

Keeping Your Money Safe: Mystery Shopping Scams

Businesses and individuals lose billions of dollars every year due to fraud. While PlainsCapital Bank has a seasoned fraud prevention team in place to protect our customers, we understand that the best protection is education. To that end, our Fraud Prevention Series, "Keeping Your Money Safe," highlights the latest fraud scams with helpful tips on how you can avoid them.

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The recent increase in unemployment caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has spurred many people to seek alternative sources of income. Unfortunately, scammers are aware of this and look to exploit people who are in difficult financial situations by luring them into "mystery shopping" scams.

What Is the Scam?

According to the Federal Trade Commission, mystery shopping is an actual legitimate activity, where retailers hire companies to evaluate the quality of service in their stores. These companies instruct an individual (known as a mystery shopper) to make a particular purchase in a store or restaurant, and then report on the experience. Sometimes, the shopper receives payment for their work.

But in the case of a mystery shopping scam, a criminal posing as a legitimate entity first lures the victim with the promise of easy money, which is often paired with receiving a large check in the mail. The victim is then instructed to deposit the check into their bank account, keep the amount that has been designated as their "payment," and use the remainder to go purchase items, such as gift cards. The criminal will ask the person to send the card information or take a picture of the back of the card for them. They may also ask that the victim provide details regarding their service, which makes the scam appear more legitimate.

In other instances, the victim is asked to wire the remaining balance of the money to a third party. The catch is, banks must make funds from deposited checks available within days, whereas discovering a fake check can take weeks. If a check turns out to be a fake, the person who deposited it—in this case, the victim—is responsible for reimbursing the bank.

How to Avoid Mystery Shopping Scams

By using caution and staying vigilant, you can avoid becoming the victim of a mystery shopping scam. These include the following tips:

- Always ignore unsolicited emails and text messages, especially if they are coming from Gmail, Yahoo, etc., rather than a verified company email account.
- A legitimate company will never ask you to use a money transfer to send cash to them or anywhere else, for any purpose.
- Never deposit a check from someone you don't know,

especially if the stranger is asking you to wire money.

- Be suspicious of any company that hires you via email or phone call without any interview or background checks.
- Don't trust any person or company that promises you can make a lot of money as a mystery shopper, as this is almost certainly a scam. Remember, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

In addition, legitimate businesses generally hire mystery shoppers through independent companies, many of which are members of the Mystery Shopping Providers Association (MSPA). To check on the legitimacy of a company offering to make you a mystery shopper, you can visit www.mysteryshop.org for more information.

As always, the "Keeping Your Money Safe" fraud prevention series is designed to help you thwart cyber criminals trying to acquire your personal information or infiltrate your devices. The key to protecting yourself is education and awareness. PlainsCapital Bank's Fraud Department provides educational resources for businesses and customers to help detect and prevent fraud on their accounts. For more information about our fraud prevention efforts, [visit our fraud resources page](#).