



Legal Q&As

Fake Buyers and WhatsApp Scams

QUESTION: I've been contacted by a buyer prospect who only communicates with me through WhatsApp. I know that WhatsApp is a common messaging app in other countries and so I've been responding to the prospect's messages. If this prospect is legitimate, I really want to help him. However, I am also worried about being scammed. Do you have any guidance?

ANSWER: We have received several reports involving fake buyers on WhatsApp over the last couple of months. The scam typically begins the same way each time. The scammer/fake buyer will reach out either by message or voice call through WhatsApp and make contact with an agent. The scammer establishes a relationship with the agent that often appears to be legitimate, at which point the scammer either: (1) informs the agent that they intend to purchase the property with cash made in crypto currency trading; or (2) requests that the agent provide the scammer with a verification code the agent has received.

The goal of the crypto story is usually to entice the agent to make crypto trades with the scammer's website, and as soon as the agent has inputted their own, personal banking account information, the scammer disappears with the agent's money. As for the verification code scam, the scammer already has the agent's login and password for some account, such as a banking or email account, and once the verification code is given by the agent, the scammer hacks that account and maybe even holds it for ransom.

It is true that WhatsApp, in and of itself, is not a scam. It is the most popular messaging app in the world due to its low cost and ease of use. You may well encounter legitimate prospect buyers through WhatsApp. However, legitimate buyers, much like legitimate sellers, will almost always take simple steps to show that they are real, such as:

1. Make initial contact through more traditional communication methods, like a phone call or email.
2. Provide verifiable proof of their identity.
3. Participate in video calls outside of WhatsApp, including video calls to verify their identity.
4. Sign an agency agreement with wet ink after you have mailed it to a verifiable address rather than using electronic signatures; and
5. Give proof of funds that can be verified with the banking institution.

The following could be clues that the potential buyer client is not who they say they are: names or addresses misspelled; a sudden change in the tone of communication, especially claims of urgency; regular changing of next steps or instructions; unusual attachments or links; and making statements that seem inflated or exaggerated, especially relating to money or property value.

We've written about fake seller scams [here](#), and much of that material also applies to this scenario. The additional advice in this Q&A can also be used to avoid fake sellers. Be wary if a prospect buyer approaches you through WhatsApp, and be sure to comply with your firm's policies regarding out-of-state prospects.

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