

Phone Spoofing Getting a Lot Easier

March 22, 2012 - Thirty years ago, people used to purchase answering machines because they didn't want to miss a call. My, how times have changed. Today, people use voice mail and caller ID to screen out the calls that they don't want. But with the advent of smart phones, and especially those built on the Android system, caller ID can no longer be relied upon as an accurate way to screen calls. And unsuspecting consumers who are not careful could wind up becoming victims of financial crimes or even worse.

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It is known as Spoofing: the ability to change the name and phone number that is displayed on caller ID units when a call is placed. Just a few years ago, spoofing was nearly impossible. Today, a quick search of the Android Market (recently renamed Google Play) reveals a wide range of spoofing applications. And many of them are absolutely free to use.

In practical terms, spoofing is a game changer. If the person placing the call can find out just a little personal information about you - like the name and phone number of your best friend or your favorite aunt - they can simply plug that information into their spoofing application and place the call to you. The chances are that you will answer.

And if that isn't frightening enough, then also keep in mind that some of these spoofing applications will also allow the caller to change their voice. That means that a guy with a baritone voice whose name is Bubba could wind up sounding remarkably like your aunt Martha.

Who would want to use a spoofing application? Well, let's start with bill collectors. Or how about stalkers? And of course, there are a wide variety of scam artists who could easily find a multitude of uses for this type of application.

Unfortunately, there is no real way to screen out spoofed calls. That means that the only way you can protect yourself is to develop good habits when it comes to releasing personal information over the phone. Among these, never give out personal information to someone you didn't call yourself. And if you suspect that a call from a number that looks like your best friend's is actually not legitimate, then get off the phone quickly and call your friend back. Maybe she just has a cold so her voice doesn't sound right. Or maybe, she isn't a she at all.

And if you do get a call that you suspect was spoofed, and the call actually came from a bill collector or a business that was trying to deceive you, just know that this type of activity is now illegal in the United States. If you can determine who actually placed the call, you should report the caller to the FTC, the FCC and to your State Attorney General. Those in violation of the law may face both civil and criminal penalties.

byJim Malmberg

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