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Neighborhood Con Artists

The wolves in sheep's clothing

By Kat Avila | Web Published 9.3.2004

Not long after I wrote "Neighborhood Peeping Toms" (LatinoLA, 8/9/2004, <http://www.latinola.com/story.php?story=1968>), I found out that some juvenile delinquents had approached my mother's house - in the guise of students selling door-to-door - to gain access to the inside. They used high-pressure appeals to the mommy instinct: "I have to make a phone call to my mother. I have to use the bathroom." When they weren't successful, the bullies left non-local graffiti in the driveway. The Santa Ana police didn't bother to write a report since nothing could be proven.

Over the years something like this has occurred several times. It is not unexpected in neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants. A group of young hustlers pretends to be selling magazines or chocolates for school; their real intent is to scout your house for a later burglary. Or sometimes it's easy money up front, like the kid who was walking around with a stolen list of Orange County Register subscribers and collecting money.

The most convincing con artist is someone who looks like your favorite uncle. A well-dressed bilingual man went door-to-door to sign up fellow Latinos for English lessons. He took their advance payments and never showed up again. Now he's just another pickpocket story, filed alongside stories of family and friends who have been taken in by pyramid schemes.

Self-righteous Chicanos are vulnerable to being hit up for cash from beggars posing as illegal immigrants in dire straits. You don't want to appear hypocritical or heartless, so you give in and let yourself be controlled by a total stranger without any investigation. You won't give an inch to the oppressive, hegemonic pale-faced fraternity, but you'll roll over like a dumb puppy



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for your hermano with the trickster heart.

The more sophisticated pickpockets use the telephone or e-mail. They pose as representatives of a financial institution. Apparently there's a problem with your account and they need to verify your account number, PIN number, password, credit card number, and/or Social Security number. Some e-mail cons are cleverly designed Trojan horses; the correspondence may contain the exact logo and even list the legitimate web site. Don't give out any financial information! Contact your financial institution either in person or through a familiar customer service number if you think there might be an actual problem.

Then there's the con artist who tries to cheat your children working their minimum-wage jobs at the local store: "I gave you a twenty, not a five." "What do you mean you won't accept this unsigned credit card with no photo I.D. that has 'VOID' written on it?" (In the latter case, the barely-out-of-high-school cashier was intimidated into accepting the card. She told me about it yesterday after it happened.)

Home repair and auto repair scams? Let's have coffee together to swap horror stories.

Now, there are times when the person at your door is not trying to con you but is really part of a school fundraiser or is trying to earn an honest living, or the person on the phone is really trying to protect your credit card by confirming your purchases (they will not ask for personal financial information). That is why it is easy for the wolves to sneak in among the sheep. Therefore, stay aware, educate yourself, and hang on to your hard-earned dollars!

Kat says art censors and con artists are bad news for the community.

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