



Blocking spam calls with mobile apps

1.7 million M'sians receive 30 million sales and scam attempts this year

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PETALING JAYA: From telemarketers offering credit cards and insurance to criminal Macau scam syndicates, Malaysian mobile phone users are being hounded by a fast-rising number of spam calls.

Anti-spam mobile application Truecaller said that its 1.7 million users in Malaysia received more than 30 million spam calls this year alone which the app managed to block.

"To give you an example of how fast this problem is growing, since January, we've seen a 100% increase in spam calls," said Truecaller's director of communications Kim Fai Kok.

Truecaller claims to have 250 million users worldwide and has offices in Sweden, United States and India.

There were 10.8 million postpaid mobile phone users and 33.3 million prepaid users in Malaysia up to end-June this year, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC).

Kim said Truecaller users in Malaysia receive an average of six spam calls a month, the second highest in South-East Asia after Indonesia where users get an average of eight. Users in Singapore and Thailand receive four respectively, while in Vietnam the figure is even lower at two, said Kim.

He said the major driver of spam calls in Malaysia are those offering financial services, which account for 67% of the spam calls.

Typically, these are banking product offers or cold calls from credit card companies.

Another major problem that Malaysians have to deal with is unsolicited telemarketing calls that make up 13% of total spam calls reported.

Kim said telemarketing calls can further be broken down into promotional calls from companies, surveys being done by analytics firms on behalf of their clients, or new client outreach for services and subscriptions.

Another 9% are calls from insurance companies offering to sell dif-



Line of defence: Truecaller claims to be able to block spam calls.

ferent types of policies, while calls from telecommunications companies selling data and offering promotions make up another 4%. The remaining 6% are debt collection, nuisance and scam calls.

The Personal Data Protection Act 2010 regulates and protects the use of personal data collected by companies including banks, hotels and airlines.

An individual who keeps getting spam calls from any of these companies and feels that their personal data may have been processed in breach of any provision of the Act can make a complaint to the Personal Data Protection Commissioner.

However, some spam calls come from firms that the user has not given any personal details to previously. Others are from scammers such as the Macau syndicate.

The MCMC when contacted advised the public to be vigilant and

take precautionary measures whenever receiving calls from unknown numbers.

These includes lodging a complaint to the commission on the matter, which can be channelled to aduan.skmm.gov.my.

In a recent post on the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) Facebook page, police advised smartphone users to install mobile apps that block spam calls and messages.

Statistics from the Communications and Multimedia Ministry showed that telecommunications fraud cases involved an estimated RM162.6mil this year alone, with the Macau Scam being the most common.

Kuala Lumpur Commercial Crime Investigation Department (CCID) chief Asst Comm Mohd Luthfi Ismail Abdullah said while spam call-blocking apps could be beneficial, members of the public should not solely depend on them to

prevent them from being victims of scams, especially Macau scams, as the number of cases has increased significantly recently.

"We must always stay vigilant and suspicious of numbers that could be from scammers. The best thing to do is to not answer calls from suspicious numbers.

"Avoiding conversation with these scammers is the best way to avoid becoming victims," he said.

For Macau scams, ACP Mohd Luthfi reminded the public that the authorities, such as the police and Bank Negara, would not call them directly regarding official matters.

"Do not believe it if out of the blue, someone claiming to be the police or from other agencies, calls you to inform that you are being investigated or even that your account has been frozen.

"If you receive such suspicious calls and talk to these scammers, call the authorities directly, don't

follow the number given by the scammers," he said.

A Macau Scam often starts with a phone call from someone pretending to be an officer from a bank, government agency or debt collector.

The scammer will then claim that the potential victim owes money or has an unpaid fine, often with a very short window of less than an hour to settle the payment or face dire consequences.

The unsuspecting victims will then be asked to make payments to get them off the hook.

According to the PDRM Facebook post, spam blocking apps typically work by gathering phone numbers that have already been reported.

While there is no guarantee that such apps can completely stop scammers, smartphone users can reduce the risks, the police said.

Some may be wary about giving permissions to an app such as Truecaller.

After all, the app's privacy policy states that contact information collected and used would include phone numbers as well as attached names, Google IDs and e-mail addresses from one's address book.

However Kim assures that: "People can use Truecaller without sharing their contacts, but to get the best experience we need certain permissions.

"To give you an example, Truecaller also works as a phone and SMS app.

"The value we provide with our dialer is that we put a name to number in your call history – which is extremely helpful. And for the SMS feature we automatically help filter out spam messages and keep your inbox clean from being cluttered."

If you don't want to install another app, some phone makers like Samsung include spam call protection in their phones.

This feature can be turned on from the dialer app. Open the app, click the three dots on the top right hand corner and then pick Settings. Scroll down and you will see the option Caller ID and Spam Protection.

To turn it on you will have to also agree to share your contacts with the service Hiya, a caller ID and blocking service.