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Scam Online Puppy Sales

Our topics for this week are

- **Typical methods used by puppy scams**
- **Means to investigate possible scammers**
- **Reporting puppy scammers**

Puppy scams are fake pet sales in which a seller advertises a puppy that does not exist, collects a deposit, then invents one fee after another until the buyer stops paying. No animal is ever delivered.

The U.S. Better Business Bureau Scam Tracker received 2,278 pet-scam reports in 2024 with a median loss of $680. It also found that just 4.8% of mass-market fraud victims report it. The problem is far worse that just those who report scams.

In a puppy scam the seller has no puppy, no kennel, and often no real name. The seller does have is a set of photos, usually copied from a genuine breeder's website or social media account, and a plan designed to move money out of the buyer's account in stages.

More than half of known pet scams start on a website the buyer has found through a search engine or social media. Scam websites are built to look like real kennels, with breed pages, testimonials and contact forms.

Most puppy scams follow predictable staged procedures.

Stage 1: The bait listing
The scammer publishes a listing on a website, social media page or group, or a classified ad. The photos are attractive and either stolen, or generated by AI. The price is often noticeably lower than the market rate for the breed. Purebred dogs offered at deep discounts are typically fraudulent.

Stage 2: Friendly, fast conversation

The buyer makes contact. The fake seller replies quickly, often by text or email. They share more photos and a sob story to generate sympathy for the non-existent puppy. They avoid phone calls, and they will not do a live video call with the puppy.

Stage 3: The deposit
The seller asks for a deposit to "hold" the puppy. Payment is requested through a method that is hard to reverse, such as gift cards, payment apps, cryptocurrency or wire transfers through services such as Western Union or MoneyGram, Zelle, and Venmo.

Stage 4: The escalating fees
Once the first payment clears, a "shipping company", "pet delivery agency" or "airline agent" appears that is often the same people using a second email address. The buyer is told the puppy is on its way, but there is a problem that can be remedied with additional fees.

Stage 5: Pressure and threats
If the buyer hesitates, the tone changes. The scammer may claim the puppy is stuck at an airport and will be seized unless the fee is paid today.

Stage 6: Silence
When the buyer finally refuses to pay more, the seller and the "shipper" stop replying. The website may disappear within weeks, only to reappear under a new name with the same photos.

The breeds in puppy scams reflects the current popularity. In recent years, that has tended to be: French Bulldogs, Dachshunds, German Shepherds, Chihuahuas, Pomeranians, Goldendoodles, Boxers, Miniature Dachshunds, and Cockapoo puppies.

Puppy photos are often too perfect in scam ads. The scammers may use studio lighting in what is supposed to be a snap shot, identical poses across a "litter", and backgrounds that melt into blur. Paws, ears, whiskers, collars and any text in the picture may appear smeared.

When looking to buy a puppy online, a potential buyer should try to find the breeder's contact details through a channel the scammer does not control, such as a breed club, a registry's breeder listing or a long-running social account, and to call that number.

The best way to avoid being scammed when trying to buy a puppy online is to have an organized, stepwise approach such as:

1. Decide on the breed before you shop

Scammers exploit impulse. A buyer who already knows which the breed is the best fit for them and their family is less able to be scammed.

2. Know what the breed really costs
Knowing typical prices matters as much as knowing the breed. When you know the normal figure, a suspicious discount stands out immediately.

3. Find the seller yourself
Start from a source you chose, such as a breed club, a registry's breeder listing or a directory search, rather than from an ad you happened to run across. Then research that seller independently.

4. Reverse image search every photo
Use a reverse image search tool on each picture the seller provides. If the same puppy appears on another site with a different name, location or price, it is because it is a scam.

5. Insist on a live video call with actions
Ask for a live video call showing the puppy, the mother and the premises. Ask the seller to hold up a piece of paper with your name, today's date and a word or number you choose on the call, then to pick up the puppy and show a specific side.

6. Visit, or use a trusted local person
Before paying the breeder, you should visit the puppy and the mother in person. If distance rules that out, some buyers ask a trusted friend or a local veterinarian to visit on their behalf.

7. Verify papers with the registry, not the seller
If the seller claims registration with a kennel club, contact that registry directly to confirm the litter and the breeder. Make sure you receive documentation of your dog's papers. Hesitation to provide them is often a warning sign.

8. Pay with a method that has protections
The FTC advises against wire transfers, gift cards, payment apps and cryptocurrency for this kind of purchase. A credit card gives you a dispute route that a wire transfer does not.

9. Choose the shipper yourself, or collect the puppy in person
A seller who insists on their own shipper is keeping control of the puppy is part of the scam where most of the money is taken.

10. Treat any new fee as a stop sign
If a shipping company, airline agent or the seller asks for more money after the sale, stop paying.

11. Keep records from day one
Save every message, email, web address, phone number, payment receipt and photo. Take screenshots of the website and the listing, because scam sites vanish quickly. You will need these records if you have to report the scam or dispute a payment.

If something has already gone wrong, call your bank first, then report to the FTC, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center, BBB Scam Tracker, and the platform that ran the ad.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

1. **Puppy sale scammers prefer not to communicate face to face.**
2. **Puppy sale scammers want deposits prior to delivery by means that is hard to reverse.**
3. **Puppy sale scammers want to use their own shipper who will ask for more money and never deliver the non-existent puppy.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, ***Animal Handling and Physical Restraint***, ***Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling, and Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling*** all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 350 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.