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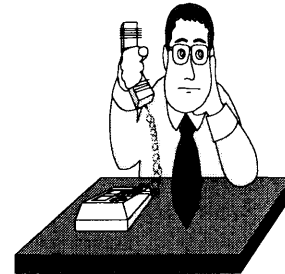
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# TECHNOLOGY ALERT

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## *The 809 Area* **Code: A Killer App For Scam Artists**



*This Alert discusses the newest alleged scheme that hooks victims via urgent E-Mail messages. The Alert contains material written by Ryan J. Donmoyer of AT&T Wireless and was reprinted with permission.*

A popular scam that coerces unsuspecting consumers to dial costly international pay-per-call telephone numbers has spread to the Internet, watchdog groups and telecommunications industry officials warn.

A company identifying itself as "Global Communications" has been sending unsolicited and tersely worded e-mail messages threatening legal action unless the recipient pays an unspecified overdue account. The message then gives a name and a number in the 809 area code to call for further information.

"I am writing to give you a final 24 hours to settle your outstanding account," the message warns. "If I have not received the settlement in full, I will commence legal proceedings without further delay. If you would like to discuss this matter to avoid court action, call Mike Murray at Global Communications."

Callers to the number are led to believe they are talking to a live person, but in fact it is a clever recording that responds to the caller's voice. Among other things, an irate-sounding man with a British accent warns, "Your check will come round or we'll come round to get it." The recording seems designed to keep callers on the line as long as possible, and is reportedly billed at \$25 per minute.

Although it may look like any other area code in the United States, 809 covers the Caribbean. Calls there are billed at international rates, and in many cases, surcharges for proprietary services, often phone sex lines or astrology services, are added.

Andy Boisseau, a spokesman for AT&T, says his company has become aware of many scams in recent months which urge recipients to call an 809 number. Some of them include:

Messages left on voice mail or answering machines claiming to have information on a family member who is ill, has died or has been arrested.

Another version may leave a message promising recipients a prize.

Unsolicited calls made to pagers sending an 809 number to call. Recently, AT&T blocked calls over its network made from a Dominican Republic number that was clearly fraudulent.

Newspapers and Internet advertisements for "mystery shoppers" and overseas job opportunities. Typically, these ads list a domestic number, which refers callers to the 809 number. "A recording on that

number contains a long-winded message that refers to companies that supposedly offer jobs for shoppers who check on store quality," according to an AT&T news release on the subject. "When people call those companies, which are legitimate businesses, there are no jobs to be had. The companies don't even know they are mentioned on the recording."

"We've done a lot to control fraud in this country. That's why you see it going overseas," Boisseau says. While it is impossible to tell just how widespread these scams are, the telecommunications industry estimates that fraud costs about \$2 billion a year.

Audri Lanford, co-editor of the free Internet e-zine Scambusters (<http://www.scambusters.com>) said that part of the reason the scams have been so successful is that the United States has recently added a slew of new area codes. The 809 prefix looks more like one of these than typical overseas exchanges, which begin with the dialing code "011."

Jennifer Adams, spokeswoman for MCI, said the long distance company's consumer protection unit has been recommending caution when calling 809 numbers. "If someone gets a message to call an unfamiliar 809 number, they should not immediately call it," she says. Although the 809 area code is a legitimate one on the North American calling system, unless you are planning a Caribbean vacation, have family, or do business in the region, be wary, she adds. Both AT&T and MCI forgive customers who may have been duped, their representatives say. However, Boisseau and Adams say that consumers do have to take responsibility for themselves.

### **Top Internet Scams**

While 809 area-code scams may be the most insidious, they are not among the most pervasive online ripoffs, according to the National Consumers League. The group is releasing what it says are the top Internet-related scams. The list is compiled from six months' worth of complaints to the group's Internet Fraud Watch Web site, which has averaged about 20,000 visits a week since it was created in February.

According to the NCL, the top five Internet scams are:

1. **Pyramid schemes:** Also known as "Ponzi schemes," these arrangements make money for a handful of early players, but most investors lose everything.
2. **Internet related services:** Scam artists promise but don't deliver Internet services, such as Web site design or Internet access accounts.
3. **Equipment sales:** Crooks sell computers or computer-related equipment such as RAM chips, motherboards, or sound cards but either don't deliver or deliver less than promised.
4. **Business opportunities:** Scammers sell business opportunities that are too good to be true, often leaving buyers unable to recoup their investment (or, in some cases, make anything at all).
5. **Work-at-home offers:** A perennial favorite for scam artists in classified ads, work-at-home schemes have gone high-tech to snag online consumers. These may involve converting graphics or photos, or doing word processing. The work usually doesn't meet the crooks' "standards" when completed.

