

Last week, a small Macon County business owner notified Lafayette Police Department's Detective Jason Roberts, with a request that sounded a little fishy.

It all began when someone contacted him, from out of state, about getting his or her Cadillac Escalade worked on.

"Their plan was to have the vehicle shipped to Lafayette to have the body work done," Detective Jason Roberts said, as he began to explain the scheme.

"The people requesting the body work acted as foreigners, therefore, they needed assistance communicating with the owner."

The scammers enlisted the help of a relay message communicator, which several Macon County businesses have reported coming in contact with recently. This sort of contact is hard to understand because the communicator will read an e-mailed message to the recipient and then type your response to the first party.

"He said these guys were going to send him a \$1,000 credit card, and have him to remove the money from that card, and purchase a \$1,000 money order and send it by Western Union, to the storage building, in order to have the vehicle shipped to Lafayette," the detective explained. "He was told this was necessary, because the storage company did not take credit cards and could only accept cash or money orders."

"He said he was totally confused. He kept trying to get additional information from the communicator and could not get a complete name, phone number, or any relevant information. The only information he could get in the way of an address was the man was from San Diego, California. The only information he received for a telephone number turned out to be a fax number. He never spoke to anyone personally; it was strictly through this relay message communicator."

The local businessman checked out the card and it all seemed legit, but still a little strange. It was odd that they would entrust a total stranger with \$1,000. They sent messages back and forth for several days with no concrete replies, so the local businessman ended up canceling the transaction request.

“I talked with the credit card company and informed them of my suspicion with the account,” Detective Roberts said. “I was checking to see if the card was stolen and it was not. But the fraud department of Discover explained that this type of situation has been occurring for the past six to nine months.”

Together, they reached the conclusion that these type of scammers have been targeting small businesses with an amount of money (\$1,000 or less) and request that they cash in the card to wire the money to this address in California, which then is sent overseas, instead of where the request was supposed to go. The original messages have been discovered to have originated somewhere in Nigeria.

“This transaction makes the “middle-man” (the local businessman) responsible to the credit card holder for being the one who removed the money from the account. This could result in a civil type matter with the credit card company, in which he would have to repay the money. In many cases, deals like this have been known to shut down the doors of the small business, especially in today’s economic strife,” remarked Roberts.

“Be aware that situations like these exist and if someone requests you remove money from a credit card to wire it to another person or place, suspect the worse and call us to check it out!”