

Too Smart to be Scammed?

Lucky me, I have been notified repeatedly via email that I've been selected as a "Woman of Outstanding Leadership." I'm to "take my place among other remarkable women" by responding.

They used my first name in the salutation, so it didn't seem to bother them that someone named Dave is a woman. At least I wasn't addressed as "Recipient."

I've been involved in running a small business for over 40 years, I've seen about every scam known to man and I'm way too savvy to be taken in by any of them. Or so I thought.

A few weeks ago, I received a call from Sue, the branch manager at our Davenport store. Some guys with heavy equipment were in our driveway there, offering to blacktop it at a substantial discount because "we have some asphalt left over from a job we just finished down the street."

Our business's driveway needed some repaving, so we authorized them to do the worst portion of it for the number of square feet they were estimating at \$3.25 per square foot, which should have totaled less than \$600. After they started, they began saying things like, well, your old pavement is worse than we thought and it's going to take a little more asphalt than we estimated to complete the job. No problem, we said.

An hour later they are calling me in Coralville saying, well, we've done almost half your lot (way more than we authorized), shall we just go ahead and do the other half? They gave me a new square footage estimate, I did the math, and it came to more than \$7,000. I asked them how much we were in for already and they gave me another square footage figure – they never spoke in terms of total price - which turned out to be over \$3000.

When I told the guy on the other end of the phone that this was starting to sound like a scam to me, he began shouting that he had done the work in good faith, and we were trying to weasel out of the deal. He threatened to remove all the asphalt they had already laid. He said his brother was calling the police (saying

over his shoulder “Are they on the line yet?”). He then offered to settle the whole dispute for \$1,200.

Sue - who isn't intimidated by anyone - then began writing down their trucks' license plate numbers and called for a co-worker to notify the police ourselves. The asphalt workers became very nervous and began packing up their stuff as quickly as they could. They cleared out, apologizing for all the confusion, and finally saying we didn't owe them anything after all.

Subsequently the police came by to confirm that these “asphalt gypsies” had been making the rounds. This episode had a rare happy ending, in that we have some free asphalt that was actually laid fairly competently. Things like this go on every day, and you can't be too wary.

Most scams these days are by email and by now most of us understand that no Nigerian prince actually needs our help moving millions of dollars to an American bank. Instead, I'm getting emails supposedly from national companies whose names you would recognize, offering gift cards that need to be “authorized” and/or a number of other plausible lies. These folks are experts at making you want to click on their links. Even a common Word file attachment can introduce a virus when opened.

One thing you can do to spot a scam is to hover your cursor over any links in the emails without clicking on them. A box will pop up that indicates where that link will take you. If the name with the .com behind it is not the name of the company you think is offering the deal, you just saved yourself some grief; it's spam at best, malware or a virus at worst.

Scams aside, I've been told by our systems techs that the vast majority of all computer problems stem from users simply clicking where they shouldn't. If you ever find yourself saying, “I'm not sure what this is but it looks important,” or “I wonder which celebrities they have nude pictures of,” it's best if you don't get happy-fingers with your mouse.

Writers Group Member Dave Parsons does not need any more asphalt at the business he co-owns on the Coralville Strip.