

## Don't trust Google for customer service numbers. It might be a scam.

Google keeps highlighting impostors when you're looking for banks, airlines or local businesses — and the toll can be devastating.



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Scams just keep popping up when you Google.

On Monday, I found what appeared to be impostors of customer service for Delta and Coinbase, the cryptocurrency company, in the “People also ask” section high up in Google.

A group of people experienced in Google's intricacies also said this week that it took about 22 minutes to fool Google into highlighting a bogus business phone number in a prominent spot in search results.

This fits a persistent pattern of bad guys finding ways to trick Google into showing scammers' numbers for airlines, hotels, local repair companies, banks or other businesses.

The toll can be devastating when people are duped by these bogus business numbers. Fortune recently reported on a man who called what a Google listing said was Coinbase customer support, and instead it was an impostor who Fortune said tricked the man and stole \$100,000.

Scammers impersonate businesses and government agencies all over the internet. But Google search is unique as the planet's most widely used online service and the front door to the world's information.

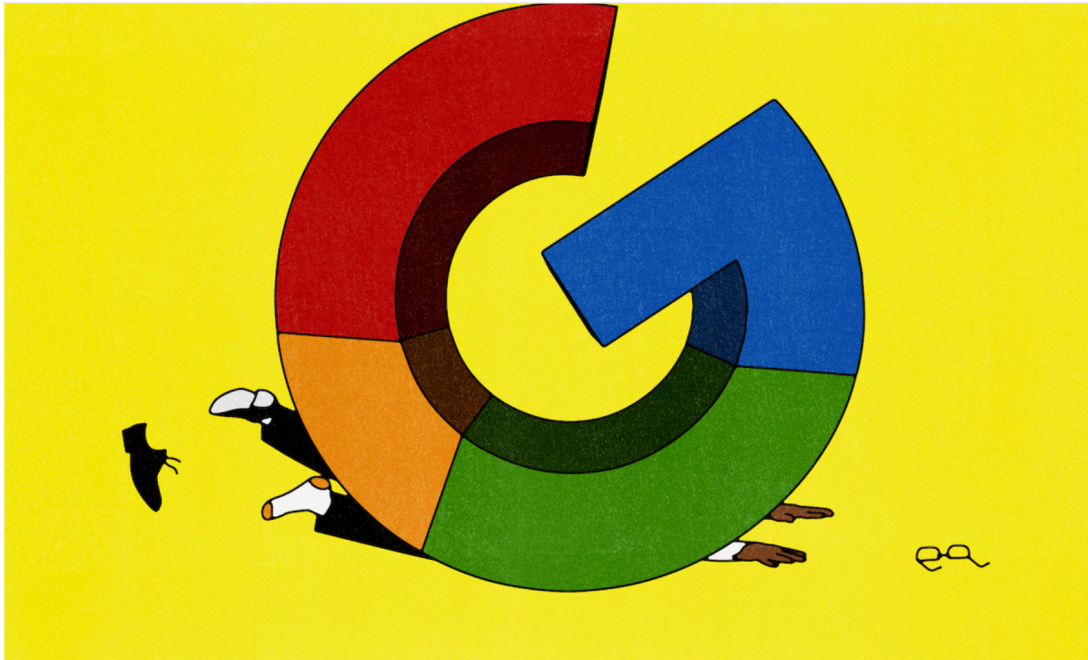
Most of the time, you will find correct customer service numbers by Googling. But the company doesn't say how often people are tricked out of time and money by bogus listings — nor why Google can't stop the scams from recurring.

A spokesperson for Google said that when the company identifies listings that violate its rules against misrepresentations or spam, it moves quickly against them.

Impostor numbers pop up so persistently that I am once again begging you to be wary of Google or Google Maps listings for business phone numbers.

## How these Google scams keep happening

Using the tactics of internet merchants, and relying on Google's lightly moderated search listings and business information, tricksters find ways to get phone numbers they control to pop up when you Google.



As an experiment, Near Media's Mike Blumenthal and collaborators took an existing Google business listing that he controls for "Illusory Laptop Repair," and submitted multiple attempts to change the phone number in Google's database. You might see business information from this database when you search Google or Google Maps.

On the third try, the bogus phone number showed up in Google results for the business.

Blumenthal said Google notified one person affiliated with the laptop business about the phone number change but he wasn't informed as the Google account owner.

If this were a scam and not an experiment, the impostor number could fool people into handing over money for bogus laptop repairs. The real business might never know someone was impersonating it.

Blumenthal, who helps businesses with their Google search results, thought the phone number swap "wasn't going to work or it would be very hard to do," he said. "I was totally shocked."

Blumenthal has been criticizing Google for years for its role in such scams. He says it shouldn't be this easy to impersonate a business in Google.

The Google spokesperson said the company looks at multiple signals to decide whether submitted changes to

business listings are legitimate, including whether the alterations were “suggested by multiple users and if they have a history of contributing helpful edits.” The company says it continues to improve Google’s business profiles.

## How to avoid these Google scams

If you look at the two impostor phone numbers in Google for Delta and Coinbase, there are red flags.

There are odd fonts and a website below the bogus numbers that wasn’t for either company. (I notified Google about the apparent scams on Monday and I still saw them 24 hours later.)

The correct customer help numbers did appear at the very top, and Google says businesses have clear instructions to make their customer service information visible to people searching Google.

You still might see bogus phone numbers in some spots in Google. And if you’re stressed trying to find help with a flight or a financial problem, you might overlook warning signs. Scams work because humans make errors in judgment, especially when we’re confused or panicky. And business impostors aren’t always obvious.

Delta said its only legitimate customer support number is 1-800-221-1212. (I compiled airline customer contacts here, and they’re in this Instagram carousel.)

Coinbase said you should find customer support from the Coinbase help center or its mobile app. The company also said it works with search engines, social media companies and law enforcement agencies to “prevent, report, and catch scammers.”

It’s smart to trust your Spidey sense about anything that seems off when you’re calling a business.

“Anytime you’re pulling out your credit card based on just a Google business listing, a consumer needs to show some caution,” Blumenthal said. Be wary if they ask for inappropriate information too soon in the conversation or are too pushy, he said.

Also read these red flags for scams from my colleague Heather Kelly.

If you’re contacting a business like an airline or bank from numbers you find in Google, check whether you can find the same phone number on the business’s website, app or social media accounts.

We all have a responsibility to look out for scams, but Google isn’t making it easy for you. The most successful company in internet history makes you largely responsible for dodging the criminals who are hurting legitimate businesses and swindling people.

*Razzan Nakhlawi contributed to this report.*