

Misfortune-Telling

Just before Christmas, self-described psychic Maria Duval sent a letter to John Jerzgarzewski of Syracuse, N.Y. Within 90 days, she predicted, he would win a jackpot of up to \$15,000. All he had to do was specify how he wanted to acquire his riches—by winning a lottery or a bingo game or at a casino—and send \$35 in the enclosed envelope. Duval would provide the winning numbers and days to play.

Jerzgarzewski selected “lottery,” wrote a check to Duval and sent it to the address in Everett, Mass., which turned out to be a UPS store. With that mailing, he would join thousands of other Americans who get conned again and again, usually for a few dollars at a time.

It’s the classic “sucker list” mail scam: “Once you have expressed interest in one particular scam,” says Sarah Nathan of the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office, “you could be inundated with information on other scams. The main purpose of some scams is just to create a sucker’s list that gets passed around among other scammers.”

After sending his check for Duval’s winning numbers, Jerzgarzewski was bombarded with more mail from the clairvoyant Duval—at least a dozen letters in two weeks, says his daughter, Frances Jerzgarzewski, who lives in San Francisco. Some letters predicted newfound improvements in health and vitality. Others told of impending riches. All of them asked for \$35 or \$40 in exchange for more specific, personalized details about Jerzgarzewski divined from tarot cards, astrology and other forms of fortunetelling.

“My father sent Maria Duval at least seven checks in one month, all for \$35 or \$40,” says Frances, 61, who discovered the payments during a recent holiday visit. “She promised him health. She promised him wealth. And

my father is desperate for both, so he kept sending another check every few days.” One Duval prediction said the 91-year-old would soon get the job promotion he long wanted.

He was also bombarded with other mail, beginning just days after his

Science Health and Beauty Center or one of about 20 other phony names—including “Maria Duval.” The company operates in Europe, Australia and New Zealand and is believed to be based in Canada—its phone number has been disconnected—but it operates out of at least four addresses in the United States, all mail-collection rental stores or other mail-collection rental facilities.

Firms like the one that runs Maria Duval buy or compile mailing lists and often sell them to other scammers, much the way legitimate companies sell their customer lists to other firms. They make their pitches by mail or phone.

Nathan offers this advice should you get solicitations from crystal-ball gazers or anyone offering a sure-fire trajectory to prosperity: “Rip up any mail with offers that sound too good to be true. Hang up on any phone calls that promise you miracle cures or predict your future. You can also contact your state attorney general’s office.”

Joe Corrado of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, which is pursuing legal action against the Maria Duval firm, advises recipients

of such solicitations to contact their local USPIS office (to find yours, visit www.usps.com/ncsc/locators/find-is.html or check the Yellow Pages).

“Don’t respond to these offers,” says Corrado. “Let us know about it, because we have a database that tracks these mailings—and some constitute mail fraud.” —SID KIRCHHEIMER

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first check to Duval was cashed, from other companies peddling products that would make Duval’s prophecies come true—miracle health cures, precious gems available for a fraction of their real worth, even prayers answered with the purchase of magical pendants.

Many of these solicitations, authorities believe, came from the same source—a mail-order marketing firm variously calling itself the National Parapsychology Center, Direct Health Organization, Guardian Angel, Bio-