

Law Office Management & Technology

Is Your Office Scam Resistant?

By Paul Sullivan

Think no one would try to scam a lawyer? Think again.

Many lawyers I know are so busy putting out fires that just don't have the time for what they deem "less critical" aspects of their practice. Management issues sometimes fall into that category — until they flare up into major problems. The purpose of these management articles is to make you be aware of some of these things and allow you to implement procedures in your office so they don't become crises for you. You might call it Management Preventative Maintenance.

This month I'll outline some of the ways vendors prey on busy professionals, hoping they'll buy unnecessary or overpriced products or pay a bill for an unneeded service without paying attention to the details. Now's a good time to review the way bills are paid and items ordered in your office and to consider how you can get taken in on your phone service. But let me start with something that happened to me recently.

Office supplies and expletives

Around noon one Monday I got a call from a woman who said our senior partner told her to consult me. She ran an office supply business out of her home, she said, and was relocating to another part of the country. She was running a closeout sale on office supplies and prices would be much lower than normal. She said Mr. Senior Partner told her we obviously were interested in saving some money.

I told her we purchased all our supplies locally and received reports on what we bought so we could track usage, etc., and that I really wasn't interested. (I knew this was a common scam). She became a little irritated, saying, "Mr. Senior Partner told me last Friday you could help me." I told her Mr. Senior Partner was wrong. "Well, he was right about one thing," she said. "What's that?" I asked. "You're an <expletive deleted>," she said, and hung up.

I thought the exchange was pretty funny, but it's amazing how often our attorneys are contacted by such people and refer them to me fully believing the offer is legitimate. If lawyers believe it, I'm sure many others do, too. The most common office-supply scam is the ribbon or toner supplier who tempts you with ridiculously low prices and then loads you up on supplies. Many of the products are inferior and shelf life is short. When there's a dispute, resolving it is difficult if not impossible.

They generally contact you by phone and represent themselves as your copier-supplies representative. They say they want to confirm the model number of your copier or laser printer — and that's how they know what products to price. They often try to sell you on the spot but usually call back later armed with information about your business, which makes them sound legitimate. They may ship supplies to you without authorization hoping you'll just pay for them (after all, you need them anyway) rather than go through the red tape of returning the products and getting your account credited.

The best course is to deal with suppliers you know and trust. Reputable dealers won't sell you inferior products and if there's a problem will make it right. More importantly, they won't load you up supplies that get old and become useless.

Advertising/marketing scams; read the fine print

Beware of several advertising rip-offs aimed at lawyers and other professionals. For example, there are the scam artists who send you a bill that looks like a Yellow-Pages invoice. Usually buried in the small print is notice that this is not a bill but a solicitation. It is actually a solicitation to place your listing in some obscure phone directory that nobody reads. Some of these groups are bold enough to just send out an invoice. Unless you pay extremely close attention to these bills you may pay them, thinking they are for your legitimate phonebook advertising.

Another marketing-related scam is the phone solicitation for specialty items, pens being the most common. They seduce you into ordering large quantities of pens with your name on them by offering a trip or some other gift. Not only are the pens usually overpriced and poor quality, the premium is rarely worth what you thought it would be. If the premium is a trip, there are usually so many limitations and exclusions that it isn't worth the bother. Once again, deal with reputable companies who specialize in such products.

Lawyers are also vulnerable to listings in publications and directories with grandiose names using key words like world's "best," "greatest," "preeminent," "outstanding," "notable," "distinguished," etc. Sometimes the sellers imply that you're part of a select group listed in this publication. Unfortunately, some of these directories are read by only the people who buy the listings in them, have no useful marketing benefit, and are extremely expensive.

Listings in legal directories are an expensive necessity for most attorneys. Review all the listings you need to be in and evaluate their effectiveness based on your type of practice. Treat solicitations for listings beyond your initial list with suspicion, and add to your listing portfolio only after careful consideration.

Slamming and other phone scamming

Resellers. How many calls have you received wanting you to switch your long-distance carrier? Well brace yourself, because the next wave will be solicitations to switch not only long-distance but local service. Resellers are purchasing blocks of time from major providers like Ameritech. They then resell that time at reduced prices, telling you they offer the same service you now have at a lesser price. This can be good for you, but you must do some serious research to see if you are truly getting a better deal. The first

problem is that service calls must be placed through the reseller, who then contacts Ameritech. This could result in poor customer service when you have a problem.

Also be careful of how much they charge for local and Intralata calls. Local calls are within a limited local area and Intralata calls are distance calls within a defined area that don't have to go through a long-distance carrier. These resellers may quote you reduced rates for line charges but really nail you for Intralata charges, charging 8 to 10 times the per-minute rate. In addition, they may charge for unwanted features such as call forwarding and three-way calling unless you specifically tell them you don't want it.

The advice here: be sure you know what you're getting. In many instances going with a reseller is a better deal, but you can't just assume that because their monthly rates or per minute charges are less that the overall package will cost less money or mean less hassle for you.

Slamming. Slamming; the unauthorized changing of long distance carriers; has been a problem for some time. Typically, a telemarketer will call and ask who takes care of the long distance. Once they have the name, they simply process the change order without your permission. To prevent this from happening, ask your current carrier to place in your record an authorization number and to require it before changing your service.

Call-thieves. You should also be aware of two common long distance scams that can cost your firm hundreds — even thousands — of dollars. A caller will contact your office and tell your receptionist that he is calling from the telephone company and testing the lines. He asks the receptionist to depress a series of keys on the phone to complete the test. In fact, he is getting access to an outside line through your phone system. Then he can call anywhere in the world — and usually does. You can prevent this by instructing your staff never to enter a series of codes into the phone at the request of an unknown outside caller.

The other common phone scam is the third-party call routine. Someone will obtain your name and phone number in an airport or hotel lobby — often from your luggage — and place a call, charging it to the home number. When the operator verifies the call with someone in your office, he or she is likely to know you are in the city in question and approve the call. The best defense is to set a policy of approving no third party calls until you can verify the legitimacy of the caller. This might require you to pay for an extra long distance call, but you'll protect yourself against the extreme cost of an international one.

Practice scam prevention

One reason these scams succeed is that dishonest operators lurk among the reputable ones offering the same products and services. Other than the outright phone fraud, all of the products and services discussed above are also offered by legitimate operator operators and will appeal to some people. Just know that even you, a lawyer, can be taken unless you do your homework and put in defensive procedures before, not after, these problems emerge.

Paul Sullivan is the administrator of Quinn Johnston Henderson & Pretorius with offices in Peoria and Springfield. He is a charter member and immediate past president of the Central Illinois Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators and a member of the ISBA Law Office Management and Economics (Standing Committee on) Council. For more practice management tips read The Bottom Line, the LOE section newsletter (available free of charge to LOE section members).