
Consumer Alert

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

Petal Pushers:

Is Your 'Local' Florist Really Long-Distance?

Flowers are a great way to celebrate a birthday, cheer up a sick friend, or simply brighten someone's day. Your local florist is just a phone call away, or so you think. Some unscrupulous telemarketing firms are posing as local florists, charging you higher fees and taking business away from legitimate florists in your town.

Here's how the deception works. A telemarketer takes out a bogus listing in the white pages of your telephone directory. The company may use your town's name in its own to make you believe it's local. Or, the name of a legitimate local florist may be listed with a different local phone number. For example, Greenville Florists.

When you call, you're unknowingly forwarded to an out-of-town telemarketing operation. The telemarketer takes your order and credit card information for payment, and forwards your order to an area florist. The telemarketer pockets a processing fee and usually a percentage of the sale as well. You don't realize you've been scammed until you get higher than expected charges from an out-of-town company on your credit card statement, or learn that the flowers weren't delivered as ordered, or were never delivered at all.

How to Protect Yourself

Follow these tips before you order your next pot of posies:

- * Ask neighbors, family, friends, and co-workers for recommendations.
- * Deal only with shops that list a street address with their phone number. If you're asking directory assistance for a number, also ask for the street number and address. If there isn't one, consider doing business with another florist.
- * Check out the florist you're considering with the local Better Business Bureau and consumer protection officials in your area. Or, if you're ordering flowers from a local shop in another city or state, contact the consumer protection officials there. Ask if they have any unresolved consumer complaints on file. Also ask them to verify the street address.
- * Ask the florist to itemize the charges. In addition to the price of the arrangement, most florists charge a delivery fee and taxes if you live in the same state.

* Ask the florist for directions to the shop. If they hesitate or refuse, consider this a red flag, and avoid doing business with the florist.

When a Rose is a Ruse: What to Do If You've Been Scammed

If you placed an order through a wire service, a toll-free number, or a local florist, call the toll-free number of the florist and describe the problem. Many wire services will work with the florist to fix the problem or refund your money.

If your arrangement was never delivered, and you paid by credit card, you can dispute the charges with the card issuer.

You also may wish to contact the FTC about your complaint. Although the FTC cannot represent you directly in a dispute with a company, it can act when it sees a pattern of possible law violation. Contact the Consumer Response Center by phone, toll-free at 1-877-FTC-HELP (382-4357); TDD: 202-326-2502; by mail: Consumer Response Center, Federal Trade Commission, Washington, DC 20580; or by e-mail: use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov.