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CONSUMER ADVISORY

Shopping for a Puppy? Do Your Homework and Beware of Scams!

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Pet purchases and adoptions have increased in recent months as families are spending more time at home. Unfortunately, more demand for companion animals has generated more complaints about online scams from individuals seeking to source pets from distant places.

All too often, pets advertised online via social media, general sales forums or even legitimate-looking websites do not really exist. Scammers will post photos of cute puppies or kittens to lure pet-lovers into making payments for non-existent animals.

The Indiana State Board of Animal Health (BOAH) advises Hoosiers who are seeking a new pet, either to buy or adopt, to take steps to protect themselves and be sure the source of the pet is legitimate.

Tips for Consumers:

1. Research the breeder or rescue/adoption center before sending any form of payment. Look for contact information, check credentials, and confirm reviews from previous clients by direct contact. Ask about the breeder/adopter and the pet's background. Consider searching the Better Business Bureau for possible complaints against the seller.
2. Make an in-person visit. Meet the dog breeder, the puppy, and the parents of the puppy.
3. Talk to others who have purchased pets from the breeder.
4. Ask friends, family, coworkers, or your veterinarian for a referral to a reputable breeder/rescue.
5. Consult with a veterinarian about which dog breeds would be best for your family. Ask your veterinarian for local breeder recommendations.
6. Never pay a fee to obtain an animal that you have not seen with your own eyes (as opposed to via pictures or videos online).
7. Don't pay to ship a pet if you can't verify the seller is a reputable breeder or rescue organization. Only pay for direct shipping to your location.
8. Be aware that scammers can and do take legitimate business names to use as a cover.
9. Look for breeders or rescues within driving distance. This allows you to see the animal and meet the breeder or rescue before a possible purchase or adoption. It also means you can pick the animal up yourself when it is ready to come home. Transporting the animal yourself not only assures the animal exists but is less stressful for the animal than being shipped by commercial conveyance. Most breeds can be found within a reasonable driving distance.
10. If you virtually chat with the seller, watch for odd phrasing or typos.

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11. If the seller asks you to pay via wire transfer or gift card, DON'T. There is a huge chance it is a scam.
12. If anyone asks you to send money overseas, particularly to pet adoption scam hotspots such as Cameroon or India, it is a scam.
13. Beware of "free" pet offers online. These are often simply scams to get you to pay shipping or other fees for non-existent animals.

Transportation Scams

When agreeing to the purchase or adoption of a pet, discuss how the animal will be transported if you cannot pick up the pet yourself. A common scam involves a seller who arranges transportation with several up-front fees that increase while the pet is in transit. The transporter or seller will contact the buyer to ask for additional payments for added expenses or fees or permits that "suddenly come up" during shipping. All too often the seller says the animal has been detained in another state during a stop-over and the transporter must pay an extra fee for a permit to a government agency. Government agencies do NOT charge fees for pet movements within the United States.

Report Scams

Hoosiers who believe they have been the victim of a scam or targeted by scammers should file a complaint with the Office of Indiana Attorney General at indianaconsumer.com or by calling 1-800-382-5516.

Buying or adopting a pet means you are adding a new member to your family. This is an exciting time. The excitement should be tempered with caution and skepticism. However, excitement can change to severe disappointment if you find out the pet you were expecting never really existed. By being mindful that sophisticated scams exist and practicing the above tips, you will be taking the steps necessary to make sure your excitement is rewarded with the addition of a new furry family member.

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