

Landlords: Beware of Internet Scams **by Mack Armstrong and Aimee Bertrand**

You may have heard about “Nigerian scams” in which individuals in other countries (most often Nigeria) try to solicit money from unsuspecting individuals using emails or Web postings. These most often offer money to a “good Samaritan” willing to lend the scam artist their bank account access for the sake of reclaiming an inheritance or other moneys.

A few managers have reported a similar “too good to be true” scam involving their properties. Free Internet posting sites like Craigslist can be a great way to publicize open units at your property, but these sites can also provide a free and easy way to exploit potential apartment renters. ***Suggestion: Search your property online to be sure you are not being used as bait for an Internet scam.***

A Recent Example

When a business manager for an apartment community found out that a scammer was trying to use her property as bait for unsuspecting potential renters, she took decisive action. Her leasing consultants received calls from two different women who saw the same posting on Craigslist.

The ad said that a man was subletting a two-bedroom unit at the community and the poster said he owned the unit and would sublet it for up to five years for a very low price, much lower than the current rent on units of this type.

Photos of a model unit from the property’s Web site were posted with the ad. The poster went on to explain that he was in the United Kingdom for an extended period of time, so an interested renter would need to mail money to England. Once the money was received, he promised to mail the keys.

Standard Lease Prohibits Sublets

The leasing staff at the property checked their records and found that they did not have any residents with the same name as the person claiming to post the ad. In addition, the lease they used stated that residents agree not to sublet their apartment units. They were therefore certain that the posting was a fake and that the individual who was posting the unit was trying to scam potential renters. In addition, they realized that the posting could have damaged her property’s reputation to potential renters, through no fault of anyone associated with the property.

The business manager immediately contacted the FBI to file a complaint. She also contacted Craigslist to report the unauthorized posting and Craigslist removed it from the site. She also said that she now checks Craigslist regularly for mentions of her property.

It is recommended that owners and managers who find themselves in similar situations let all law enforcement agencies from the top to bottom know about Internet crimes.

Tips for Protecting Your Property

- **Check your property online:** Search your property name on a regular basis to see if any unauthorized or suspicious mentions of your community are posted on other Web sites. Some search engines, like Google, allow you to receive emails on a periodic basis whenever new mentions of your property pop up on blogs, new stories and Web sites. Check specific sites like Craigslist to search for your postings using your property name on a regular basis too. You may also wish to check for common misspellings of your property's name, (like Point vs. Pointe, etc).
- **Report any suspicious postings immediately:** Most free posting sites will immediately remove offensive or unauthorized content when it is reported. Check the "Frequently Asked Questions" portion of the site, or the "Contact" page for information on how to report the posting.
- **Keep a copy of any reports that you make:** Any time you make a report to police or other authorities, you will probably want to keep copies to keep your lawyer happy. In the rare case that the media comes knocking after an unauthorized posting, you will want to make sure that you have proof of your diligence in combating the scam.

Notify the Authorities

Authorities to notify should you find an unauthorized post about your property on Craigslist:

- Craigslist: email abuse@craigslist.org (be sure to include details on the posting and the URL or eight digit post ID number in your email)
- FTC toll-free hotline: 877-FTC-HELP (877-382-4357)
- FTC online complaint form: (www.ftc.gov)
- Internet Fraud Complaint Center – affiliated with the FBI – (www.ic3.gov)
- California Attorney General's Office Online Consumer Complaint form (http://ag.ca.gov/contact/complaint_form.php?cmplt=CL)
- Non-emergency number for your local police department

Tips to Avoid Scams

Craigslist offers the following tips to help end users avoid scams on its site:

- Deal locally with folks you can meet in person
- Never wire funds via Western Union, Moneygram or any other wire service. Anyone who asks you to do so is a scammer.
- Fake cashier's checks and money orders are common, and banks will cash them and hold you responsible.
- Craigslist is not involved in any transaction.
- Never give out financial information
- Avoid deals involving shipping or escrow services.
- [Beware of people claiming to be relocating from another country. They will send you a fake money order and then request you send a check back to them because they found a different place to rent. Or they will ask you to send their

check back to a third party. The money order they send is not real, but the personal check with which you refund them is.]

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