

YOUR MONEY

What Amazon, the F.T.C. and C.I.A. Won't Say When You've Been Scammed

New York magazine's money columnist wrote about being conned out of \$50,000 by crooks pretending to be from Amazon and government agencies. We asked the company and agencies for comment.



Credit...Robert Neubecker



By [Ron Lieber](#)

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When New York magazine's finance advice columnist dropped [an article](#) that went viral on Thursday about falling victim to a \$50,000 scam, my heart skipped a beat.

My own financial planner had [gone to jail](#) years ago, which I'd chronicled in [a few columns](#). Nearly all of us are vulnerable to scams, at least sometimes. What would I have done if someone called and insisted that my children, in particular, were in grave danger?

The writer, [Charlotte Cowles](#), who once had a [weekly business column](#) with The New York Times, described crooks spinning a fantastical tale: First, they impersonated Amazon and told her she'd been a victim of identity theft. Then, one thief passed her on to someone who impersonated a Federal Trade Commission investigator, who told her

that nine vehicles, four properties and 22 bank accounts were registered to her name. Finally, a supposed Central Intelligence Agency “lead investigator” persuaded her to withdraw money from her bank and give it to them for safekeeping while her husband and son watched.

But what would any of those entities do if they thought that any one of us was *actually* a victim of some kind of identity fraud? What would they say, request and tell us to do?

I called them all and asked. Here’s what they said.

Amazon has no direct line to the Federal Trade Commission.

Ms. Cowles’s story begins with a call in October that was supposedly from Amazon, when a woman on the line told her about \$8,000 of fraudulent purchases and said she was a victim of identity theft.

The woman then offered to connect Ms. Cowles with Amazon’s liaison at the F.T.C. Soon enough, he was on the line.

But Amazon does not transfer customers to the F.T.C. or any other government agency, according to Tim Gillman, a spokesman.

The company will sometimes call people to verify account activity, which will likely get much harder to do as Ms. Cowles’s story continues to go viral. But if the call seems fishy, just hang up and reach out directly via the Amazon app or website.

“Do not call numbers sent over text or email or found in online search results,” Mr. Gillman added. And if someone suggests that you download or install Amazon customer service software, don’t.

The F. T. C. won’t offer a badge number.

Once Ms. Cowles was on the phone with the supposed F.T.C. investigator, he offered up his badge number and asked about the contents of her bank account.

On Thursday afternoon, Lina Khan, the Federal Trade Commission chair, [posted on X](#): “Being the victim of a scam can be devastating. A reminder that nobody from @FTC will ever give you a badge number, ask you to confirm your Social Security number, ask how much money you have in your bank account, transfer you to a C.I.A. agent, or send you texts out of the blue.”

By coincidence, the F.T.C. on Thursday [finalized](#) a new rule giving it more powerful tools to combat criminals who impersonate businesses. Consumers reported fraud losses of over [\\$10 billion](#) for the first time in 2023, according to the agency, up 14 percent from the previous year.

Last month, the F.T.C. issued [a warning](#) about fraudsters trying to persuade you to move your money someplace safer. It sounded a lot like what had already happened to Ms. Cowles.

The C.I.A. probably isn't going to call you.

Before inducing her to move her money, the F.T.C. impersonator wanted to pass her on to the lead investigator on her case, who purportedly worked for the C.I.A. She had her doubts, but he called from what appeared to her to be the F.T.C.'s main phone number.

She thought he might be "spoofing," using tools to pretend he was indeed calling from that number. But he quickly moved on to telling her not to talk to her husband or a lawyer about the situation. Soon, the exchange turned to the freezing of her assets and the issuance of a replacement Social Security number.

"C.I.A. is a foreign intelligence organization; this is simply not the kind of matter we would be involved in," a C.I.A. spokesman said.

The C.I.A.'s website makes a few points that are relevant. The agency collects foreign intelligence and conducts covert action. "We are not a law enforcement organization," [the site says](#). And while it may work with law enforcement entities, it tends to be on things like counterintelligence and terrorism.

Its [F.A.Q.](#) goes into even more detail, noting that it "does not require employees/contractors to obtain assurances of money or any personal information (such as your Social Security number, driver's license or banking information) to initiate a relationship."

Nevertheless, Ms. Cowles's contact told her to go to her bank and take out \$50,000 — and not tell the bank why.

Banks may not stop you from leaving their branches with a backpack full of \$100 bills.

Ms. Cowles did as her C.I.A. minder told her. At a Bank of America branch, someone directed her up a set of stairs, where a teller handed over the money and [a piece of paper with some warnings](#) about scams.

"Going in, I was honestly hoping that they would say no to my withdrawal or make me wait, but they didn't," Ms. Cowles told me via email. "The fraud warning DID give me pause, but since the scammers hadn't yet told me to give the money *to* them, I didn't feel like it really applied to my situation. What's more, I was so terrified of what would happen if I didn't follow instructions that it overrode my skepticism."

Ms. Cowles is not a senior citizen. If she were, perhaps the bank teller might have slowed things down. Banks worry a lot about elder fraud and [will shutter every account](#) a person has if it suspects anything untoward.

Ms. Cowles said that she did not hold it against Bank of America, given that it was, in fact, her money she was withdrawing. But do banks typically hand over large amounts of cash?

“We have [extensive efforts](#) to warn clients about avoiding scams,” said a Bank of America spokesman, William P. Halldin, via email. The bank declined to comment further.

“We don’t restrict customers from accessing their money,” said Justin K. Page, a Chase spokesman, via email. “However, there are instances where funds are held for additional verification. This includes instances where one of our bankers suspects that our customer may be accompanied by someone who appears to be pressuring them. We train our bankers to look for that.”

Hijackers are in brains, not planes.

The thief impersonating the C.I.A. agent did eventually tell Ms. Cowles to hand over the cash. After all, he said, she was going to be charged with money laundering; allowing the agency to convert the money to a government check using her new Social Security number would render her \$50,000 clean.

This sounds preposterous. It also, however, created a conflicting internal dialogue.

“People who have always used their brains are not paying attention to their emotions, and I think we need to pay attention to what our bodies are telling us,” said [Amy Nofziger](#), director of fraud victim support for AARP’s Fraud Watch Network. “The gut is actually a scientific dumping of chemicals. I’ve heard countless victims tell me, ‘My gut told me I shouldn’t do this, but my brain told me I should.’”

Eva Velasquez, who has seen it all as the president of the [Identity Theft Resource Center](#), viewed the situation similarly. “The bad actors hijack our brains,” she said. “And it works, because we are all, after all, human.”

Tara Siegel Bernard contributed reporting.

[Ron Lieber](#) has been the [Your Money](#) columnist since 2008 and has written five books, most recently “The Price You Pay for College.” [More about Ron Lieber](#)

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