

## Opinion Article – Adapted from an AARP Story

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What do a truck, a lost cat, a barrel of whisky and a timeshare all have in common? A lot, it turns out.

The March 2026 issue of the AARP magazine includes a story of several very different scams whose victims lost a lot of money. The common thread is they were not aware that scams could happen to them and didn't do enough research before their interactions with scammers to assure that their financial transactions were secure. First, briefly:

- The truck: scammers stole a truck in one state, changed its VIN – essentially stealing its identity – and sold it in another state. The stolen truck was practically an identical match to one whose VIN they stole. This was important because, when the victim checked the truck's information, it matched that of the truck in the other state. The theft had happened so recently that records had not been updated at the time of the theft. The victim unknowingly bought a stolen vehicle and paid the thieves \$30,000 for it. When the scam was discovered, the victim lost the truck and his payment. Fortunately, some of the money was recovered.
- The cat: being involved in recovery of lost pets is a growth business in "scam world". A pet owner advertised for a lost pet, providing all the relevant information so that the pet could be identified, if found. Shortly after placing the ad, he received a call that the pet had been found but, due to an injury, needed immediate surgery. The caller quoted the cost and the address where the payment could be sent – a fake veterinarian. The scammer then followed up with more requests for money, which the owner willingly paid. The owner tried vainly to find out how his pet was doing but got nowhere. Only then did he do the due diligence to learn that the vet was a fake. His money was gone and so was his pet.
- Whiskey: An US investor, Mr. S., received a surprise call from a Mr. A of the UK, who claimed to have premium scotch whiskey available for investment. Whiskey appreciates over time and Mr. S decided it would be a good way to diversify his portfolio; he bought 6 barrels for \$30,000. Confident of his investment, and at the urging of Mr. A., Mr. S later flew to the UK where he met with Mr. A and discussed other investment ideas. As a result, he put \$300,000 more into the scotch idea. Coincidentally, about the same time, a US Attorney became aware of this scam (there were other victims) and lured Mr. A to the US where he was arrested. Unfortunately, Mr. S lost his entire investment and there was never any whiskey.
- Timeshares: James was the owner of a timeshare that had become a financial burden and he was eager to sell. When he received an unsolicited call from a prospective buyer's agent, he felt he could finally get out from under. The agent said that in order to close the sale, certain fees must be paid. Over a period, the number and cost, of the fees escalated. Desperate to unload the property, James paid them, in all almost \$900,000. Unfortunately, there was no buyer, and the agent was a member of a Mexican drug cartel that was well

known to be the perpetrator of this type of scam. James' obvious vulnerability was his relief in finding someone to buy his property; the scammers were well aware of this dilemma.

In each of these scams the common thread was that scammers attacked vulnerabilities their victims had. In each case the victims received unsolicited calls and in each case the victims handed over money without checking the legitimacy of the callers. You could argue that these criticisms are easy to see after the fact. But this is precisely the point. While scams have been around forever, the world we live in has changed. There are (arguably) more scammers, who have more ways to separate you from your money and many (most?) of them are beyond the reach of our laws.

So, what can you do to protect yourself? Here are a few suggestions:

- Always be skeptical of any unsolicited contacts
- Never, give money away when pressed to do so under urgent conditions
- Triangulate the source: look for several ways to confirm the source is legitimate

This is how Chat GPT summarized the above stories:

The four items you mentioned—a truck, a cat, a barrel of whiskey, and a timeshare—share a common theme: they all represent potential targets for scams. In each of the scenarios outlined, individuals were victimized through schemes that exploited their vulnerabilities. Here's a summary of the links between them:

1. **Identity Theft and Authenticity**: The truck scam involved the theft of a vehicle, followed by altering its VIN to sell it as a legitimate product. This underlines the identity and authenticity concepts that can be manipulated by scammers.
2. **Emotional Vulnerability**: The lost pet scam specifically preyed on the emotional distress of a pet owner searching for their beloved animal. This demonstrates how scammers can take advantage of deep emotional connections to extract money.
3. **Investment Scams**: The whiskey investment scam highlighted how individuals can be swayed by the allure of profitable opportunities, especially when they appear to be legitimate and are promoted by well-spoken individuals.
4. **Desperation and Urgency**: The timeshare scam showed how desperation to offload a financial burden can lead someone to make hasty decisions without sufficient research. This reflects a common vulnerability—urgency can cloud judgment.

In summary, the commonalities among them include the manipulation of identity, emotional appeal, the lure of investment opportunities, and exploitation of desperation. The victims' lack of awareness and due diligence allowed them to fall prey to scams that promised resolution, validation, or profit. To protect against such scams, it is essential to remain cautious and perform thorough research before making any financial decisions, especially when approached with unsolicited offers. Always verify the legitimacy of the source and resist pressures to act quickly.