

In the final months of every year, many seasons happen at once. In the world of sports, baseball is crowning their champion, football is approaching mid-year, while basketball and hockey teams are just starting out. For others, pumpkin spice is giving way to turkey and cranberries all while holiday shopping overshadows everything. As Halloween fades behind us, retailers work hard to focus attention on the holiday shopping season. With more people doing their shopping online every year, we see new seasons of criminal activity appearing.

The first is phishing season. No, I'm not talking about catching fall walleyes. As more people embrace online shopping, phishing attacks aimed at stealing your personal or financial information become more of a concern. Criminals know more and more people are utilizing and depending upon online retailers to find that perfect holiday gift or can't miss sale. Emails warning of a suspension to your Amazon account, a delay in shipping for your packages, or an issue with your bank account are all designed to catch a consumer's attention and hook you into clicking on the links within the email. Always treat unexpected emails and text messages with a healthy dose of skepticism and mistrust, just like that lime jello dish with the fruit in it your Aunt Beatrice brings to Thanksgiving. If you believe the email or text message could be legitimate, find a way to contact the sender without using any links in the email. Virtually all retailers, shippers, and banks have either a website or app in our modern world. Use these resources to reach out to the alleged sender to inquire if there truly is an issue.

Online fraud season is in full swing this time of year. Criminals routinely set up fake websites or bogus retail outlets on social media hoping to defraud people who come across their paths. Deals that seem too good to be true, usually are. Be alert if you find one of these retailers offering merchandise at drastically discounted prices. In the best-case scenario, you'll end up with a cheap knock-off version of the merchandise you were promised. In the worst-case scenario, no merchandise will be sent your way as the criminal and their online store disappear into the dark corners of the internet with your money and financial information. Other red flags to watch for include requirements that payment be made in gift cards, cryptocurrency, or wire transfers. These payment methods are generally not trackable and offer the consumer no protection or hope of getting reimbursed. Using a credit card or secured payment system (like PayPal, Venmo, or Apple Pay) provide consumers with fraud protection and the ability to get reimbursed if a seller turns out to be less than reputable. Sticking with reputable online retailers who provide contact information and dispute resolution policies is always advisable.

As delivery trucks circulate through our neighborhoods, porch pirates be setting sail. As the pirates troll past homes, unattended packages are their intended target. Your best defense against these opportunistic criminals is to keep packages out of sight. Ideally, schedule delivery when you'll be home. If that isn't possible, consider a delivery to your workplace or coordinating with trusted neighbors or family members who can be home when packages are delivered. If the package must be delivered to an empty home, many shippers allow customers to include delivery instructions for their package. Designate an out-of-sight location at your home, such as behind a privacy fence or inside a shed, and request the package be placed there rather than out in the open. For those professional online shoppers, a quick search will offer a variety of package lockers at reasonable prices that would serve to keep packages hidden away. If you happen to catch a glimpse of a suspected porch pirate sailing on your block, please report this suspicious activity right away to your local law enforcement.

Regardless of what season you are in, we hope that these tips will help keep you from being a victim. 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.