Did Bill Gates Really Offer a TV Interviewer a Blank Check?

Some claim he did, but that’s not what’s really important.

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There’s a story going around about Bill Gates and an offer he made to a TV interviewer several years ago. According to this account by Sylvain Saurel on Medium, the conversation went like this:

The journalist asked: “Mr. Gates, what is the secret of your success?”

Instead of answering the question, Gates handed the interviewer a blank check and told her to write whatever amount she wanted on it. The journalist refused and then repeated the question. Gates, according to the legend, gave her the same blank check and again told her to write whatever amount she wanted. Again, she refused. And even tore up the check.

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Gates looked at her and finally answered the question. “The secret of my success is that I do not miss any opportunities like you just did,” he reportedly said. “If you had that philosophy, you could have become the richest journalist in the world today.”

Saurel, a self-professed bitcoin entrepreneur, had the right takeaway. As a business person you should seize every

opportunity, right? “You will only be successful if you are able to take the immediate and massive actions required when golden opportunities arise,” he writes. “So, if one day a billionaire gives you a blank check and asks you to write the amount of your choice on it, do not waste time with unnecessary questions and take action immediately.”

He’s certainly not alone in this opinion. In a Reddit conversation from a few years ago, most of the people discussing the alleged incident agreed. “I write down $40 million and cash the check,” wrote one. “Fill in $25 billion, deposit and decide how to spend it,” wrote another.

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But then again you could have the point of view of this Redditor: “Ask him what the catch is,” he (or she) wrote. “I don’t want to suddenly find I’ve signed up to assassinate the Woz or something!”

OK, so the reference to Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak is a little extreme. But that user (who has since been deleted for some reason and I hope it has nothing to do with Steve Wozniak) makes a valid point for any small business owner that’s offered a seeming sweetheart deal. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

The customer who promises to “pay double” is probably not going to do that. The salesperson who promises to close that big deal next month is unlikely to do that either. There’s a good chance that the piece of equipment that’s up for sale at half price doesn’t work. Bill Gates isn’t going to give you a blank check. No one is going to offer you a blank check. Life, and business, doesn’t work that way.

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When you run a business for more than two decades like I have

you learn that people sometimes bend the rules, inflate the truth, and nothing – I mean nothing – is as good as it seems. Sure, you should seize the opportunities when they come. But don’t do it blindly. Ask. Investigate. Trust. But verify. And expect that whatever promises were made won’t be kept. If you’re looking for quick wins and money falling from the sky, go to Vegas or buy a lottery ticket. Otherwise, understand the reality that when something sounds good to be true, it usually is.

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