

You've Got Scams

No writer is safe from e-mail scams promising fame and glory unless you learn to recognize them ahead of time. Remember that if an offer is too good to be true, then it probably is.

VIOLIN teachers and screenwriters.

The resemblance is uncanny, no? Both work in the arts. Both seek payment for their services (although the rosin-and-bow gang probably has a better success rate). And both find themselves in the sights of e-mail scammers.

All right, the point is conceded: In our wired age, *everybody* finds themselves in the sights of e-mail scammers. But violin teachers and screenwriters are special. Why, they're right up there with wedding photographers.

According to anti-spam crusader Joe Wein, violin teachers, wedding photographers and screenwriters are among the professionals who have been specifically targeted by would-be cyber crooks hailing from that West African land of spam, scams and the star-crossed prince who urgently needs to transfer \$35.5 million to your bank account for safekeeping: Nigeria.

"Maybe up to a decade ago, it was true that victims of Nigerian scammers were mostly wealthy people," the Japan-based Wein said in an e-mail interview, "but the picture really changed dramatically over the last five years."

That's where violin teachers, wedding photographers and screenwriters come in. See, in the old days — the 1990s — a Nigerian scammer could rely on the classic scam (the one about the prince) to bring in the customers. All he had to do was follow a simple three-act structure. First, e-mail an unsuspecting person and pretend to be a prince in dire straits. Second, encourage the unsuspecting person to provide the particulars of his or her bank account (so that his royal self can transfer \$35.5 million into it, of course). And then the surprise act three finale: Clean out the

unsuspecting person's account.

Eventually, the classic Nigerian e-mail scam became a victim of its own success, or maybe excess. The e-mails were so ubiquitous that the scammers' pool of unsuspecting people became just a little shallower. On the Internet, whistleblowers abounded. In the brick-and-mortar world, Better Business bureaus issued consumer alerts. By now, if you haven't been wizened to the Nigerian prince e-mail scam, you probably don't have e-mail, on account of it's hard to get Wi-Fi under that rock you call home.

None of this is to say the Nigerian prince has retreated from public life. Spam e-mail is forever, and the Nigerian scam is timeless. In fact, according to the Federal Trade Commission, it's been "around for decades," far predating e-mail. But faced with the fact that at least a few people were onto their game, the scammers diversified.

"There are many Nigerian scams besides the more well-known generic varieties," Wein says. "The scammers are pretty effective at using Google to uncover sites with [e-mail] addresses that fit whatever profile they are searching for."

All of this explains, according to Wein's spam-tracking site (joewein.net), why violin teachers are e-mailed by an overseas World Health Organization official seeking lessons for his son. (And, oh, by the way, could you possibly deposit a cashier's check to cover the lessons and then wire back the leftover money?) And it explains why wedding photographers are e-mailed by a British groom-to-be (or perhaps a proud Danish father) seeking their services for his upcoming nuptials. (And, oh, by the way, could you possibly deposit a cashier's check, etc...). And it's

why screenwriters are e-mailed by a Japanese conglomerate seeking the rights to their latest thriller, romantic comedy or four-quadrant action-adventure.

The screenwriter scam, tagged by Wein as the "Film/Movie Rights Scripts Purchase" scam, is like the teacher and photographer scams in that it involves the scammer, for all his fancy talk of making a "mutually agreeable lump-sum payment for multiple film/movie scripts of anticipated medium and large-scale worldwide commercial impact," getting to the inevitable punch line: Say, what's your bank-account number?

The long, convoluted text of at least one of the Nigerian screenwriter scam e-mails, or 419s (after the local Nigerian criminal code that theoretically makes such scams illegal), can be found on Wein's site. The somewhat shorter version goes like this: A representative for the Hashimoto Group, supposedly a long-standing, family-owned Japanese conglomerate (that, um, doesn't have a corporate website, and, um, relies on Yahoo! Mail and Hotmail accounts), reveals he is contacting "prospective screenwriters who are currently interested in selling the rights to completed film/movie scripts with commercial potentials."

The pitch goes on to pledge the Hashimoto Group's commitment to becoming a "major player" in Europe and that other film production hotbed, the United Arab Emirates. It talks partnerships, onscreen credits and consulting fees.

Unfortunately, the e-mail, for all its detail, for all its relatively error-free grammar, never explains how a "prospective" screenwriter would have a script, much less one with "commercial potentials," lying around his or her apartment? Isn't a "prospective" screenwriter a person who's only thought about becoming a screenwriter?



