

First free seeds from China, now free Amazon packages. What you need to know about 'brushing' scams

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Mysterious seeds from China are not the only strange unwanted packages arriving on doorsteps.

"Free" Amazon deliveries are arriving addressed to residents who didn't order them—all part of an ongoing scam.

The deliveries, which are not gifts, are what authorities call a "brushing scam," in which people receive unsolicited items from a seller who then posts false customer reviews to boost sales.

While this isn't a new scam, the Better Business Bureau is warning consumers "of a scary downside" of getting free boxloads of merchandise from Amazon or other companies.

"You are not the one who hit the jackpot. A scam company is the real winner," the BBB said in its news release Monday.

Amazon could not immediately be reached for comment. In an Amazon seller forum in June, there was a brief discussion of some receiving unordered packages.

The BBB gave a few examples of what some people have found in the usually lightweight packages: flashlights, Bluetooth speakers and computer vacuum cleaners. Over the past week, U.S. TODAY Consumer Editor Michelle Maltais received three unordered Amazon packages: a bug zapper, an iPhone repair kit and an empty velvet jewelry pouch.

"The fact that someone was able to have the items sent to you as if you purchased them indicates that they probably have some of your [personal information](#) such as your name, address, and possibly, your phone number," the BBB said. "Once the information is out there on the internet, it could be used for numerous crooked enterprises."

According to the BBB, the best course of action if you receive a mystery [package](#) is to notify the retailer.

"Brushing and fake reviews are against Amazon's policies, so contact Amazon Customer Service if this happens to you and the product appears to come from Amazon. They will investigate and take action on the bad actor," the BBB said. "The company also takes security seriously and encourages customers to report fraudulent purchases or other security issues."

The BBB also suggests changing passwords and keeping an eye on credit reports and credit card statements.

But can you keep the freebie? Yes; the Federal Trade Commission says you have "a legal right to keep it as a free gift."

To protect yourself from more unordered merchandise, the FTC says be cautious when participating in sweepstakes or order goods advertised as "free," "trial," or "unusually low-priced."

The FTC also advises consumers to contact retailers for help dealing with unordered merchandise.

"If this doesn't work, contact your state or local consumer protection office, local U.S. Postal Inspector, or the Better Business Bureau in your area for help," the FTC said. "The Direct Marketing Association also may be able to help you."

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