

Read Advice

I was the target of a scam OR always use your credit card.

Feb 17 '03

The Bottom Line Keep your eyes open for offers that are too good to be true, and always use your credit card.

Here is a story I hope you learn from - I know I did. This was a close call that I hope never happens to you.

Note: I couldn't find a better spot for this, if anyone has any ideas, I am happy to hear them.

I recently bid on ebay for a very expensive plotter for my firm (and lost).

Yesterday I received an email from a guy claiming to be a quality eBay user in belgium who would sell me a similar one for half the price, he pays shipping, and he would use and escrow service. Boy was I excited.

I looked up the user (and this was the first fishy thing) - he said his user name was ozmt (12) - now for anyone who uses eBay, you know the (12) is the number of ratings, and not part of the name. I thought this was fishy, but chalked it up to foreign issues. I looked at the eBay ratings, and they were good, but none of them were as a seller!

So, I wrote back that I was interested, and asked some questions, what shape is it in, etc.

The answer I received back was fishy:

1. For the shape he said "take a look at the attached photo", but the photo was a marketing photo - it even had the page hanging halfway out like you see
2. For the speed, he gave an answer that was 4 times faster than the spec

He also wrote that he had set up an "escrow" at www.escrow-bay.com. This site claimed to be Italian, and had all the certificates - Truste, etc. It also said Copyright 1998-2003.

I went to look for payment by credit card (still trying to protect myself from a scam), and they only take Western Union or e-gold. This reminded me of a friend who got burned in a Yahoo auction trying to buy a computer, but where they required payment by Western Union. He lost \$2500 - you don't get credit card protection with Western Union.

Ever the optimist, I looked into e-gold. Well, e-gold has fraud alerts, describing this very type of offer. Indeed, www.escrowbay.com (no dash) was listed. So, I did more research -Google, of course. NO LISTING OF EITHER SITE, except for the one e-gold reference. I then did a whois - the domains were started in January of 2003! That's right - a couple weeks old, and the technical contact was out of LA, not Italy.

That was enough for me - I said no go.

There are many important lessons that come out of this, and ones you should be wary of:

1. Just because you shop online a lot doesn't mean you can't be scammed. I am a very savvy shopper, and I could have been burned
2. ALWAYS USE YOUR CREDIT CARD. No Western Union, no check, no e-gold. Credit cards offer extra protection
3. Use an escrow for big purchases - a real one!
4. Google your escrow sites, google your seller, google, google, google
5. Ask questions, including ones you know the answer to - find out if the seller actually owns the thing
6. Get a picture of the real thing
7. Be wary of offers that are too good to be true - for example, not only was this half price, but free shipping from Belgium? This thing weighs 200 pounds - U.S. shipping is \$150!
8. ALWAYS USE YOUR CREDIT CARD. Did I say that already? I can't emphasize it enough
9. Do whatever other research you can, like eBay
10. Look up message headers, web site registrations, and anything else that can help you detect fraud.

Good luck out there, it's a rough world in cyberspace. Always use your credit card.

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