

GIFT CARD FRAUD

A Guide for Consumers and Retailers

consumer *alert*

WHAT IS GIFT CARD FRAUD?

Gift card fraud typically involves impersonators contacting consumers and urgently demanding payment in the form of gift cards. Scammers may demand payments over the phone or via emails or texts, which may be “spoofed” to look legitimate. “Spoofing” is a practice that allows scammers to fake caller ID information and email addresses, hiding their true identity. While some scammers may ask for physical gift cards to be sent, others may ask for certain information on the gift card (such as the card number and security code) which allows the scammer to spend the gift card without physically possessing it.

Be wary of any requests for payment via gift cards – no legitimate business or government agency will ever ask for payment exclusively in the form of gift cards.

HOW COMMON IS GIFT CARD FRAUD?

Gift card fraud has become increasingly common in recent years. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), gift cards were the most commonly reported method of payment in fraud schemes from 2018 to September 2021. From January 2021 through September 2021, the FTC received over 39,000 reports of gift card fraud. These reports suggest that gift card fraud may have cost consumers as much as \$148 million.

COMMON GIFT CARD FRAUD SCHEMES

- **Government Agency** – Someone calls claiming to be from a government agency like the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or the Social Security Administration (SSA). They claim that you will be arrested if you don’t make the payment demanded; that you owe back taxes; or that you must pay a fine to stop your social security number from being frozen.

- **Utility** – You receive a call from your electric or gas provider saying that your service will be cut off if you don’t pay right away.
- **Business and Tech Support** – A caller offers you a refund, credits money in excess of the refund, and asks you to return the additional money in gift cards. Alternatively, someone calls from tech support saying that there is an issue with your account or a security breach and that you must pay them in gift cards to fix the problem.
- **Employer** – A scammer pretending to be your boss sends a text or an email asking you to pick up gift cards for a work event or as a present for another employee. They tell you to take pictures of the backs of the gift cards, and they promise that you will be reimbursed later.
- **Family Emergency** – You receive an urgent call from a friend or family member asking you to send money for bail or to help with an emergency.
- **Romance** – Someone you have met on a dating website or app needs your help and asks you to send gift cards.
- **Freebies and Sweepstakes** – You’ve won a prize! But you need to pay a processing fee with a gift card to receive it. Some scammers may ask for your personal information and a credit card number too.

Continued

Contact the **Division of Consumer Affairs** at:

1-800-242-5846

(toll free within New Jersey)

or **973-504-6200**

800-242-5846 ▶ **New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs**
www.NJConsumerAffairs.gov



REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RETAIL EMPLOYEES

Retailers that display gift cards for sale are required by law to train employees on how to identify and respond to gift card fraud. The training shall be conducted in accordance with the following guidelines.

- Employees should be aware of signs that someone is the victim of gift card fraud. Examples include:
 - Customers who are buying multiple gift cards, especially with high dollar values.
 - Customers purchasing gift cards when they seem distressed.
 - Customers who say they are purchasing gift cards to help a family member in need or pay their bills.
 - Customers who, immediately after purchasing a gift card, take pictures of the serial numbers and/or PIN numbers on the back of a gift card.
- Employees should use the “If you see something, say something” approach. If an employee sees signs of gift card fraud, the employee should engage the customer and ask questions, including why they are making such purchases.
- Employees should understand how to report suspected fraud to their employer and to appropriate government agencies, pursuant to the employer’s policies and procedures.

Employees must receive the training by August 1, 2022, or within 45 days of beginning employment, whichever is later.

BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAILERS

In addition to training their employees on how to identify and respond to gift card fraud, retailers should consider adopting the following best practices to deter fraud.

- Prominently post and maintain signs near cash registers and/or gift card stands to warn customers about gift card fraud.
- Limit the number and dollar amount of gift cards that may be purchased at one time.
- Encourage payments for gift cards via credit card, which can be more easily tracked and cancelled in the event a fraud is subsequently discovered.
- Limit purchases and activation of gift cards to cash registers staffed by an employee, instead of allowing purchases and activation at self-checkout stands.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CONSUMERS

- **DO NOT** give gift card information – including via phone, text, email, or photo – to pay bills or fees, or to fix any other problem. Gift cards are not for transferring money.
- If you receive an urgent call, text, or email from a co-worker, family member, or friend, reach out to that person directly to confirm that they need your help.
- If a caller tells you to lie to a store clerk about why you are purchasing gift cards, hang up.
- If you receive an unexpected tech support call, do not give the caller remote access to your computer.
- **DO NOT** give out your personal or credit card information to callers in exchange for a gift card.
- Before buying a gift card, check to see if the packaging has been tampered with or the PIN on the back of the card is visible; these may be signs that the gift card is compromised.
- Keep the receipt or the gift card ID number to file a report if you lose the gift card or suspect fraud.

REPORT FRAUD

If you were a victim of a gift card scam or suspect gift card fraud, report it to:

- **The Federal Trade Commission** at <http://reportfraud.ftc.gov/>;
- **The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Internet Crime Complaint Center** at <https://www.ic3.gov/>;
- **The New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs (DCA)** at <https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/Pages/Consumer-Complaints.aspx>; and
- Local law enforcement, who can issue a police report that may help you work with the card issuer to get a refund.

RESOURCES

[FTC – Gift Card Scams; 2021 Data Spotlight; Stop Gift Card Scams; and What To Do If You Were Scammed.](#)

[CFPB – Resources to Help You Avoid Scams.](#)

[FBI – Business Email Compromise: Gift Cards.](#)

[DCA – Gift Cards and Gift Certificates.](#)

[AARP – Gift Card Scams.](#)

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