

Internet trio who cheated 3,000 eBay shoppers are jailed

By Fiona Govan

THREE internet fraudsters who made nearly £300,000 conning thousands of people into buying non-existent items on eBay were jailed yesterday for their part in a "well planned and sophisticated fraud".

In the biggest fraud of its kind uncovered so far, a Romanian couple and their accomplice tricked customers from across the globe into paying for fictitious goods that never arrived.

The couple, who advertised a range of items from parachute trousers and concert tickets to expensive cars on the internet auction site, used 12 aliases to con more than 3,000 unsuspecting shoppers across the world.

Nicolae Cretanu, 30, and his wife, Adriana, 23 of Leytonstone, east London, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to obtain property by deception between July 1 2003 and May 31 this year and money laundering.

They were jailed for three and a half years and two and a half years respectively.

Their accomplice, George Titar, of Stratford, east London, who collected the payments from money transfer shops, admitted the same charges and was also sentenced to two and a half years.

The scam was successful because buyers on eBay have to pay before they are sent their goods. Shoppers were told by e-mail that they had been unsuccessful in their first bid but were offered a "second chance" to buy a similar item.

Customers were then encouraged to wire money via Western Union as quickly as possible if they wished their bid to be successful.

The majority of the cash was sent back to the gang's accomplices in Romania.

The racket was finally exposed after suspicious staff at Western Union alerted police and the three were arrested after an investigation by Scotland Yard's economic crime unit.

Chief Supt Nigel Mawer, who led the operation, said: "We believe there were 3,000 victims of this fraud and this type of fraud is still continuing."

The cell's accomplices in Romania had been arrested and were awaiting trial.

He stressed that internet auctions were essentially safe as long as customers followed the safety rules. "The message we are trying to get over to the public is do not send money by transfer to a person whose identity you do not know."

The £300,000 involved in this case was "a drop in the ocean" compared with the estimated £1 billion a year conned from people who wired funds in this way. "eBay scams form a substantial part of that," he added.

Passing sentence at London's Middlesex Guildhall Crown Court, Judge Duncan Matheson QC described the crime as "a major, sophisticated and well-designed fraud".

He said that for nearly two years the trio and their Eastern European masters "exploited perceived weaknesses in the eBay system, targeting a large number of people who parted with monies under entirely fraudulent circumstances".

The judge said he would also be recommending to the Home Secretary that all three be deported upon their release.

Anthony Riem, a partner at Philippsohn Crawfords Berwald, a law firm specialising in fraud, gave a warning that internet shoppers should be vigilant.

He said: "Policing the perimeters of the web remains a constant challenge and begs the question as to whether responsibility lies with the consumer, who enjoys the perks of cheap trading at a cost, eBay, or the police. It is vital that consumers remain vigilant."