

Google might've accidentally approved an ad for a Target gift card scam

Most of us check our gift card balances online (because who actually keeps those receipts that tell us how much money we have left on them?), making an apparent oversight by Google all the worse. It appears that Google inadvertently approved a prominent ad for a phony Target gift card balance checker that's meant to steal your funds.

A Reddit user on r/assholedesign discovered the slip-up when searching Google for "Target gift card balance" on mobile, and found that the very first result is an ad, titled "Check Gift Card Balance – Target." Only, the site isn't Target – it's actually a site called "bristolhirevan." The ad's description says it will let you check your gift card balance "immediately," and that it also offers "all van sizes to fit your needs" – how can you get more legit than that? My colleague Sean Hollister and I found the same phony ad when searching for the exact phrase ourselves.

Okay, while the name of the site doesn't sound convincing at all, its interface sure looks like the real thing, although the actual Target site requires you to sign in to check your gift card balance, while this fake site doesn't. Besides that, the only things that are off about the webpage are the URL, which still has the "bristolhirevan" domain and the fact that every single link on the page leads to the real Target homepage, despite promising to link to a weekly ad or a gift registry. If you were really in a rush (and were somehow distracted enough to ignore the mention of vans), you just

might accidentally enter your gift card's number and security code here, resulting in it getting stolen.

Gift card scams appear to be on the rise. Last year, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported that victims of gift card scams lost a total of \$148 million within the first nine months of 2021 – more than all of 2020. Target gift cards are apparently scammers' cards of choice, as FTC data shows people were scammed out of \$35 million worth of Target gift cards last year, more than double the amount of any other gift card brand.

As pointed out by the FTC, gift card scams often take place over the phone, with the scammer pretending to be an employee of a company like Google or Amazon (or even someone from a federal agency) who demands the victim make a payment in the form of a gift card. However, fake balance checker sites like these often hide in plain sight – apparently even as ads on Google.

A 2020 report from *Bleeping Computer* draws attention to sites that impersonate Target gift card balance checker pages, noting that Target is actually one of the most popular sites for scammers to replicate. *The Verge* reached out to Google with a request for comment about how this scam may have slipped through its ad review process, and if it will be removed, but didn't immediately hear back.

<https://www.theverge.com/2022/1/15/22885562/google-search-target-gift-card-scam>