



Scams are ringing off the hook

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ROWLEY — Rowley resident Barbara Prentiss got so many pre-recorded calls offering her an extension on her car warranty she finally decided to "press 1 to speak with a representative."

"She asked me: 'What is the make and model of the vehicle whose warranty is running out?'" Prentiss said. "I told her, 'You're the one who called me saying my warranty was running out. You tell me the make and model of the car.' Then I heard, click, and she hung up."

Prentiss called the bluff of what authorities say is likely a widespread scam, trying to bilk money and credit card numbers from consumers. And she's not alone in getting frequent unsolicited calls of this nature.

Calls from scam artists who offer owners extensions on "about to expire" vehicle warranties are not only frequent, they don't discriminate. Prentiss' daughter got calls at her work number through the company switchboard, as did others of her colleagues. Even law enforcement officials aren't exempt.

Amesbury Detective Sean Leary got calls on his cell phone about a month ago after he purchased a used car.

"It was an automated call," Leary said yesterday. "They finally stopped calling when I didn't respond."

According to Rowley Deputy Chief Robert Barker, warranty extension offers made over the phone or through the mail aren't the only possible scams going around. Barker said a local resident lost \$3,000 recently after wiring money to someone who said he was in distress and a friend of her son. Too late, the kind-hearted woman learned it was a scam and reported it to police, but her money was gone.

Barker said what happened is a version of what law enforcement refers to as the "grandparent scheme."

"People get calls from their supposed grandchild or someone who says they're a close friend of their son," Barker said. "They say they're in jail somewhere out of the country, like Canada, and request money, and there's a plea to keep things quiet from the family so no one finds out. They always want you to keep things secret."

Many grandparents will do anything to help their grandchildren, Barker said, and although they may be wary of the call at first, the "clever con artists" making the calls talk them around.

"They got this woman on the phone and fished for information," Barker said of the crime perpetrated on one of his residents. "They do that. They may know a little bit about you, and by fishing, by asking suggestive questions, you fill in the information they need to convince you. People need to be careful."

Barker said he tosses out the warranty extension postcards he frequently gets in the mail from companies he

doesn't know, and recommends consumers be very suspicious of unfamiliar companies who cold-call people with pre-recorded calls.

"I tell people to be suspicious of unsolicited calls," Barker said. "Never give credit card numbers to people like that or Social Security numbers. And never to give in to being pushed, to being told they have to act immediately or lose the offer."

Newburyport Lt. Richard Siemasko agrees with Barker. Reputable companies don't give ultimatums.

"If there's a time limit, just walk away immediately," Siemasko said. "Ask for the name of the company; ask for a number to call them back. If you don't get it, just hang up."

There are all kinds of new scams, like the recent rash of calls telling people their bank accounts had been compromised. Siemasko himself got one of those. Calls to the bank proved there were no problems. It was just an attempt to get people to give their bank account, debit card, credit card and Social Security numbers to the callers, he said.

"And there's a new scam born every day," he said.

Those looking for warranty extension can find reputable companies who provide the service, including car dealers and others. Research the company and get referrals, Barker said. Call them; don't go with someone unknown.

If given the name of specific companies, the Massachusetts Attorney General's Consumer Fraud Division has a hot line (671-727-8400) and can take complaints and also tell consumers if or how many complaints have been lodge against a company.

The New Hampshire Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division (603-271-3641) also takes questions and complaints on such issues.

Scams you may get on your phone

Grandparent Scam: Caller says a loved one is in trouble; they claim to be a friend who can help if you send them money.

Auto Warranty Extension: Caller offers warranty extension for your car. When pressed for information, they hang up.

Bank Account Problems: Caller says there's a problem with your bank account and asks for account numbers, passwords, etc.

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