

CompuServe accounts are still being targeted by **unscrupulous scammers**, says Barry Fox.

Prime targets



If anyone has lost money after falling for the scam messages being delivered to some CompuServe email addresses, one thing is certain — the UK company's MD, Martin Turner, cannot plead ignorance of what's been going on. I have a

pile of readers' war stories from which a clear pattern emerges. Anyone who takes up a free trial on CompuServe may receive a very cleverly worded message, shortly after getting an address. But it's not bona fide.

They all read in much the same way. It reports a 'problem with your account', claims to be signed by CompuServe's 'Account Manager', and looks like an official communication. It claims either the new user didn't fill out the sign-up form correctly, the information received was corrupted, or the subscriber's bank didn't reply correctly to CompuServe's billing.

'To continue using CompuServe you should fill in the following form,' it says. This asks for name, address and credit card details, bank name, telephone number and email password. Only the names of the 'account manager' change, and so do the addresses for reply.

The scammers have tried different tacks — sending messages full of impressive jargon about CS-29.X2 transfer protocols giving increased connection

speed if the CompuServe user returned a form which agreed to pay \$5 and required full banking details. This was allegedly signed 'CompuServe Technical Support Team'. CompuServe users seem to be prime targets for these scams because the network's address system is based on numbers rather than names.

CompuServe's support line tells those who call for advice that they're aware of the problem. But still it goes on. If you fear you've been caught, don't delete the message as CompuServe suggests. Keep it in case you need evidence of how you were scammed.

'Thanks for your article,' writes someone who got a message after a couple of days. 'I might well have been taken in had I not read it.'

I got nervous when I received a message from CompuServe telling me that my credit card was due to expire soon and I had to send fresh details. I can only

hope it was a genuine request.

'I had a new PC delivered yesterday,' writes another new user. 'By early this morning I'd received a message claiming to be from CompuServe asking for my billing details. If it hadn't been for your article I'd have definitely sent them, being none the wiser. Thank you.'

I first asked CompuServe to comment on all this last October. I've sent many faxes to Martin Turner, Konrad Hilbers, Executive VP of CompuServe Europe, and Mayo Stuntz, President of CompuServe in the USA.

By mid-January, I'd heard nothing directly from anyone. But Turner found time to write a letter for publication assuring that CompuServe 'takes the most stringent measures... and very few such messages ever reach members'.

Turner also found time to send a Christmas greeting email to subscribers. It puffed new channels, V.90 access, and CompuServe's 2000 Beta test. Only those who read the whole tedious lot will have seen the standard reminder at the end that 'no-one at CompuServe will ever ask you for your password'.

Is this because a more direct reference to the scams would make poor publicity?

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The only response I have got, is from the company's legal counsel, Jonty West. 'We are very much aware of the continuing problem,' admits West. 'The use of "urgent" and "problems with your account" messages are a recognised feature of this approach... we are employing specific measures to eliminate the possibility of these requests reaching our new members... we employ extremely sophisticated anti-scramming technology.'

Intelligent networks can weed out offending messages by scanning for key text phrases like 'get rich quick'. So why can't CompuServe scan for the tell-tale words, 'Problem with your account'?

The CompuServe network is obviously intelligent. My own email to Martin Turner was returned, because his address does not receive incoming messages.

100131.201@compuserve.com