

FILE – The National Retail Federation estimates more than 81 million people made online purchases on “Cyber Monday” in the United States in 2017. Technology security experts warn scammers may target shoppers via phony emails and malicious software. Wilfredo Lee - AP

LOCAL

Black Friday shoppers in these major cities got hit the worst with online scams, viruses



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Seasonal online shopping around Thanksgiving exposed customers to an increased amount of harmful computer viruses, malicious software and potential financial crimes, says one national company that sells anti-malware protection and tracks attacks.

Enigma Software Group says its customers in Charlotte saw the largest spike in harmful infections on their computers during the four-day “Black Friday” to “Cyber Monday” stretch. The company produced a report of the [top 40 major cities](#) affected by increased malicious software, or “malware,” activity.

Charlotte came in at the number one spot, followed by Detroit, New York and Salt Lake City. Last year’s holiday shopping season saw Raleigh near the top of the Enigma list, along with Kansas City, Miami and San Francisco. The rankings are determined by the scope and number of malicious online activities affecting customers in each city, not by a city’s population.

Most cases of malware targeting online customers are attempts to steal personal information for financial gain, says Anthony Falco, owner and operator [PC Paramedic](#), a local business with stores in Charlotte and Mint Hill.

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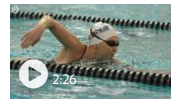
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That Charlotte was ranked first on Enigma's list didn't shock Falco, who says he finds hundreds of viruses and malware infections daily on local computers.

Peak shopping season is particularly a favorite time for bad actors to strike, he said, because consumers are more vulnerable as they spend more time and money online. Scammers infiltrate computers and phones connected to the Internet often using untraceable "exploitation kits" and fake emails, luring people into handing over personal information.

Some of Falco's local customers have been victims of "ransomware," where a virus essentially locks down data on a computer or device and sends a demand for money.

"It's a huge scam," he said. "I've had customers coming in crying because they've lost all their data."

Similar attacks happen at small to medium-sized businesses, he said, which tend to have fewer lines of defense than large corporations. Locally, these businesses have included real estate firms and the golf industry, Falco said. In one case, PC Paramedic began to unwind an infection involving phony emails and bank accounts and Falco ended up on the phone with the FBI.

After nearly 20 years in the business, Falco says the attacks are increasing in both sophistication and frequency.

He recommends buying personal malware and virus protection software as well as a backup and data recovery program, like Carbonite.

Enigma, maker of SpyHunter anti-malware software, says the number of infections in Charlotte over Thanksgiving weekend increased three-fold compared to the month before. Nationwide, the company reported malware activity doubled in major cities.

This is mainly due to the increased amount of people spending hours on the Internet.

The National Retail Federation estimates more than [81 million people](#) made online purchases on "Cyber Monday" and a majority of those used smartphones to shop around.

Enigma said it would not publicly disclose exact customer numbers in each city but said computers with SpyHunter in Charlotte registered more than 1,000 types of infections last weekend and, nationwide, Enigma tracked more than 250,000 infections.

The trend is expected to continue in December, as online shopping for Christmas continues, Enigma spokesperson Ryan Gerding said.

While Enigma ranks cities affected the worst by malware, its experts say it's unlikely Charlotte and other places were geographically-targeted. Instead, "phishing" attempts – scams that fish for hundreds or thousands of victims at once – can strike anywhere there's Internet connection, often using email addresses and website links that look similar to known contacts and trusted sources.

Enigma warns "cyber crooks" may also try to send direct messages on Twitter and Facebook with malicious links masquerading as content sent from friends. Online shoppers should also be suspicious of websites that require downloading or installing software before making a purchase.

Falco says consumers should use caution when clicking links or opening attachments in emails. And, out-of-date operating software on devices, including smartphones can leave data and personal information under-protected.

Experts also recommend using a retailer's official app on mobile devices to ensure you're ordering and entering your credit card information on a safe site. Because Internet URL sites appear abbreviated on most phone screens, it can be more difficult to

verify quickly the identity of a website and scammers often model fake websites to look like well-known brands or store logos.

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