

Gift Card Scams Are Getting More Sophisticated - What You Need to Know

December 23, 2022 - 'Tis the season for scam artists, and some of the biggest scams revolve around gift cards. According to the FTC, nearly \$150 million in gift card scams were reported in the first three quarters of 2021 alone, and the trend is growing. That's because there are almost no barriers to entry for enterprising crooks. And now that the holidays are here, and a lot of people are doing their last-minute shopping, gift cards are pretty much a "green field" for scams. There are a couple of new things to be on the lookout for this year to make sure that you don't become a victim.

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One of the more clever scams to arise this year are gift cards with fake bar codes. The way this works is that a scammer will copy the barcode of a real gift card that they own onto a sticker. They will then go to a store that sells gift cards and cover the real bar codes on the cards being sold with the sticker-barcode that they just made. When someone comes along and purchases a gift card that's been tampered with, it will ring up at the register without any trouble at all. But any money that they spend will actually be topping up the gift card of the criminal behind the scam.

In most cases, the criminals behind this type of scam will be able to track their gift card balances in near-real time. That means that by the time you discover that you've been scammed, there is almost no chance that the money you spent will still be available on the card you actually topped up.

Another similar scam is also common. Criminals are now scratching off the protective covering over gift card PIN numbers, making note of them, and then covering up what they did with a sticker that looks just like the original PIN protective coating. Just as in the other scam, they then monitor the gift card numbers for the cards they tampered with to find out when they have been activated. They then spend that money right away.

Fortunately, these scams are fairly easy to detect for anyone that is paying attention. When you purchase a gift card, take a look at the back of the card first (NOTE: some packaged gift cards don't allow for this but their packaging is also much more secure). If the silver sticker over the PIN number isn't in pristine condition, or if it is crooked, don't purchase the card.

From there, take a look at the card's bar code and run your finger over it. The code should be printed directly on the card itself. If the bar code feels like it is printed on paper or if you can tell that it is printed on a label stuck to the card, don't purchase the card.

In either of these cases, don't place the card back on the sales display. Take it to a store employee and turn it in. That will prevent anyone else from becoming a victim.

by Jim Malmberg

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