Ah, but we quibble. And the Hashimoto Group does not quibble. In fact, it's not even married to the whole screenplay thing. If by chance you have a spare "idea" lying around your apartment, why, it'll take a look at that, too.

One other interesting thing about the famous Japanese conglomerate: According to Wein, its e-mails were sent from an Internet service provider in ... wait for it ... Nigeria. "In fact," Wein says, "numerous conventional Nigerian scam e-mails had been sent from the same IP address, so there was little doubt that it was that of an Internet cafe frequented by online scammers." (An attempt to reach the Hashimoto Group rep via the e-mail addresses found in the letters posted on Wein's site was unsuccessful at press time.)

In any case or any location, the initial Hashimoto Group e-mail makes no mention of money beyond the promise that should a screenplay or bright idea be found viable, the writer will live the dream of all scribes, prospective or not, and get paid.

In two follow-up e-mails posted by Wein from the Hashimoto Group to an unidentified writer, money still isn't mentioned. Nor are red-flag words and phrases like "cashier's check," "account transfer" and "say, what's your bank-account number again?" But what would a Nigerian/419 scam be without an eventual detour into the world of finance? Lee Eide wouldn't know.

Eide is an author and unproduced screenwriter from Minnesota. Last year, he received and responded to a series of e-mails along the lines of the Hashimoto Group ones. From the get-go, Eide was suspicious, but he was also desperate.

"I wasn't thinking clearly in general

and, being an unpublished writer, I was susceptible to something like this," Eide says in an e-mail interview.

Eide tried to keep things real and asked himself why a supposedly deep-pocketed company with designs of capturing the worldwide box office would solicit material from a writer with no screen credits. But his cooler head did not prevail. At least not at first.

Per Nigerian/419 scam etiquette, the company never asked for money and instead floated an offer of \$1 million to Eide for a screenplay. Of course, for Eide to get the payday, contracts had to be signed and notarized — and bank information had to be shared.

At first, Eide communicated with the scammers by e-mail. Then one day he tried to fax the company a document — possibly a copy of the contract, although Eide says he can't recall exactly what. Despite repeated attempts, the fax would not go through.

It was Eide's lucky break.

"I got extremely suspicious," Eide says. "I got one phone call from the scam artist, but it was a voicemail message, and the guy didn't leave a return number to call." And that was all Eide needed to hear. He closed the bank account that had been potentially compromised by the scammer. He did not report losing any money. Score one for unsuspecting people everywhere.

Eide says he thinks "the perps," as he calls them, got his e-mail address from his website, which discusses the novels he's published and the screenplays he's written. Similarly, Wein said the New Zealand writer who originally tipped him off to the scam believed her e-mail address had been found through the New Zealand Writers Guild website. (For what it's

The screenwriter scam is like others in that it involves the scammer, for all his talk of making a "mutually agreeable payment for multiple scripts," getting to the inevitable punch line: Say, what's your bank account number?

worth, the Kiwi apparently was offered \$12 million for three scripts. Like Eide, she smelled a rat and shooed it away.)

The good news is that in the year since Eide and the New Zealander were both contacted, Wein said he hasn't heard more of the Nigerian screenplay scam. (The New Zealander, in fact, was the only writer to contact Wein with her story.) But don't mistake the silence as a sign that the scam or the scammers are finished.

"In all scam formats," Wein says, "people who report losses are far outnumbered by people who suspected that they were being scammed and didn't respond or didn't pay." Plus, many people who lose money are too embarrassed to talk about it later, according to Wein.

The way Wein sees it, the best way to fight the scammers is to expose the scammers — that's why his website features thousands and thousands of e-mails used in actual scam attempts. Read 'em, weep and learn.

Another tip is to report any suspected fraud to the scammer's e-mail provider. Just cut and paste the suspicious e-mail into Wein's handy "scamomatic" (as found at scamomatic.com) to see if the text matches past scam e-mails. Or you could become an informed member of the Scam Baiting Community (as found at forum.scambaits.com).

Such measures don't put the scammers out of business, Wein says, "but [they] help keep them away from real paying victims." Not to mention violin teachers and screenwriters. ☑



JANE FRODO (frodo@creativewriting.com) has been quoted in *Elle* magazine, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *American Public Media's "Marketplace,"* among others.