

How to spot a ham radio Internet rat

Andrew Barron ZL3DW, December 2012

Many years ago my father gave me some great advice, “if it seems too good to be true... it probably is”. These days, with the advent of online shopping that warning is still valid, maybe more so. I regularly buy ham equipment on the Internet and I don't want to discourage anyone from doing that, but there are some traps to be avoided. There are many people making their living from Internet fraud so you need to be very careful before sending your money away. A few quick checks could save you from disappointment, lost cash and some embarrassment. I find that there are many people in faraway places very willing to send me millions of dollars from Nigeria, banks I don't use often need me to update my confidential password details and of course I regularly win \$10,000,000 or more in non-existent lotteries. These scams are fairly easy to spot, but even so many people are fooled by them every day. Less obvious, are very convincing advertisements for used amateur radio equipment, often at great prices. These may include accurate descriptions and photos of the equipment, a realistic call sign that checks out on QRZ.com and the offer of a safe way to transfer the money. So here is my story and a few tips that could stop you getting burnt by a scammer.

Generally buying from a reputable dealer in Europe or the USA will be fine. I have had no trouble importing from a dealer in China either. I would be remiss if I did not point out that buying from overseas dealers will mean that the equipment will have to be freighted back to the overseas dealer for warranty support. The local dealers and local offices of the manufacturer will not support equipment purchased off shore. This is one of the risks you take when you import equipment. Another thing that you must take into account is that you will have to pay GST on any import with a value including freight costs of more than NZ\$400. So check the pricing and availability from your local dealer before buying from overseas, it may be that the lack of warranty support, the price including freight and GST, the risks and the delay due to freight time makes buying locally a better option.

If you do decide to import equipment, it is not a bad idea to ask around the club if anyone else has used the same dealer. If you are buying from a dealer in Europe make sure they take the VAT off the price, there is no point paying two lots of tax. Buying from individuals or dealers advertising on Trademe is usually ok since you can check details and their feedback. But you still need to be careful to make sure you know who you are dealing with. Buying from individuals advertising on EBay or ham radio trading sites is riskier and buying from overseas classified advertising sites is exceptionally risky and is not recommended. Note that many Americans advertising on Ebay and some US dealers will not send equipment overseas, so check before you buy or bid.

So here is my story. I am in the market for a linear amplifier but the budget is tight, so I have been cruising the Internet looking for the best value for money. Imagine my amazement when I found an online advertisement for a complete set of Elecraft equipment, including a K3 transceiver, 500W KPA-500 linear amp, and Panadapter spectrum display for only \$US1600.00. The advert showed several photos of the gear on a typical ham shack desk and mentioned some upgrade options. The website was a classified advertising site in Atlanta Georgia. That advert has been removed now, but the same ad is currently on what seems to be a Spanish language web site in Miami.

<http://miamiclasificados.univision.com/ElectronicsForSale/1600-complete-elecraft-k-line-k3-p3-kpa500-linear-amplifier-all-factory-built/19013944>.

I smelt a rat, but thought I would check it out anyway, after all a bargain is a bargain, but now I am 100% sure it is a scam. I emailed the vendor and asked for details including the serial numbers and their ham call sign, I asked the cost of freight and suggested payment by PayPal. This is the email I received back.

“Thank you for your email. I am glad that you want to buy my Complete Elecraft K-Line K3, P3, KPA500 Linear and the price I am asking is US \$1,600.00. From the start I want to inform you that I

left the USA a couple of days ago (next day after I listed this for sale) and I came in United Kingdom with my work (I am a member of the "Save The Children Foundation"). If you still want to buy it, we can do it in a very safe way using an escrow company. They will handle the delivery and will offer you a number of days of inspection so you can test and see that the merchandise is exactly as described by me. I will pay all shipping/escrow fees."

This reply set off a number of alarms and I immediately sent back an email stating that I had changed my mind and no longer wanted to buy the equipment.

So what are the issues? Firstly it breaks the "if something seems too good to be true" rule, more than \$4700 worth of equipment for \$1600. Also it was not advertised on EBay or ham radio trading sites which would be more logical for a genuine seller. The photos and accurate description of the equipment can be easily copied from genuine online advertisements. The email he sent me reads OK, but there are several danger signs. He failed to supply the information I requested; serial numbers which can indicate that the equipment really exists and his call sign. He has left the USA and "came in United Kingdom", bad English is not in itself a problem, just look at 90% of ads on Trademe, but it is another indicator. Also it means that he has no verifiable address and supplies an excuse for delaying tactics. I read of another ham radio scam where this technique was used along with identity theft of an English ham operator. In that case after receiving the money he said that the equipment was still in the USA and that he was arranging for a friend to send it. Then it was the friend had made a mistake, then the replies to emails stopped. Finally there is the offer of using a safe method of escrow to handle the financial transfer. This was new to me but apparently escrow is used extensively in Europe for Internet purchases. It works by a finance company providing a conduit for the money and not paying the supplier until the goods have been received by the customer. The scammer creates a false escrow company web site and you will note that he has volunteered to handle all shipping and escrow fees, so I would not need to contact the escrow company myself.

