

# Secret Shopper Scams



The Office of the  
**Minnesota Attorney General**  
helping people afford their lives and live with dignity, safety, and respect

Scam artists seek to take advantage of people who may be looking for a side job or part-time work. Although some companies do hire “secret shopper services” to analyze their customer service by having “secret shoppers” buy certain goods or services at their stores and report their experiences, fraudsters operating secret shopper scam” offer no such service. Instead, these fraudsters attempt to trick consumers into believing they are participating in a legitimate secret shopping assignment in order to steal money. Don't become a victim of this scam!

## How the Scam Works

A consumer receives in the mail a letter, often addressed personally to the consumer, from a company or individual claiming to be in the business of customer service evaluation. The letter may be unsolicited or the result of the consumer's response to an online posting. Either way, the letter purports to be an offer of employment as a “Secret Shopper,” “Customer Service Evaluator,” “Mystery Shopper,” or some similar position. The position requires the consumer to secretly evaluate the various services offered at retail stores by making specific purchases at those locations.

To facilitate making the purchases, the consumer also receives a check for several thousand dollars, which the consumer is instructed to deposit into their bank account.

One of businesses to be “evaluated” by the consumer is a money-wiring service or retailer that sells prepaid cards or gift cards. The consumer is invariably instructed to use the funds to purchase a wire transfer, prepaid card, or gift card, usually for several thousand dollars. The consumer is then instructed to send the wire transfer or provide the prepaid card or gift card's information to a third-party, who usually resides in a foreign country. As compensation, the consumer is told to keep a portion of the funds.

Unfortunately, the consumer who received and deposited the check usually discovers that it is counterfeit only after sending the money or providing the prepaid card or gift

card's information. By this time the scammers have most likely received converted the wire transfer to cash or used the funds on the prepaid card or gift card. . Once a victim sends funds onward from a bogus check, they may be liable to the bank for the amount sent.

## Secret Shopper Scam: What to Look For

1. A letter or ad offering employment as a “Secret Shopper,” “Mystery Shopper,” “Customer Service Evaluator,” or some similar position.
2. A check, usually for several thousand dollars, said to cover the costs involved in purchasing and evaluating certain goods and services.
3. Instructions to deposit the check and purchase a wire transfer, prepaid card, or gift card, usually for thousands of dollars, and to send the wire transfer or provide the prepaid card or gift card's information to a third-party.
4. Instructions to retain a portion of the funds from the check as compensation for your work.

## Don't Be Fooled

Just because a check looks authentic does not mean it is. Scammers can create authentic-looking checks emblazoned with the name and logos of actual companies and banks. Further, just because a bank deposits a check and makes the funds quickly available soon thereafter does not mean the check is legitimate. Federal rules require banks to make deposits available to consumers quickly, often the following business day. Ultimately, a check, even a legitimate one, is worthless until the bank that issued the check “clears” it and actually releases the money.

Therefore, while the funds may be available in your account within days of your deposit, the check may take weeks to bounce. Banks typically will not cover the loss and expect the victim to pay the difference.

## Additional Steps to Avoid Being Scammed

The following are some tips to protect against this type of fraud:

**Do not wire money to strangers!** This is one of the easiest ways to avoid being defrauded. Remember, if you wire money via Western Union or MoneyGram, it is almost impossible to retrieve the money once it is picked up at the other end. Wire transfers can be picked up almost anywhere in the world. Therefore, the money is virtually untraceable, and United States law enforcement agencies may have little recourse in recovering the funds.

**Never give a prepaid card or gift card's serial number to anyone you don't know.** Giving this information to a scammer is as good as giving them cash. If someone asks you for a serial number or other information on a prepaid card, gift card, or receipt, it's a good indication that it's a scam.

**Research the company before doing business with it.** Contacting the Better Business Bureau or the Minnesota Secretary of State or performing an Internet search on the company will often reveal whether it is a legitimate company. Beware if the company is based in a foreign country or requires you to contact or send money to an individual in a foreign county.

**Attempt to determine the authenticity of a check by researching and contacting the company and issuing bank listed on the check.** Obtain the contact information for these entities, however, through other legitimate sources. Do not use the contact information on the check. Placing a call to the company and bank will often quickly resolve questions regarding a check's authenticity.

## Additional Resources

Secret shopper scams are a crime. If you have lost money to a scammer, you may wish to file a complaint with the FBI, which can be reached as follows:

### Federal Bureau of Investigation

Minneapolis Office

1501 Freeway Boulevard

Brooklyn Center, MN 55430

(763) 569-8000

You should also file a complaint with your local police department or sheriff's office.