



Data Privacy Detective Podcast – Episode 66: Phone Scams and You, A True Story

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Authors:

[Joseph J. Dehner](#)

This is a true story of a phone scam of May 2021. The Data Privacy Detective got a call on the home landline, and here's how it went. ([Listen to the podcast episode](#) to follow along.)

The call came from a local number, rather than from the actual South Asian location of the call center being used for fraudulent and criminal purposes. It was from the same area code as our home phone number.

Hello, this is Spectrum calling, the voice started, with an accent sounding like that of a good friend who lives in Mumbai, India. I could hear background clatter of a boiler room or call center.

Then, the first trick of any salesperson – are you doing well today? the voice asked, hoping for a “yes.” Rather than hang up, I said yes.

Wonderful, so happy to hear that, said the voice, which then explained that it belonged to James Michael, who provided a phone number in case I wanted to get back to him later about the wonderful gift he was about to bestow. Later I called the number (347-593-8761). This was a non-working number at a local bank.

James Michael (his stage name) said that Spectrum was sorry for all the service problems that had plagued my area and was also sorry to report this was going to continue. In fact, James Michael said, in a few hours our entire TV service would go out for a long time. So, to avoid that, Spectrum was going to install new software that would prevent any problem with TV reception ever in the future. Great news, and not only that, but Spectrum was also going to issue us a \$30 a month credit on our future bills for two years – almost \$700 of compensation

for the terrible problems it had caused.

I said, go ahead and apply the credit, thanks. But then James said there would be a one-time fee to install the software needed to enter a golden age of TV reception, only \$199, and if we kept the software for six months, the \$199 would then be refunded.

James Michael asked if my TV was on. I said no, but then I turned it on (it was doing just fine). He said, okay now, please turn off your TV, as that was needed to install the software.

OK, it's off now, I said. James Michael said the software was being installed now and that would only take 8 to 10 minutes.

Then he asked for how I wanted to pay, which credit card, for the temporary one-time fee of \$199. I said, just charge it through the same system we use to pay Spectrum monthly. That seemed to confuse or frustrate James Michael, though he kept a friendly tone and said instead, please write down the name of the software we are installing, which is paid through the one-time fee. He asked me to get a pen and pencil ready. Go ahead, I said. He said, "W—? Last Link." I said, please repeat. He spelled it – Wireless Link." I wrote it on a scrap of paper.

James Michael returned to asking for what card I wanted to use for payment. Just use what you already have in the Spectrum system, please, I kindly replied. This seemed to stymie him. He said, I will now transfer you to my supervisor, who will help me.

Ten seconds later, someone saying he was Supervisor Ralph Smith was here to help me. He simply needed what credit card I wanted to use to pay the temporary one-time fee. I said to this impostor that Spectrum has my personal information, so just go ahead and charge it to what's on file. Oh no, said Ralph Smith's supposed voice, that's a fee instead of a charge, so it needs to be paid by credit card.

I asked, how do I know this is really Spectrum calling? Oh, said the Ralph Smith impersonator, we're approved by the Better

Business Bureau.

That was the end of my patience, so I disconnected, then called Spectrum to report the incident, which was not news to the Spectrum agent who fielded my inquiry.

This scam will succeed in stealing money from countless Americans. It's targeted particularly at older people who dearly love their television, especially during pandemic times. Lessons? Conclusions?

Not a bad scam – sophisticated actually. First, it began by what seemed to be a local phone number, followed by an apology from a service company (in this case Spectrum). Not a real one, but one that makes the listener think, oh yes, there have been problems. Finally, a company that cares!

Then, the trust me line – here's my phone number and how to call me later if you need to. He gave me his employee ID number – #10037. Building a relationship, seeming to be honest and transparent and accountable.

Then the explanation that he was calling to offer us a credit, not to sell something. Okay, credits of a modest amount over two years. Who would not want to say yes to that?

Then, instead of asking for funds or personal information, he made it urgent, as the TV reception would completely fail in three hours if I did not act now. This is the "engineer panic" part of a scammer's script.

Then one pretends to be following through – though this was stupid of the scammer – why would a turned off TV be able to receive a software update? But how many tech wizards are there in people over age 65, the targeted population for this.

Finally, only then did the request for credit card information pop up. And instead of arguing with me when I resisted, it moved to a friendly supervisor, who tried to convince me the caller that all is well because the Better Business Bureau approves.

You can see the tricks and traps in this scam. Of course, the best defense is not to answer such calls at all, but then how can one know that a local number is not an old friend or acquaintance calling

for a good reason.

If you get a call like this, write down the details. Share them with the fraud hotline of the company being impersonated. Notify the FBI and the Federal Trade Commission if you have the time. This builds a file on these entities. Though it's unlikely that law enforcement will be able to shut down the criminal syndicates and others active in this fund-raising activity, it will build the awareness that our privacy is attacked through such intrusions. Without greater regulation and defense against such increasing scams, there's a risk that our communications systems become so riddled with such problems, that we'll all retreat into a hole to avoid them.

One definition of privacy is the right to be left alone. Anyone with a phone will find that hard to achieve. You can, however, work with your phone service provider to block calls in various ways. Check with your provider what restrictions you can put into place to limit calls from James Michael and Ralph Smith.

Remember – protecting your personal privacy begins with you.

If you have ideas for more interviews or stories, please email info@thedataprivacydetective.com.

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