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# ftc consumer feature

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Bureau of Consumer Protection

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## Federal and Postal Job Scams: Ads That Don't Add Up

The ad in the “help wanted” section of a local newspaper looked like the opportunity of a lifetime: high-paying wildlife jobs with the federal government. A Delaware man called the toll-free telephone number listed to get more information about federal jobs being filled in his local area.

Instead, he got a high-pressure sales pitch that convinced him to shell out almost \$80 for job-related information. He thought he was buying a list of available jobs in his area, as well as practice tests to help him pass the Civil Service exam. He was persuaded to buy similar materials for jobs with the U.S. Postal Service.

What the man wasn't told was that:

- no Civil Service exam is required for most government wildlife jobs;
- the company was selling a list of job descriptions, not a list of actual local job openings;
- very few wildlife jobs — and none at the advertised salary — hire at the entry level;
- although a test is required for most entry-level postal jobs, the tests are given infrequently; and
- all the information the company sold is available free of charge.

When the caller realized that he'd been duped, he tried repeatedly to get his money back — without success.

His story is hardly an isolated incident. Federal and postal job scams are among the biggest rackets on the employment front, preying on consumers who are unemployed or underemployed and who can least afford to be “taken.”

The Federal Trade Commission is taking steps toward protecting consumers against these scams. It's tracking down and putting the brakes on companies that make deceptive claims about the availability of federal and postal jobs, the procedures required to apply for those jobs, and the materials sold to help people identify and land those jobs.

Gregory Ashe, an attorney at the FTC, says that by placing ads in the “help wanted” section of local newspapers, the companies deceptively imply that the jobs are available and hiring locally. He says the deception can continue in the sales pitch consumers get when they call a company's toll-free telephone number for more information. In addition, he says, the companies often deceptively imply that applicants who purchase their materials improve their chances of being hired.

According to Ashe, these claims are misleading. “There's a lot of misrepresentation about what job seekers will get for their money,” he says. The companies “prey on some people's lack of understanding” about the federal hiring process. “For example,” he says, “there are plenty of folks who don't realize that there's no single Civil Service exam, that most federal jobs don't require a test, and that federal employment information, including a list of job openings, is available for free.”

It's not illegal for a company to sell information about federal jobs, says the FTC. What is illegal is misrepresenting what's being offered and the benefit to consumers.

Based on the number of complaints that have poured into the FTC's Consumer Response Center and the nation's Better Business Bureaus, many people believe that they've been deceived by a host of companies offering federal and postal job information.

A woman earning the minimum wage at an Indiana grocery store, for example, saw an employment ad as a springboard to a better-paying job with good benefits. Believing the company's claims that buying the materials was the

only way to get hired by the U.S. Postal Service, she spent almost \$80 for a worthless packet.

In Georgia, a man responding to an ad for postal jobs agreed to buy a study booklet for the postal exam and a description of jobs available — only to learn how infrequently the postal exam is actually given. To add insult to injury, he never received the postal job information he had paid almost \$160 to receive.

Similarly, a Texas woman called a company's toll-free number to find out about advertised park ranger jobs in Colorado, and ended up buying the information packet for \$39. And although she declined the company's pitch for postal job materials, she received them anyway, along with an unauthorized charge for them on her credit card statement.

When these and other victims realized that they'd been "taken" and called the companies for the refund guaranteed if they were not hired for one of the advertised jobs, their calls were transferred to a voice-mail "black hole."

"These companies are taking advantage of consumers' lack of understanding of the federal and postal hiring process," said Howard Beales, director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. "The companies had no intention of honoring their advertised promise to refund the money of any customer who didn't get a new job."

Beales said the FTC's actions are designed to bring a halt to these companies' fraudulent activities, and to deter other companies from using similar business practices.

Beales stresses that it's not necessary for consumers to pay for information about job vacancies with the U.S. government or the U.S. Postal Service. Federal agencies and the Postal Service never charge application fees, or guarantee that an applicant will be hired. And although the Postal Service requires applicants to take a test, it typically offers sample questions and study materials free to people who sign up for the exam.

"It's totally unnecessary for consumers to get conned into paying for something that's available for free," he said.

In addition, Beales says it's deceptive for anyone to guarantee that a person will get any particular score on the postal entrance exams, or that a high score will guarantee them a job.

The FTC, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and the U.S. Postal Service caution consumers to be on the lookout for these "tip-offs to federal and postal job rip-offs":

- Classified ads or verbal sales pitches that imply an affiliation with the federal government, guarantee high test scores or jobs, or state that no experience is necessary.
- Ads that offer information about "hidden" or unadvertised federal jobs.
- Ads that refer to a toll-free phone number. Often in these cases, an operator encourages the caller to buy a "valuable" booklet containing job listings, practice test questions and tips for entrance exams.
- Toll-free numbers that direct consumers to other pay-per-call numbers for more information. Under federal law, any solicitations for pay-per-call numbers must contain full disclosures about the cost. Also, the solicitations must make it clear if there is an affiliation with the federal government. The caller must have the chance to hang up before incurring any charges.

Information on postal jobs is available at post offices. In many areas, the Postal Service offers a job information hotline with current hiring announcements. Information about other federal jobs is available from the Office of Personnel Management's USAJOBS telephone information system. For the telephone number in your area, check the Office of Personnel Management telephone listing, under "U.S. Government." Consumers also can find information about jobs with the Postal Service at [www.usps.gov](http://www.usps.gov) and jobs with the federal government at [www.usajobs.opm.gov](http://www.usajobs.opm.gov).

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.