (Yellow Pages I.M.A.) caution businesses that unscrupulous promoters are soliciting advertising for online, “bogus” or nonexistent business directories. Although these directories appear to be legitimate Yellow Pages publications, they are not distributed to the public, posted on the web, or promoted as promised. As a result, the directories — if they exist at all — offer no benefits to businesses that pay to advertise in them.

The solicitation to buy directory ad space or membership may look like an invoice and bear the “walking fingers” logo and the Yellow Pages name. Neither the name nor the logo is protected by federal copyright or trademark registration. That’s how fraudulent promoters are able to lead businesses to believe they are affiliated with local telephone directories distributed in a particular area.

The U.S. Postal Service requires solicitations that look like invoices, bills or account statements to carry the following notice: **THIS IS NOT A BILL. THIS IS A SOLICITATION. YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO PAY THE AMOUNT STATED ABOVE UNLESS YOU ACCEPT THIS OFFER.**

Of course, not all solicitations you receive in the mail look like bills, invoices or account statements. Your business may receive a check that looks like a refund or rebate check. Read the front and back carefully. By cashing the check, you may be agreeing to be billed monthly for something you don’t want or need, such as Internet access or membership in a Web directory. And more and more, bogus Yellow Pages invoices are being designed to look exactly like the monthly telephone service bill on which you normally receive your Yellow Pages charge. Be skeptical when you receive offers from strangers, and scrutinize any solicitation attempting to collect on advertising services outside the scope of what you’re used to. Some solicitations could violate the law if they misrepresent information.

Before you buy directory advertising space or membership through a mail solicitation or pay an “invoice,” take the following steps:

- Check out the company and its publication. Call your local Yellow Pages publisher to see if it is affiliated with the soliciting company.
- Ask for a copy of a previous directory edition.
- Ask for the online directory’s Web address and call advertisers in the directory to ask if their listing has been a good buy. If your business is listed in the Yellow Pages of a legitimate publisher, you likely will be listed in their online directory at no charge.

- Ask the publisher for written information about where the directory is distributed, how it is distributed (does every local telephone customer receive it?), how often it is published, and distribution or circulation figures.
- Check with your local and state consumer protection agencies to determine if any complaints have been filed about the publisher. This isn't a guarantee, but it is a prudent step.

If you think you've been scammed by a promoter pitching bogus Yellow Pages or business directories and memberships, contact your local Postmaster or Postal Inspector. Their numbers are available in the blue pages of your telephone directory. Or, write: Chief Postal Inspector, United States Postal Service, Washington, D.C. 20260-2100. You also can call the Mail Fraud Complaint Center at 1-800-372-8347. You can reach them online at [www.usps.com/postalinspectors](http://www.usps.com/postalinspectors).

In addition, you may direct questions about Yellow Pages publishers to: Yellow Pages Integrated Media Association, Two Connell Drive, First Floor, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey 07922, or go to their website at [www.yellowpagesima.org](http://www.yellowpagesima.org).

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

