

NEWS FROM SCDCA

South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs



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December 8, 2008

Release #08-108

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SECRET SHOPPER SCAMS COULD SPOIL YOUR HOLIDAY SEASON

Columbia, SC... This season, saving money is on everyone's mind. Whether it is fewer decorations or generic ingredients in your recipe, consumers are looking for a few extra bucks to ease the burden of the holiday season. Unfortunately, scammers are well aware of this fact and are looking to cash-in this season by preying on unsuspecting consumers.

If you haven't received a personal invite, you have probably seen an offer to be a secret or mystery shopper. The pitch is very tempting. You get paid to buy from your favorite stores, and you get to keep the products you buy. Unfortunately, many of these offers end up taking money out of your pocket. So how do you determine a legitimate secret shopper pitch from a bogus one?

First, you're better off picking them, not letting them pick you. If you are interested in joining a shopping club, inquire about reputable organizations after viewing their website yourself. Unexpected offers in the mail should be a red flag. Offers may provide an initial check for you to cash and get started shopping. Other offers may congratulate you on being part of a pre-selected, pre-approved group of secret shoppers. The offers, regardless of the details, are attempting to either steal some of your real money by sending you a fake check or steal your personal information by pretending they already have information about you.

About the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs:

Established by the Consumer Protection code in 1974, The South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs represents the interests of South Carolina Consumers.

Our mission is to protect consumers from inequities in the marketplace through advocacy, mediation, enforcement and education.

For more information, visit www.sccoconsumer.gov.

Regardless of the pitch or promise, consumers should remember a couple things. Just as money doesn't grow on trees; it doesn't appear in your mailbox. Steer clear of companies offering to pay the start-up costs upfront. While legitimate companies do not charge application fees, consumers should still expect to bear some initial financial responsibility. Spelling and grammar DO matter. Bogus offers are often crafted by individuals who do not speak English as their first language. Lots of misspellings and grammar mistakes may tip the consumer that the organization represented is not a professional, reputable company. Finally, consumers should be suspicious of deals promising a quick, easy fix. Saving a few bucks this season is possible, but it's unlikely to come through a secret shopper offer this season. Legitimate secret shopping clubs are long-term investments that require significant effort.

For more information, contact the Public Information Division at 803.734.4190, toll free in SC at 1.800.922.1594, or online at www.sconsumer.gov.

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