

Those robocallers really want you to call them back

BY LINDA ROBERTSON
Miami Herald

Have you been receiving phone calls from Lithuania, Tunisia or Belarus? Has the IRS threatened to send “the cops” to arrest you? Have you heard from a kindly doctor who will send you a free brace to relieve chronic back pain? How about those calls from a prison in Starke?

You are another hapless victim of the robocall epidemic, which has gotten so bad that many people are reluctant to answer their phones.

Americans receive an average of 5 billion robocalls per month, and nearly 60 percent are scam calls from fraudsters. Four Florida cities ranked in the top 20 for robocalls received in May, with Tampa 18th at 48 million, according to the Federal Communications Commission and YouMail, a telecommunications company.

“We have email spam, which we’ve learned to control, and we have phone spam, which is out of control,” said Alex Quilici, CEO of YouMail, provider of robocall tracking, analyzing and blocking services. “The bad guys keep finding new ways and new numbers to lure you into answering the phone and falling for the scam. For them, it’s easy and cheap to operate, difficult to trace and extremely lucrative.”

The FCC and phone carriers have been slow to fight the assault on our privacy, but screening and blocking technology is improving, said FCC chairman Ajit Pai.

“There is one thing in our country today that unites Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, socialists and libertarians, vegetarians and carnivores, Ohio State and Michigan fans: It is that they are sick and tired of being bombarded by unwanted robocalls,” he said at a public hearing last week.

Six types of scams accounted

for about 700 million of the automated calls in May: health and health insurance scams, student loan scams, interest rate scams, easy money scams, search engine listing scams and Social Security scams. Identity theft can be part of the hoax. Health, interest rate and easy money scams decreased significantly, but student loan scams increased 40 percent and Social Security scams were up 16 percent, YouMail found.

“If you include outright scams and possible telemarketing scams, two-thirds of robocalls are unwanted,” Quilici said. “The other third are alerts about prescriptions, announcements from schools, reminders for payments.”

Spoofing — in which the caller falsifies the number displayed on caller ID, perhaps using your area code or even your own number — has become a common con.

“Often, calls are spoofed to look like they are coming from a local business or neighbor,” said FCC commissioner Geoffrey Starks. “This pernicious practice makes it so we can’t differentiate these unwanted robocalls from calls from our doctors or our kids’ schools.”

A scheme that started in Japan is called the “Wangiri” scam (which means one ring in Japanese). The scammer acquires a premium number — often from a foreign country — calls you and then hangs up after one ring. When you make the mistake of calling back, you are billed at an inflated rate for it, like an international call or the old \$3.99 per minute 976 call-a-psyche numbers. A recorded message may say, “Hello? I can’t hear you. Can you call back, please?” — and that’s a second charge if you do. Or the message says, “Listen to this song from someone who loves you. At the end, you’ll find out who sent it,” which keeps you on the line. This trick has bilked

people out of an estimated \$7 billion, warns the FCC.

A back brace or knee brace scam, which was a form of Medicare fraud that targeted elderly people and generated \$1.2 billion for its perpetrators, was shut down in April when federal investigators arrested 24 people in six states, including Florida. Telemarketers in the Philippines and Latin America would acquire seniors’ Medicare information and connect them with a doctor who would write a prescription — sometimes multiple prescriptions for the same person — for orthopedic braces, even if they weren’t needed.

One of the highest volume robocall scam numbers last month was 855-419-7365, a tech support scam. In one version, the caller uses scare tactics to tell you your computer has been compromised and your IP address is being used by a child pornography site. But if you pay a fee and give this “technician” who claims to be from AT&T or Comcast or another reputable company remote access to your computer, he can fix it. If you erred in answering, hang up and block the number.

Millions of student loan scam calls originated from 888-328-0016, in which the caller says, “Press 1 to get rid of your student loan.” Don’t succumb, even if you feel like playing along to get robocall revenge because once they know it’s a live number they can sell it to another scam artist.

“A 16-person call center in India can make \$75,000 per day,” Quilici said. “There are call centers all over the map — from Florida to Guatemala to Nigeria to New Delhi to Philadelphia. Or just get four friends together in your apartment with a laptop and make millions of calls for nothing. There’s not a lot of overhead.”

Quilici estimates there are 300 to 500 different scam campaigns operating in the United States,



JOHN RAOUX | Associated Press

The robocall epidemic is getting worse as scammers find new ways to manipulate technology — and gullible recipients who answer. Miami is one of the most notorious markets.

with 20 variants on the Social Security scam alone. Thousands of prerecorded calls can be made per minute using autodialers and fake caller IDs.

“It’s easy to get access to the U.S. phone network, easy to get numbers, easy to disguise them, easy to switch carriers, easy to make calls under the radar,” he said.

The FCC voted last week to allow carriers to automatically block unwanted calls by default before they reach consumers’ phones, as long as customers can opt out of the service. The FCC repeated its request that major carriers implement the caller ID authentication network SHAKEN/STIR (Signature-based Handling of Asserted Information using toKENS/Secure Telephone Identity Revisited) by the end of the year. The standardized system would enable carriers to legitimize caller IDs before the call gets to the consumer.

Starks and other FCC commissioners said they would object if carriers charged blocking fees. Starks wrote a letter to carriers discouraging any fees to customers and asking for detailed filtering and blocking

plans by July 10.

“The commission has acted. Now it is industry’s turn to put these new tools to work for consumers,” Starks said.

Pai has been waiting seven months for carriers to adopt the screening network and said he is “optimistic that the end-of-the-year deadline will be met,” but Quilici isn’t so sure.

“I think carriers will become more aggressive at blocking illegal calls from fake area codes and prefixes, but it won’t be a panacea. We’ve never seen regulation solve technical problems,” Quilici said. “Carriers have to be careful of liability. They have to feel safe blocking certain numbers. No carrier wants to make national news because grandma tried to reach her grandson to go to the hospital but her call was blocked. Robocall blocking is complicated. You have to figure out if a number is misbehaving.”

The FCC wants consumers to be more proactive about blocking robocalls. Most consumers can opt in for blocking service from their carrier, but many are not aware of or don’t use the service.

Consumers need to recognize

telltale signs — such as demands for personal information or poorly, vaguely worded voice recordings — and strange numbers that originate from unfamiliar places, including towns you’ve never heard of. Report robocall numbers to the Federal Trade Commission’s Do Not Call Registry or file a complaint with the FCC.

YouMail has a free robocall blocking app. Robocallers are greeted with a message that the number is out of service.

The robocall and telemarketing industries have spawned the call-blocking industry: First Orion, whose mission is to get people to answer their phones again, has predicted that almost half of all calls made to mobile phones will be robocalls by the end of 2019. RoboKiller answers, connects with a human operator and then plays a recorded “gotcha” message. Nomorobo intercepts calls. Apple has announced a feature that will reroute calls from numbers that aren’t in the user’s contact list.

Robocallers are simply taking advantage of our addiction to our phones. The best solution? Turn it off.