

GARTH BRUEN: NEWTOWN SCAM REPORT



PREYING ON OUR WEAKEST MOMENTS

For most of us the sight of a horrible tragedy triggers an “I wish I could help” reaction. This is in our nature as normal and most of us will contribute to our community at one time or another with sweat or cash from our wallet. I say “most” because there is an insidious population which only takes and never gives in times of tragedy. These vultures are persistently waiting in the wings for disaster to strike the innocent so they can collect off of your grief and good nature. Whether it was 9/11, the 2004 tsunami, hurricane Katrina, the gulf oil spill, or the horrid mass murder in Newton Connecticut, cold hearted charity scammers see only dollar signs in the suffering of others. It is bad enough to be ripped off online, but to have your money stolen with the belief you are helping someone is the ultimate insult.

The unspeakable Sandy Hook school shootings occurred on December 14, 2012. Within hours someone falsely claimed to be a relative of one of the deceased and began soliciting funeral donations on Facebook¹. Readers may wonder how the Bronx woman charged by the FBI for pretending to be a dead child’s aunt could live with herself. The answer is apparently quite easily as she also allegedly ran three fake hurricane relief charities following the destruction of Sandy on the east coast². The suspect had created several websites to solicit donations. Yes, we are talking about serial predators just waiting for the next disaster to strike. So, what drives these criminals?

¹<http://www.scribd.com/doc/118145609/Pozner-scam-charity-complaint>

²<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/bronx/feds-probe-home-newtown-scammer-article-1.1229228>

PSYCHOLOGY OF PERPETRATORS

The defendant in this case, Nouel Alba, had allegedly registered an Internet domain name under the identity "Jason Martin" on December 18, 2012. The Internet address was not a general reference to the Newtown shootings, but was actually the name of a six year-old victim: noahpozner.com. This would seem to be an unbelievable personal intrusion beyond simply taking advantage of public grief. However, the personal touch is a key part of the scam artist's toolbox. In various postings by Alba she claimed to have attended memorial services and been hugged by president Obama. This claim has a dramatic impact on the reader's brain: it expresses sensitive emotion and offers legitimacy to the scammer through an official proxy, in this case the very president of the United States. The scammer now has an almost divine purpose to collect your money. But this is also a distraction tactic, as common as a street hustler's deck of trick cards. The attention is now on the president's hug and not on the scammer. Believing scammers does not make you stupid, it makes you human. For the scammer, there is complete detachment from you suffering. The scammer's suffering, whether it is financial or emotional, trumps any empathy which would prevent a normal person from abusing a murdered child's name to steal. In the scammer's mind, they are the victim not you.

According to the FBI criminal complaint Alba was already being investigated for an unrelated wire fraud before the fake Newtown charity was reported by a real victim's family. The FBI discovered fake hurricane relief sites when



they examined the PayPal account connected with the Newtown scam site. Alba also had an Amazon Wish List for donations³. The child's namesake website has since been transferred to the family.

PERSONAL SCAMMERS

These fake charities are not always targeted at national tragedies but often take on very personal aspects. Several people have been caught and charged with fraud after faking cancer and collecting donations⁴. Many will use social networking to find victims⁵ and even set up websites⁶. These scammers in particular have additional mental disorders driving their behavior beyond the financial motivation⁷. Fake disease scammers frequently crave the attention in what is called Munchausen Syndrome. This is a very real syndrome in which people will not only fake illness but undergo unnecessary and painful procedures or even hurt themselves for attention.

VERIFYING CHARITIES

There are of course ways of verifying charities, but before we discuss that ask the question if money is what they really need? Money is obviously the

³ http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/blood_money_X7GyZnJ23AQTx4E7mi5N4J

⁴ <http://www.indianasnewscenter.com/news/local/Fake-Cancer-Patient-to-have-Pretrial-Conference-Mon-day-166739106.html>

⁵ http://www.abc2news.com/dpp/news/crime_checker/baltimore_county_crime/judge-sentences-fake-cancer-patient-to-15-years-behind-bars

⁶ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/jersey-mom-faked-cancer-profit-attention-sister/story?id=17339938>

⁷ http://www.oddee.com/item_98193.aspx

most convenient way to donate but charities often really need other things like blood, clothes, or your time. For example, many hurricane Sandy victims simply needed batteries and ordinary household items. There are a number of charities which accept old unused cars as donations. Food pantries have regular drives for canned food which is already in your house. Having worn glasses for years I always send my old glasses to New Eyes For The Needy when I get a new pair. Scammers are less likely interested in these kinds of donations, unless they can sell them, but mostly the crooks are looking for cash.

However, if you do donate money it is important to follow some simple rules. You have a right to know where your donation is going and how it is spent. Any legitimate charity should be prepared to provide their address and full incorporation name. The address is critical because many fake charities will have vague names which sound like real charities, the address will help verification. If they cannot provide this information, walk away. There are a number of resources available to easily check charitable organizations, take five minutes to verify before giving money away. The Internal Revenue Service certifies charities and publishes this information for the public benefit. The so-called Publication 78 data is refreshed regularly and even charities certified within the last week should be listed⁸. You can even call the IRS at 1-877-829-5500 to verify a charity with a live person. In the Newtown case

⁸<http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Exempt-Organizations-Select-Check>

a fake Taxpayer ID was used for a related bogus charity which was not listed with the IRS, easily verifiable. If a charity has been around for a couple of years and collects more than \$25,000 annually they should have filed a Form 990 which is a public record. For local charities, check with your state attorneys general and the secretary of state. State AG's will investigate fake charities and the secretary of state publishes filings for legitimate organizations. Most states now have comprehensive websites which share this information. In addition to the Better Business Bureau⁹ services like GuideStar¹⁰ and Charity Navigator¹¹ publish information to help people give smartly.

In the midst of any recent chaos, charity efforts are often set up in an Ad Hoc fashion to address immediate needs. This is why it is more important than ever to be vigilant as these criminals will prey on our weakest moments and navigate the confusion like a shark. Avoid stuffing cash into a can shoved in your face by a stranger, wiring money or giving out credit card information to someone who called your phone. Just because someone shows up at your house with a clipboard does not mean they are legitimate. Ask them to give you literature and then verify the information yourself. If they will not identify themselves, call the police.

⁹<http://www.bbb.org/us/charity/>

¹⁰<http://www.guidestar.org/rxa/news/articles/2011/dirty-secret-about-verifying-charities.aspx>

¹¹<http://www.charitynavigator.org/>

ON NOT LOSING FAITH

Stealing donations is the epitome of a cynical world, but the rest of us can do better than the thieves who have already sold their souls. We must move forward in the face societal parasites. Ultimately, no money in the world can restore a lost loved one. Our resources are best spent preventing tragedies and supporting friends through their grief.

For the long term, pick a single charity that deals in an area close to your heart and give to them regularly. Your dedication to a single cause can do more good over time than sporadically giving to multiple charities. Supporting a community group locally with your time is an even better way of giving back which actually provides results you can see with your own eyes.



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