
Column: Businesses warned about fake customers

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Since 1912, the Better Business Bureau (BBB) has guided consumers in finding honest and ethical businesses, and how to keep bad businesses at bay. Let's flip the script here and ask, how about businesses needing protection against unethical consumers?

Some customers may set impossible expectations when it comes to getting in touch; some customers don't want to hear that your business doesn't offer the product they need. And some customers, well, they may not exist at all.

In recent months, BBB Great West + Pacific has received multiple complaints from businesses regarding fake customers that have initiated a quote request, provided deposits (often paying more than required), and then requested a partial refund of the deposit due to a personal emergency.

Here's what happens next: The honest and ethical company grants these refunds as a money order or via payment platforms like Zelle or PayPal. Unfortunately for businesses, the original deposit, often provided via cashier check, is found to be fraudulent, resulting in lost funds by the business after returning money to the fake customer.

These bad actors use many different names in their tactics. However, the name Donna Bass has been used in multiple instances across the United States, including at least twice in the Great West + Pacific service area.

In fact, a roofing company accredited with the BBB reported losing \$4,500 to a customer named Donna Bass. But this was no normal Donna Bass. She claimed to be unable to meet the roofers at her home due to undergoing cancer treatment.

So, the honest roofing company went to the home address, visually inspected the roof, and provided a quote to Donna Bass. Donna paid the full \$12,000 via cashier's check, much more than the required one-third deposit. The following day she requested a partial refund due to a family emergency, and the day after that, needed more funds returned. Donna Bass was still well above the required one-third deposit amount, so the business fulfilled both requests.

A few days later the business's bank notified them that the original \$12,000 cashier's check was fraudulent. The company suddenly realized they'd been taken advantage of. The home they visited had no connection to this supposed Donna Bass.

Trust goes both ways in a business transaction. Customers might not be what they seem in some instances. Look to protect your business and vet your potential customers. The roofing company that was taken advantage of is doing so by now verifying with city public records that the customer who reaches out to them is listed as an owner of the home.

At Better Business Bureau, we encourage all companies to verify who they are interacting with before exchanging any funds, whether the prospective customer came directly to their website or from a third-party service. If you're targeted once, don't think you won't be targeted again. Since the Accredited roofing company was targeted, they have since been targeted two more times by individuals using other names.

Businesses may want to be cautious of customers that are not able to meet in person or give an unusual sense of urgency. Pay close attention to individuals that request the business accommodate them for family emergencies or other extenuating circumstances. Keep in mind that some of your real customers may have legitimate family emergencies, but if they are bringing this up on multiple occasions and leveraging it against your business, that's a warning sign. Also, ensure that any payments from a customer clear your bank before returning any funds to the customer.

Other scenarios in which a business can be taken advantage may include fake invoices and email phishing. Build out a vetting procedure for all staff to follow and review it regularly as tactics and technology change. Ensure employees know what to look for in protecting the business.

Logan Hickie is the Public Relations and Communications Manager at BBB Great West + Pacific. The Better Business Bureau (BBB), a private, non-profit organization, has empowered people to find businesses, brands, and charities they can trust for more than 110 years. For more information, visit [BBB.org](https://bbb.org).