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The Top 10 Worst Internet Hoaxes

Communicating by e-mail seems safe and clean compared to the real world--no bad breath, no cauliflower ear, and no anthrax. But e-mail doesn't escape the clutches of con artists. Just because an e-mail message looks legitimate and plays upon our deeply felt hopes and fears doesn't mean it's true. Here's our top ten list of some of the most devious hoaxes and outright scams in Internet history. Don't be surprised to see some of them appear (and mutate into new forms) again and again.

10. Let the Good Times Roll Even the threat of a computer virus is enough to throw many PC users into a tizzy. And virus warning hoaxes are nearly as bad as the real thing. Frightened recipients frantically forward the bogus advisory to everyone they know. One of the first phony bulletins warned recipients not to read or download any files with the name Good Times. Naturally, the message spread like a virus, bogging down mail servers all over the world.

9. Help a Sick Child Who wouldn't want to save a little girl dying of cancer? Or help a little boy with epilepsy? The various incarnations of this hoax go on and on. Most of them involve forwarding the e-mail message to others. In return, the American Cancer Society, a hospital, or another medical organization will donate anywhere from a few cents to a dollar to the non-existent child.

8. Bill Gates Reaches Out to You Impossible as it may seem, Bill Gates is contacting you, personally. And not only that, the billionaire wants to give you money! "My name is Bill Gates. Here at Microsoft we have just compiled an e-mail tracing program..." Naturally, there will be some forwarding of e-mail involved. Starting to see a pattern? Variations on this theme appear to come from Walt Disney Jr. (who never existed), The Gap, Victoria's Secret, and AOL.

7. Dial 809 for Trouble This started as a real e-mail scam, but somebody managed to turn the whole thing into a hoax, too. A few years back, an e-mail message requesting payment of an "outstanding account" demanded that recipients call a number in the 809 area code (a Caribbean prefix) to clear things up. Lots of people dialed the number only to incur \$25-per-minute phone charges. ScamBusters.com exposed the original threat, but some joker started circulating an altered version of the ScamBusters report that adds to the confusion. According to ScamBusters, there were other area codes used in the scam: 242 (Bahamas), 284 (British Virgin Islands), and 787 (Puerto Rico). Does that mean you should never dial numbers in the 809 area code or these other zones? Of course not.

6. Money Nonsense in Nigeria You receive an urgent, confidential message from a Nigerian government official who wants to deposit millions of dollars in your bank account. The official is contacting you in order to bypass some local bureaucratic snafu. All he needs is your name and bank account number. Should you respond, or delete the message? You might find it peculiar, but lots of people have been conned out of their savings in this dangerous and ongoing con game, known as the Advance Fee Fraud, 419 Fraud, or Nigerian Scam.

According to the 419 Coalition Web site, the con has pulled in more than \$5 billion and is one of the largest industries in Nigeria.

5. Save Big Bird Everybody knows that PBS needs your support to keep delivering its programming. So when you receive a professionally written plea quoting Nina Totenberg and warning that the system is in danger, it comes as no surprise. You don't even have to send money, just--you guessed it--forward the message. This kind of hoax is bound to stick around for a while. So for future reference, remember that there is no such thing as an e-mail petition.

4. The \$250 Cookie Recipe This is a true story, really. It must be--I read about it in an e-mail message. You've probably stumbled upon this message, too. But in case you haven't heard, the story goes like this: Someone ate a cookie for dessert at a restaurant in a Neiman Marcus store. The customer asked for the recipe, and was charged \$250 for it (not "\$2.50," as expected). Though this urban legend dates back more than 50 years, according to the San Fernando Valley Folklore Society, it's gained a new life thanks to the wonders of e-mail. Whatever you do, don't bother forwarding it.

3. Deodorant Endangers Your Health? We tend to believe reasonable first-person accounts, especially if they report the advice of doctors or other experts and prey on our fears. A convincing-sounding message forwarded from a woman who attended a health seminar warned that deodorant can cause breast cancer. There's no truth to the story, says the American Cancer Society. But post the message to your favorite mailing list and just watch the panic ensue. You can stop worrying about shampoo and toothpaste, too.

2. Last Photo From the World Trade Center Deck? Even the tragic events of September 11th have spawned hoaxes. Did you see the photo posted on the Web of a tourist posing on the World Trade Center observation deck a split second before an airliner crashed into it? Visit an Urban Legends Web Page for the photo and the reasons why it never happened.

1. Next Time, Just Say "I Don't Know" If you've been suckered by an e-mail hoax, you're in good company. During the 2000 elections, a gullible television reporter asked debating Senate candidates Hillary Clinton and Rick Lazio about pending legislation to establish a 5-cent tax on e-mail messages. Both stated their opposition to it--live on the air. Never mind that no such bill ever existed--the reporter had just read one of those urgent e-mails.