

FTC Consumer Alert

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

PHONE, E-MAIL, AND PAGER MESSAGES MAY SIGNAL COSTLY SCAMS

Beware the “urgent” message you hear on your answering machine, the email message about a “prize,” or the long-distance message on your pager. Any of them could turn out to be an expensive telephone trap.

From coast to coast, American consumers are getting stung by “emergency” and cryptic telephone, email and pager messages urging them to call an “809” number for information about injured or sick relatives, “prize opportunities” or “debt collectors.” The messages tell recipients to call a long-distance number for more information. In many cases, the return-call number is an international pay-per-call line, with a three digit exchange that looks like an American or Canadian area code.

Concerned or curious consumers who take the bait and place the return call usually are kept on the line, listening to long-winded messages. As the clock ticks, the charges build, and scam artists are counting the rebates they’ll receive from foreign telephone companies. For every minute you stay on the line, the scam artist who offers the “information” collects a bigger share in the profits.

It’s not always easy to distinguish an international dialing code from a North American area code. Most international numbers can be reached only by dialing *011*, the international access code. However, some places outside the United States or Canada, such as the Caribbean, *can* be reached simply by dialing a number beginning with three digits that resemble a North American area code. Many scam artists take advantage of this situation — and of unsuspecting consumers — by urging them to call numbers that begin with area codes *809*, *758*, or *664* without revealing that these calls result in international long distance charges that could be costly. Because each country establishes its own telephone rates, there is no limit to the per-minute charge for these calls.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reminds consumers to be suspicious of unidentified telephone, email, or pager messages that claim to offer information about a sick or injured relative, a debt, bad credit, or prize offer. In addition, the FTC cautions consumers to be wary of messages from unfamiliar sources with a return telephone number using *809*, *758*, or *664* area codes, or the *011* international access code. Finally, the agency suggests that consumers question television or print ads that offer products or investment opportunities through telephone numbers that start with these area codes or the *011* international code.

A list of Caribbean area codes appears on the reverse side.

Anguilla	264
Antigua and Barbuda	268
Bahamas	242
Barbados	246
Bermuda	441
British Virgin Islands	284
Cayman Islands	245
Dominica	767
Grenada	473
Jamaica	876
Montserrat	664
St. Kitts and Nevis	869
St. Lucia	758
St. Vincent/ Grenadines	784
Trinidad and Tobago	868
Dominican Republic	809

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 any of 150 consumer topics, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. 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.