

There's an old cliché that seniors are the most vulnerable to scams, because they're more trusting than younger people. However, the biggest scam in history, Bernie Madoff's \$50 billion Ponzi scheme bilked millions out of supposedly aware younger people like actor Kevin Bacon, producers Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg, as well as other wealthy suckers.



They all put their misguided trust in the sleazy guy because they believed his wild promises of heavy returns on their money. Now that it has all been exposed, it's easy to ridicule those investors for being so stupid as to entrust billions to this con artist. However, every day, both rich and poor, young and old, are falling for scams they should know to avoid.

The rules for spotting scams are simple. If it sounds too good to be true, it's a scam! For instance, if a direct mail piece offers you a travel deal for free, you can be sure you'll eventually pay, often through the nose.

Say the offer is a round-trip flight and two nights in Las Vegas free. Forget it. Usually, the small print requires you to listen to a sales pitch, and from our own experience, even smaller print says you must sit through the long, painfully pressured presentation or later be billed for hundreds of bucks after you've returned from the trip.

Another scam is the timeshare deal. Of course, some timeshare communities are absolutely legitimate. However, if you're a senior couple wandering through an entrance of a Vegas hotel lately, you're almost sure to be accosted by a smiling guy or girl who offers you all kinds of free stuff, including buffets, nights at the hotel and cash. All you have to do to get the goodies is attend a sit-down timeshare pitch somewhere in Sin City.

If you go, you're herded into a room with other senior suckers and subjected to a very hard sell. We fell for it once, and because we refused to go through the whole two-hour heavy pitch, we were kicked out of the hotel and never got our goodies.

An update note. Like all other real-estate business today, timeshare sales are way, way down. Don't ask me to join you in looking for deep-discount bargains, but if that kind of partial ownership of an apartment appeals to you, go do your research. If you really want a place to

crash every year for two weeks in such vacation spots as Vegas, Malibu, Big Sur, Lake Tahoe or Key West, get on the internet and call legitimate timeshare companies directly.

When dealing with the administrators on what you consider a legitimate deal, don't sign up until you know the TOTAL costs, including association and maintenance dues, as well as other factors you'll need to deal with when you get involved in a timeshare ownership. In fact, don't sign up at all until you've reviewed the entire deal with your personal attorney and/or your adult children.

Another offense against seniors is the old pigeon drop trick, with some modern updates. You get an email, phone call or letter from some alleged attorney in Africa, England, Russia or the Caribbean saying they've recently found your long-lost relative's account or unclaimed money in your name in a foreign bank.

Usually the figure is somewhere between 100,000 and a million bucks. If you bite, you're asked to send processing money of from \$1,000 to \$20,000. Believe it or not, almost every day we hear tragic stories of elderly people who've fallen for the scam. Of course, once their "good intentions" money was sent, they never hear about the big bucks they were supposed to receive.

If you're like us, you know just about every sales pitch we hear lately is manipulated in some way. Hotel rooms, flights and combination packages are advertised with one "low, low" price, but all come with at least a 15 to 25 percent boost for taxes and other piled-ons.

Too many TV commercials and infomercials are now screaming pitches for miracle cures, cars, super glues, lotions, diet pills and other obviously falsely advertised junk. Also, there are the TV charities. If you have any doubts about such pitches, don't buy or contribute unless you check the source with the Better Business Bureau or other protection agency.

If you're a senior, when contacted by phone, email or snail mail, whether the offer is for travel or anything else, just use your common sense before throwing away money on false deals.