

FAKE INS WEB SITES TRICK IMMIGRANTS

Green card lottery applicants targeted by imposter pages

By Bob Sullivan
November 6, 2002
MSNBC

Each year, some 10 million hopefuls enter the American Dream drawing - the annual Green Card lottery. Only 50,000 Green Cards are awarded, but the scant 200-to-1 odds don't deter many. Today was the last day to submit applications for the 2004 lottery, leading to a flurry of last-minute research by would-be American workers. Lottery tickets, and access to the American dream, are supposed to be free. But applicants who searched the Web for Green Card lottery information this time around often found themselves at a gallery of for-profit sites posing as U.S. government Web sites, charging \$50 or more for applications that are supposed to be free.

The sites have tempting names, such as "USA Immigration Services," and "United States of America Foreign Immigration Services." The Web addresses are convincing, too, such as USAIS.org. They are laced with bald eagles, American flags, White House logos - one even sports a mailing address on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, near the White House. But none of those sites are affiliated with the U.S. government, and all of them are looking to profit off the confusion of would-be immigrants desperately seeking a way into this country.

RB, a Toronto resident interested in moving to the United States, told MSNBC.com he was pointed toward USAFIS.org by a banner ad this weekend. He wasn't sure what to think.

"The site looks like a U.S. government Web site you know, not too high tech," he e-mailed. "The site's main page says 'Welcome to the United States of America Foreign Immigration Services.' It has the Statue of Liberty on it, and an American eagle in their logo," he wrote.

The site also includes a link to "FirstGov.gov" logo on the bottom, which is supposed to be the federal government's seal of approval for government services Web sites.

Attempts to contact a representative of the site through contact information supplied on its Web page were unsuccessful.

But when RB traced the site, he discovered it was hosted on a server located in Jerusalem. "I'm probably just jumping to conclusions, or am ignorant, but why would a U.S. government site be hosted in Jerusalem? I can't help but wonder who the heck really put the site up and what they are doing."

A BIG PROBLEM

What they are doing, according to the real U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, is trying to trick would-be immigrants into thinking they are official U.S. government Web sites, in the hopes of landing a few extra application fees. The INS issued a warning about the fake government sites on its own Web site in late October, during the thick of the monthlong Green Card lottery enrollment window. But through today, the sites were still operating, many taking applications - and application fees - even after the lottery had closed.

"It's a big problem," said an INS official who asked not to be named. He said the INS had received over 200 complaints about the government-imposter Web sites - many from victims who've fallen for the ploy - and the agency had done all it could to warn consumers around the world. But still, he believes plenty of victims paid for applications that will never be submitted.

The most brazen of the fake sites, USNIS.org, mimics the real INS Web site design, and even sports a graphic with the words "United States Naturalization and Immigration Service" - a strategic reversal of the agency's real name, Immigration and Naturalization and Service - atop the page. Attempts to reach USNIS.org were also unsuccessful. The site's domain registration information indicates it is run by an operator in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

LOTTERY DRAWS MILLIONS

The official government program, known formally as the Diversity Lottery, hands out Green Cards to about 50,000 foreign nationals from around the world each year. The highly prized cards allow the winner to move to the United States and work here with few strings attached.

The application process is simple, but strict. All that's necessary is a piece of paper with basic personal information, such as name, address and birthplace, along with two photographs. But the application must be received via regular mail during a particular 30-day window, usually in October of each year. And the photographs, application paper, and envelope all must follow exacting specifications.

As the Green Card lottery deadline loomed, the imposter sites were advertising aggressively, particularly in the recent weeks. A search on Google.com, for example, generated paid links to USAIS.org and INSUSA.org atop the results listings. Google.com did not immediately respond to requests for an interview.

USAIS.org also used a massive e-mail marketing campaign, according to the INS. "A couple of months ago USAIS.org was spamming basically the whole world," said the INS official. "We have great concerns about this, but we have no law enforcement authority (to stop it)," he said. The Federal Trade Commission, which enforces federal false advertising laws, does have such authority. And in 1997, it took an immigration lawyer to court for making false claims on his Web site, according to Heather Hipsley, assistant director of the FTC's advertising practices division.

That lawyer promised that he could increase applicant's chances of winning a Green Card, a fraudulent claim, since winners are selected randomly. Hipsley said such Green Card fraud schemes peaked in 1997, and public education efforts since then seem to have kept other immigration services from making that kind of claim.

But the new crop of immigration Web sites use much more subtle methods to glean fees of \$50, \$100, or even \$200 from applicants. Now they make carefully-worded claims that they offer access to the INS Green Card database for the "latest information" on application status - suggesting they can tell applicants quickly if they are accepted or rejected. In fact, no one can, but the offer preys on a frustration felt by lottery applicants, who never hear anything unless they are chosen as a winner.

And the claims are so subtle the FTC isn't ready to take action. Many sites, for example, might be designed to look like official U.S. government Web sites, but include mention in small print that they aren't affiliated with the government - and that would obscure any case against them. Piling flags and eagles on a Web site might be deceptive, but it's probably not illegal.

"If they misrepresent that they are affiliated with the government that's a red flag, and something that we would look for," Hipsley said. "Unfortunately, there's always another (scam) out there."

The INS, in its warning, advises consumers to note that only Web sites that end with the suffix ".gov" are official U.S. government sites.

'WASTE OF MONEY'

Yigal Torem, an immigration lawyer who runs Greencardlottery.com, said that sites like his can provide a vital service to Green Card hopefuls. His site has the words "National Visa Registry" atop the page, next to an image of the Statue of Liberty. But the words "a non-governmental agency" appear at the bottom of each page to clarify his agency's role in the process.

"There's over two or two million of these things rejected every year (because of application errors)," Torem said. "Obviously people are not getting it."

Torem said Green Card applicants can spot fake sites because they "hide" the application process instructions, suggesting to users that they must pay for assistance. Legitimate sites will offer plenty of free information, he said.

"We basically give the overall procedures for anything you need to do, so you can try yourself or decide to ask for help."

Since Sept. 11, Torem added, business on his GreenCardLottery.com site had slowed considerably.

While the INS processes Green Cards, the Diversity Lottery is actually run by the State Department, which publishes the official application instructions on its Web site every year. Stuart Patt, spokesman for the Consular Affairs Bureau of the State Department, agreed that not all Green Card lottery Web sites are frauds. Many do fill out the application correctly for immigration hopefuls and send it in - but paid help isn't necessary, he said.

"When we first announce the program each year, we have a phrase in there that says, there is no need to pay anyone to make the entry for you," he said. "There is absolutely no advantage to going through any such service."

Allan Wernick, an immigration lawyer who writes a syndicated column for King Features, goes one step further.

"It's a waste of money," he said. The application is simple, and many non-profit agencies will help applicants with the form. But, he added, the INS and the State Department have created some confusion with the lottery process, opening the door for fraud artists.

While the State Department Green Card lottery Web site has explicit instructions on the form procedure, it does not include a sample form, leaving the exact formatting to the applicant. That lack of direction creates unnecessary confusion, Wernick said. "They should just provide a form on the Internet with a sample page. That would discourage some of these other services," he said.