

Salon victim of fake promotion

| Updated Nov 22, 2010

The coupon sounded like a good deal to Joel Carter.

He paid the man who approached him with the offer at Wolfie's bar in Spring \$49.99 and walked home with a coupon for a 30-minute massage, discounts on products and a number of services at L'Avantage salon in The Woodlands.

He called to schedule an appointment, only to find out no one at the salon had ever heard of the promotion.

It turns out he had been sold a fake offer to the salon.

"They just walked into the restaurant and walked up to someone else, and I overheard her and said, 'Let me see what you've got' and I ended up buying one," Carter said.

"... I was telling a guy I work with about it and he said he bought one right outside of Wal-Mart."

Carter had given the sales person, who worked for Smart Circle International, his credit card number to pay for the certificate.

It turned out that representative was part of a legitimate company, but that L'Avantage had nothing to do with the offer — which looked official but misspelled the salon's name.

"The person who is like our regional contact for the Houston area ... did, in fact, fraudulently sign the contract between Smart Circle and (L'Avantage)," said Rupa Patel, of Volmer PR, which handles media relations for Smart Circle.

Patel said the manager who allegedly forged the signature is no longer employed by Smart Circle, and that she hasn't heard of a similar incident occurring within the company. All of the other accounts created by the former employee were checked and non of the other offers are believed to be fraudulent, she said.

L'Avantage's Francis Douglas said the salon filed a police report about the coupons.

Customers who purchased the coupons have two options, Patel said.

The (owners) of L'Avantage (has/have) agreed to honor the 40-50 coupons that were distributed, so the customers can simply use them at the salon, Patel said. The other option would be for the the customers to get their money back, either through cash or through the option of applying the cost toward other Smart Circle products.

None of the customers who purchased the fraudulent L'Avantage coupons ever had their credit card numbers at risk, Patel said.

“Our main concern is for the public, especially this close to the holidays,” said L'Avantage's Francis Douglas. “People shouldn't be giving their credit cards to somebody off the street, because you don't know.”

She recommends people call the business that is the subject of a promotion before purchasing anything, or instead purchase a gift card directly from a business.

Douglas said the owner of L'Avantage had been approached about working with Smart Circle prior to the incident, but turned down the opportunity. Douglas said 5-10 people attempted to redeem them the first week.

“We're just kind of upset for our clients and it's going to make us look bad too,” Douglas said

Despite the actions of its former employee, Smart Circle may continue doing business with L'Avantage as well, Patel said.

“We're still working with the owner,” she said. “We're still in conversation with them. They wanted to continue with (a certificate campaign) in January.”