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Weld Sheriff's Office warning residents about sophisticated scammers: Pt. 1

The Weld County Sheriff's Office is warning the public about a pair of sophisticated scams that have already victimized two residents.

In both incidents, the scammers were able to prey on their victims by using their online activity against them.

The first incident occurred Thursday, Nov. 26, when deputies met with a man who had been scammed out of \$1,400 in Google Play gift cards. The man told deputies he received earlier that day an email he thought had come from Amazon Prime about a fraudulent purchase on his account.

The email was sent at 1:02 p.m. by a "Todd.Gutierrez@icloud.com" and stated the victim could expect an Apple MacBook Pro he purchased to be delivered by the weekend. The total cost was \$2,208.34. The email stated if the victim did not make the purchase, he could cancel it by calling (844) 365-2937.

That email was followed by three in succession from account-update@amazon.com, a legitimate Amazon Prime email address, indicating someone had signed into the man's account from the Washington D.C. area. At 1:04 p.m., the man received an email from amazondepartment@gmail.com, a fraudulent email address, indicating his account had been placed on a four-hour hold.

The man decided to call the (844) number from the initial email to report he didn't make the purchase. The man was told he could receive a refund after paying a processing fee. The scammer told the man given limitations on open businesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic he could pay the processing fee with Google Play gift cards.

The scammer kept the man on the phone as he drove to a local convenience store. The scammer

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wanted to know the man's every move, asking questions such as if he was in the car yet, how far he was from the store and whether he was in the checkout line.

The man purchased \$600 in Google Play gift cards on his debit card. When the scammer said it wasn't enough, the man drove to a second convenience store and purchased another \$800 in gift cards on a credit card. The scammer then hung up.

Given the timing of the emails, deputies think there is a high likelihood the man's computer or smartphone was hacked and the scammers were able to use his personal information against him. This scam also worked because the man stayed on the phone, allowing the scammers to deploy distraction techniques to prevent the man from thinking critically about his actions.

Below are some tips to avoid being a victim of a scam like this one:

- First and foremost, it's almost always a scam if someone says you can use gift cards to pay a debt, processing fee or avoid going to jail on a warrant.
- If you find yourself on the phone with a suspected scammer, collect as much information as you can without giving out any of your personal information.
- When in doubt, hang up and call the company, agency or organization directly to verify the caller's information.
- Avoid using unsecure public Wi-Fi unless you have installed a virtual private network (VPN) on your computer, smartphone and other devices.
- Change passwords often.
- Be wary of click-throughs in emails and text messages. If it seems suspect, delete the message immediately.
- Make sure you have downloaded the most up-to-date operating system for your devices, as software developers are constantly updating protections to thwart the latest hacking schemes.
- Double check the email address before taking action. A company, organization, agency or government entity's name should always come second in the domain name space. For example, account-update@amazon.com is a legitimate address because the company name is featured second, while amazondepartment@gmail.com is fake because the company is featured first in the username space. Also, a real Amazon employee or department wouldn't use a Google Mail address.

Anyone with information regarding this or any other crime is asked to call the Weld County Sheriff's Office at (970) 356-4015 or Northern Colorado Crime Stoppers at **1-800-222-TIPS (8477)**. **Tips can also be submitted through the Crime Stoppers website at**

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www.crimeshurt.com. Those submitting tips through Crime Stoppers that lead to the arrest and filing of charges on a suspect(s) may be eligible for a cash reward.

Steve Reams

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