

As scammers expand their reach, carriers responding



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CONSUMER WATCH

Scam calls have become so common many people don't even bother to answer the phone anymore unless they recognize the number. While Caller ID is overall a great invention that has saved countless people from having to engage in unwanted conversations, spoofing technology now allows scam-

mers to make it look as if the call comes from pretty much any location they want.

In the "old days," pretty much everybody who had a phone could be found in the phone book. Technology to autodial thousands of numbers at once was still in its infancy, and the risk of being contacted by a scammer was pretty low. Long-distance charges made it expensive to call from outside local areas, and it was hard to make a lot of money this way.

On the other hand, since we had no

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way of knowing who was calling, most of us picked up the phone and answered. "Screening" consisted of the person who answered the phone asking who was calling, and then deciding whether or not to talk to the individual. (Frequently, the result was a lot of bewildered parents who had to decide how to handle the caller when their teenager was in a spat with their significant other.)

But that was then. Today, a scammer sitting in a Third World slum or well-equipped "boiler room" operation in a big city can place a call to you from the other side of the globe at little cost. Once they've gotten you on the phone, they'll spin a yarn about how you're about to be arrested by the IRS or claim to be your grandchild who's

been arrested in the Virgin Islands as he was helping a friend renew his wedding vows. If they're successful in getting past your defenses, they'll get you to wire money you'll never see again.

It's a big problem, since most of us use our cellphones and a lot of us have ditched our old-fashioned landlines. Crooks know this, and cellphones are now taking the brunt of the scam traffic. The Federal Communications Commission, in calling on cell providers to do something about the problem, noted that Americans received 29 billion robocalls last year. FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai convened a "robocall strike force" last year, consisting of 33 telecom and tech companies.

And the industry appears to be responding. AT&T rolled out its free Call Protect app in December, which it claims has blocked a billion robocalls already, and

Verizon and Sprint have announced fee-based services to provide some protection. T-Mobile announced July 24 that customers of its MetroPCS prepaid service now have access to Scam ID and Scam Block, which flag calls from numbers reported to be scams. The services were originally rolled out for T-Mobile customers in April, and in a news release, the company claimed to have flagged 243 million calls as potential scams and saved its customers from potential \$130 million in scam losses. (The company says it got those numbers by figuring the average phone-scam victim loses \$274, with about 0.2 percent of all calls being successful scams.)

With Scam ID, customers who get a call from a likely problem number will see a "likely scam" alert beside the number, and you can choose to accept or deny the call. With Scam Block, numbers from

known scammers will be automatically blocked before they ever reach you.

T-Mobile COO Mike Sievert noted studies of the data since the April rollout have revealed scammers usually work a standard 8-to-5 workday, with far less activity at night and on weekends. You're most likely to get a call in the late afternoon, and most scam numbers are used only once.

For consumers, these services could potentially cut down on the number of scammers who actually reach their targets, but that's only part of the problem. Until everybody learns that scammers are really good at using the phone as a way to steal and they stop talking to unknown people on the phone, the scourge of phone scams is likely going to be harder to eradicate than kudzu on a Mississippi farm.

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