

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

The Singapore Scam

It all started innocently enough on Oct. 5, 2011, with an e-mail from a Joe Smith. He wanted to purchase a Buffet Crampon E11 France Performance Bb clarinet.

The e-mail read as follows:

“I want to buy this for my son if you have this product available (Buffet Crampon E11 France Performance Bb clarinet) and I want to know if you accept international credit card and ship to Houston.”



I was a little suspicious, but no alarms went off. It was going to be shipped to Texas, after all. We wrote back that we did have the instrument in stock and that we did accept credit cards.

“Thanks for the message,” he wrote back. “Can I send my credit card information’s by e-mail here so that you can run my card manually for the payments? Also let me know how much is the shipping cost to Texas. Hope to hear from you.”

Yes, the language is awkward, but again, it was being shipped to Texas.

He sent full credit card information with the name Courtney Stevens and a shipping address in Houston. In my defense, I did go to whitepages.com and check the address for Courtney Stevens. It was

listed. I thought it might be a surprise for his son, so I didn’t call to check the phone number. I did call Visa before I charged the card and was told that if the card goes through, then everything is fine. This turned out to be false.

At the time, everything seemed OK, so we charged the card and sent the E11 to Texas.

On Oct. 8, we received a request from a Michael Robert in Australia for a used Selmer saxophone to be shipped to Oregon. Again, e-mails were sent, and credit cards were processed. Correspondence went back and forth, and in due course, the instrument was sent

on its way. Then on Nov. 5, I received another e-mail from Joe Smith, this time asking for a Buffet R-13, Tosca and Festival to be shipped again to Courtney Stevens at the same address. We ordered the instrument, but thankfully, Buffet took a while to ship it.

On Nov. 4, we received an e-mail from Ivana Lee asking for 150 sets of Thomastik Dominant 4/4 violin string sets to be sent

to Singapore.

When I called Connolly — Thomastik’s U.S. distributor — to ask about ordering 150 sets of strings, they told me, “This sounds like the Singapore Scam. Don’t send anything!”

THE DISCOVERY

To be sure, I contacted Sandra Collazo, senior international trade specialist for the U.S. Export Assistance Center at the U.S. Department of Commerce. She said it looked very suspicious and sent it to Sherry Ng, a commercial assistant at the U.S. Embassy for Singapore. Ng said the information, company name and phone number were false, and it was in fact a scam. (I’ve listed their names as a reference for anyone who experiences similar issues.)

We all know the endgame here. On Nov. 15, I got chargebacks on the two shipped instruments. Fortunately, I had not shipped the R-13, so my loss was less than it could have been.

So what was the lesson learned from all this? If you have a question about a charge, call your credit card processor, not Visa. The processor is the only one that can check to see if the card is legitimate. Also, don’t accept any foreign credit cards unless you are familiar with the person or company. **MI**

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How to protect yourself from international credit card fraud