

Reality Check

By Sid Kirchheimer

It should be obvious: Receive an unexpected check—for a lottery you never entered, a loan you never asked for—and it's probably not worth the paper it's printed on.

Yet fake check scams are thriving, accounting for nearly a third of complaints to the National Consumers League and other agencies.

Usually it works like this: You're instructed to deposit the check and then forward some portion of the deposit elsewhere, typically by wire transfer, as advance fees that will allow you to collect a jackpot.

By the time your bank discovers the check is fake, which can take two weeks, the scammers have gotten their forwarded loot, and you're on the hook for funds drawn from that deposit. You may even face criminal charges or have your bank account frozen.

Spotting a fake check can be tricky. Here are some tip-offs to the rip-offs:

1. Edges: Most legit checks have at least one perforated or rough edge. If all edges are smooth, the check may have been printed from a personal computer.

2. Bank logo: A fake check often has no bank logo or one that's faded, suggesting it was copied from an online photo or software.

3. Bank address: No street address, just a P.O. box or a wrong ZIP code—which you can check by contacting the issuing bank—indicate a fake check.

4. Check number: If there's no check number at the upper right-hand corner, or the number doesn't match the check number in the MICR line, you've got a counterfeit.



By the time you discover the check is a fake, you're on the hook. You may even face criminal charges.

Typically, the first nine digits of the MICR line make up the routing number, which identifies which bank issued the check. A check with no routing number or with fewer—or more—than nine digits is clearly a fake. You can verify routing numbers by going to www.fededirectory.frb.org/reserve.cfm. □

5. Amount: Usually it's less than \$5,000 because federal rules require that deposits of that size be made available to you within five days. This can trick you into thinking that the check has cleared. Deposits of \$5,000 or more are subject to longer holding periods.

6. Paper: Fake checks are often lighter than the paper stock used for authentic checks. They also may feel slippery.

7. Signature: Stains or gaps around signatures, a digitized appearance, or many up and down pen strokes indicate the payer's John Hancock was printed from a scanned original or was forged.

8. MICR line: The bottom of every real check has a series of digits in an unusual font, representing the bank routing number, the account number and the check number, generally in that order. That special font is known as MICR, which stands for

magnetic ink character recognition. These numbers can be read by specialized check-sorting machines. Real magnetic ink looks and feels dull to the touch. Fake MICR numbers are often shiny.

9. Routing number: