

BEWARE OF SCAMS, COURT TV WARNS IN TONIGHT'S SPECIAL

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Overconfidence is a con artist's greatest weapon - your overconfidence. If you're absolutely sure that you couldn't and wouldn't fall prey to a scam, you are a victim waiting to happen. Hello, sucker. Goodbye, money.

This is the message cable's Court TV wants to deliver with tonight's "Crime Stories" special, "Rip-Offs and Scams": "At some point in everyone's life, he or she will fall prey to a con artist." The program's goal is to show the staggering number of ways Americans get conned.

Don't be so sure, "Rip-Offs and Scams" warns, that there isn't a con with your name on it. You see the fast-talking street hustler with his game of three-card monte. You might be thinking, "I would never fall for that." Well, OK, probably you wouldn't.

"And the reason is that those cons were not designed for you," said the show's host, private investigator Fay Faron, owner of the San Francisco detective agency Rat Dog Dick. "But what might happen to you is you might be a father, and you might have the world's cutest little girl.

"So you see in the newspaper this ad that says, 'Star Search is coming to town and we want to check out your child.' And so you go down there with your kid and they say, 'Incredible potential. We need \$400 worth of pictures.' And that sounds reasonable and so you do that. You've just fallen victim to a model mill, because the way the (modeling) business works is you don't put up money for your own pictures. And so there really is a con for everybody."

A teenager at a carnival, for instance, wants "to please his girlfriend and win a teddy bear," Faron told TV critics in Los Angeles. "What the kid doesn't know is that the basketball hoop is actually smaller than the basketball and, therefore, the basketball will never go into the hoop."

Although violent crime statistics are down, fraud is on the rise in almost every state. "Rip-offs and Scams," which Court TV will premiere at 10 tonight, examines and exposes everything from that three-card monte game to telemarketing schemes, cyberscams, psychic frauds, sweetheart scams and classic flimflams being furiously recycled with the latest technology.

In Illinois, according to statistics cited by Court TV, telemarketing scams alone accounted for \$40 billion last year. The cable special not only explains the techniques of street cons, grifters, swindlers and bunco artists, it introduces us to their victims.

Don't many targets of con artists fall victim to their own greed? Yes, but "at the other end of the spectrum," Faron told critics in January, you have the senior citizen "who just wants to help people, and somebody calls up and says, 'We want you to donate money to charity,' and he's writing out checks for \$12,000."

Many con artists "consider themselves to be entertainers," she said, "and so what we want to do is show you the magic behind the scam."

Entertainer Ricky Jay, who has appeared in such films as David Mamet's "House of Games" and the recent "Magnolia," is the special's sleight-of-hand expert, illustrating the hocus-pocus behind the scams.

- Caption: BOX: TV PREVIEW Rip-Offs and Scams A Court TV show about con artists airs at 10 tonight, with a repeat at 1 a.m.
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