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## How I Got Scammed Online Over the Holidays

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By

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*Not once, but twice.*

In late November, I recall seeing a CNN segment about fake websites. The example they used was the Beats headphones site, and they showed the fake one next to the real one. Unless you knew what to look for, you would not know the difference.

Shortly after, I was thrilled to find a particular Hardwick sweater for my dear Jim on a site that was selling it for 20 percent off of retail. I placed my order, provided my credit card, received confirmation by email and waited for my shipment. Ten days later, no sweater.

To resolve the issue, I tried to call the number on the site, which turned out to be a non-working number. I tried to email customer service, and it came back as an invalid service. My next step was to cancel the order, and start over. Meanwhile, I had to cancel the credit card and wait for a new one. Just in the heart of holiday shopping, and now I had no Visa for several days. Sigh...

Now I was running out of time for the holidays. I Googled the name and style of the Hardwick sweater and started over. I found another reputable site and placed my order. I paid with my credit card, got a confirmation and waited. Two days later, I received an email telling me the sweater is out of stock, and the seller will issue a credit. The credit did not happen.

Instead, I started getting miscellaneous charges on my credit card from companies in China. Again, even with my diligence, I got scammed. I had to cancel the charges, complete a bunch of paperwork and get a new card.

**Tips for Avoiding Online Scams**

I shared this experience with my associate, Jon Sereda. He did some research and came up with the following prevention suggestions:

- Keep track of all of your open accounts. You can do this for free up to three times per year at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). Hackers are now more prone to attacking and taking ownership of existing unused accounts, instead of opening new accounts in your name.
- If you notice a transaction that you don't remember, call the number on the back of your card. A common mistake is to look the number up online. This is where hackers will set up a fake number that will pop up in search engine results. That leads to a fake call center where they can gather further personal information.
- Set text or email alerts on your credit cards. Most banks have different alerts that allow you to receive notifications if certain purchases are made: many different ranges can be set. From area code to the transaction dollar amount.
- Change your online shopping behavior. When searching for a particular product, instead of clicking on the links provided in the search, copy and paste them into a new browser window. This avoids links that are set up that show a route to Amazon.com, for example, but in reality, they reroute you to a mock Amazon.com site. Hackers set up these sites to trick consumers into entering their credit or debit card information. The sites look trustworthy because they appear to allow you to make your purchase as you normally would. The problem is that hackers take the data and make other online purchases.
- Keep an eye on small transactions that don't make sense. For example, some hackers will get a hold of your information and make a few small purchases, such as approximately 99 cents over a couple of months. This is to feel you out, and find out how carefully you monitor your transactions. The transactions will continue to grow in dollar amount as they go unaddressed.
- When accessing your accounts online, before doing so, you must physically enter in the web address and bookmark that page. This avoids the search engine issues mentioned earlier.
- Each time you shop online, be sure to save all confirmation numbers generated after you complete a purchase. This helps track the transaction from start to finish to ensure accuracy.
- Also keep track of recurring bill payments that are automatically taken from your account electronically. You can set alerts on these transactions with certain ranges (since most monthly bills vary to an extent) that are typical for the bill. This helps keep note of added costs the particular service provider may start looping into your bill.

I hope this helps you avoid the headaches I went through.

Photo courtesy of [www.giftideasformen.com](http://www.giftideasformen.com).

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**About Susan Carr-Templeton**

Susan Templeton is the founder of Stafford Wells Advisors, a wealth management firm serving individuals, families and businesses and advising workplace retirement plans. Stafford Wells was founded in 2008 with the mission of delivering independent, complete, unbiased investment and planning advice, free of any conflicts of interest. Susan Templeton has more than 20 years experience in investment management. She received her B.S.B.A. degree in marketing from the University of Denver and her M.B.A. from the University of Chicago. Susan is a trustee for the Advocate Foundation where she chair's the Planned Giving Committee and is a member of the Investment Committee. Susan serves on the investment committee for the Visiting Nurse Association (Chicago) and is a former trustee of the Village of Oak Brook Police Pension Plan.