Always ask for a call sign. If a call sign is supplied, you can check the contact details on a call sign database like QRZ.com. If the email on QRZ is different to the one on the advertisement you can send an email to it and see if you get a reply from the same person. Gmail, hotmail and yahoo email addresses could be anyone. For high value items ask for a phone number and give them a call, have a chat and see how genuine they sound and how knowledgeable they are about the gear they are selling and the hobby in general, have a chat about band conditions, sunspots or propagation. You don't have to sound suspicious or be confrontational. If QRZ is linked to a web site you could ask a technical question you know the answer to relating to something on the website or just what kind of dog is in the photo. It is reasonable to ask for serial numbers. Often you can use the information to tell the date of manufacture using information on the Internet and if the serial number should be in a particular format it is a dead giveaway if the proposed supplier supplies something that looks totally different. I would not be inclined to buy equipment if the vendor refuses to supply serial numbers. It is an indicator that something is wrong about the deal, maybe there is a scam or possibly the equipment is stolen property. Payment by Western Union is definitely out. There is no protection at all it is simply a money transfer with no guarantee that the vendor will ever send you the goods and it is a favourite for scammers. Be very cautious of using Money Orders and Cashier's Checks. PayPal and Credit Cards seem to be the best option as far as having any buyer protection. Money Orders & Cashier's Checks are perfectly acceptable once you are absolutely sure who you are dealing with. Always ask the vendor to use a freight service with a tracking function so that you can see where your parcel is.

The escrow option is ok but you should always independently verify that the company is genuine by checking the web site and contacting the escrow company direct rather than using any links on the web site suggested by the vendor. If the company is legitimate it should have a complete web site not just a single page. If you really want to make sure, call them on the phone. False web sites are another favourite for scam artists. On any web site sent to you by email hover the mouse over any

links on the page and note the address displayed at the bottom of the screen. It should be consistent with the web site 'domain' and not include odd country codes, or words like Lycos, gmail, Hotmail or yahoo. Never click on the links, go to the web page using your Internet browser. The 'real' site should look the same and have the same links. Personally I never ever use links on web pages sent via email. I always go to the Internet site and then click the links from there.

My Elecraft vendor refused the PayPal option and offered free freight and to pay the escrow fees. That would seriously erode the \$1600 for the equipment and is pretty unlikely from a genuine seller, especially since I didn't ask for it. He didn't supply the checking information I requested and does not have a verifiable address.

Here are a few examples I found on the Web. *"BEWARE There is a SCAMMER who goes by the name and callsign of FRED RICE G7LPP in London England UK. He scammed me by offering to sell amateur equipment and wanted funds sent via Western Union. After partial payment was sent to him, he claimed he did not get money. Western Union verified via signature and ID he picked up money and used ID with FRED RICE's name. BEWARE, HE IS A CONFIRMED SCAMMER"*. Note the use of Western Union. Here is another; *"the one used to impersonate me was arg7kpfgayne@gmail.com"*. Note the use of a plausible but made up email address. This next one sounds a lot like my Elecraft guy, *"Some recent ads on VKClassifieds.com.au have looked very attractive. Some Icom and Kenwood high value gear (TS950Sdx and IC756 pro3) being offered at about 1/2 to 2/3 of its typical price in Australia. An email enquiry to the seller, calling himself Donald [name withheld] of Wilmington Illinois USA and using an email address that looks like a callsign plus the numerals 73, returned some telltale responses. He asked for payments via Western Union and UPS delivery. And he used some odd English constructions in his wording"*. Common factors are; Western Union, made up but plausible email address, odd use of English phrasing and bargain prices.

99% of hams are genuine decent fellows and almost all overseas trades are just fine, just remember to verify that the person you are dealing with is genuine before parting with your hard earned cash. It is probably better to miss out on the bargain of the century than lose the money. Not that this worries me anymore because I can now afford to buy anything I want... my friend the nephew of the King of Senegal is just about to send me a heap of cash.

73 Andrew ZL3DW