

Financial scams. Those two words likely create a mental picture for you. If you're like most people, your mental picture is that of your parents, grandparents, or someone else from the baby boom generation either on a land line or about to click a link in an email from an unknown sender. Increasingly though, criminals are targeting your children, grandchildren, and others in Gen Z with a surprising level of success.

Technological innovations present challenges for any generation, especially when these innovations come about later in an individual's life. Ask a baby boomer to help you start a carbureted car at -5 degrees and you'll be headed to Kwik Trip to get a donut and coffee in no time. Ask a baby boomer to send you a "Snap" and you'll likely get a blank stare. Criminals running scams on senior citizens depend upon the senior's unfamiliarity with technology to facilitate their scam. However, when criminals target the children and young adults of Gen Z, they are counting on the victim's complete comfort with technology and online transactions.

Gen Z was born into a world dominated by the internet and technology. In their formative years, electronic transactions have become the norm. Catch a Gen Z member without cash and they are more likely to rattle off a litany of peer-to-peer payment apps with names that sound like an elementary student trying to spell out the sound of a sneeze than offer to write you a check. Because most Gen Z members expect and prefer to pay electronically, receiving electronic communications seeking payments or financial information are solidly within their comfort zone. It is within this comfort zone that criminals are finding their victims.

Brenda Ramler is a Personal Banker at Frandsen Bank in Foley. She routinely deals with children and young adults who have fallen victim to these scams. According to Ramler, she and her colleagues deal with fraud daily and that increasingly, the victims of fraud are young adults. Ramler advised most scams targeting Gen Z members are phishing attacks designed to get the victim "curious enough to engage with [the criminal]." Ramler stated, "once [the victim] engages, [the criminal] either tries gaining [the victim's] trust, intimidating the [victim] or becoming aggressive and abrupt with the victim by using scare tactics." Ramler has seen many instances in which the criminal pressures or manipulates the victim into buying gift cards and providing the financial information on these cards to the criminal.

In Ramler's experience, victims encounter these criminals via email, text message, online chat rooms, gaming devices, social media accounts or instant messaging platforms. Ramler stated "many young adults spend countless hours on gaming systems and store their own debit cards or a parent's debit card on the system to pay fees for games and such. Since the start of the pandemic gaming systems have become probably the leading way to steal funds from young adults." Ramler suggests using pre-loaded gift or debit cards when paying for gaming services. "Pre-loaded cards are probably the safest because if the account is hacked, the damage is limited to the funds on the card" Ramler said.

For Gen Z members or those who have Gen Z members in their lives, the solution to these scams is the same as those scams targeting seniors. Always be suspicious of any unexpected contact, regardless of the method of contact or who the contact purports to be from. Ramler agreed, stating “teach [children and young adults] to not answer calls they don’t recognize, don’t click links out of curiosity and don’t respond to emails they are not familiar with. If someone reaches out through a chat session and wants them to message them privately in another way such as Google chat, Snap Chat and the other similar platforms tell them this is a red flag.” Ramler emphasized the importance of good lines of communication on this topic between adults and children by stating, “Teach [children and teens] about these dangers and how to follow their gut feelings when something feels wrong. Tell [children and teens] to come to a trusted adult and explain the issue or situation. Whenever someone tells them especially to NOT tell their parents that should be their RED flag and to go straight to a trusted adult immediately.”

Even when unexpected contacts looks legitimate, avoid giving up any personal or financial information. Scams targeting Gen Z members will be crafted to look legitimate, so be diligent in taking the time to research any unexpected contact. A good Google search and perhaps a telephone call to the purported source of the contact should separate any legitimate inquiry from scams.

As a member of Gen X, I’m not fluent in Instagram, Tik Tok, or any of the other places most Gen Z people frequent. If there is a Gen Z person reading this, I’d be grateful if you could transpose this simple message into a Tik Tok video, “be skeptical of anyone who contacts you unexpectedly.” For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff’s Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.