

# The day Western Union foiled scam

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BY TEH JOO LIN

THE woman walked into a Western Union outlet and started filling up a remittance form to wire \$4,000 to China.

She seemed to be receiving a stream of non-stop instructions on her mobile phone.

Warning bells rang for the Western Union staff: It looked like a phone scammer was about to claim yet another victim.

Customer service executive Jane Xu, swinging into action, gently quizzed the woman in her 40s. But she brushed Ms Xu off curtly, saying: "This is my business."

The woman was insistent on sending the money. Staff

later found out she had been led to believe she had struck a big lottery prize but had to wire the \$4,000 first.

Back-up was now needed. Colleagues joined Ms Xu, 45, in showing the woman police advisories and counter notices about phone scams. The assistant vice-president talked to her too.

It took them half an hour. But their doggedness paid off when she came round. Not so lucky were 378 people who lost a total of \$4.6 million to phone scammers last year.

At yesterday's annual crime briefing, police chief of staff Senior Assistant Commissioner Soh Wai Wah said: "The best way to fight this crime is to stop it before any

money gets out of the country." This was why public awareness is key and the police are also working with remittance houses on the matter.

Staff at Western Union – situated in 65 locations here – take their "scam alert" seriously, knowing they may be the last line of defence.

Western Union's assistant vice-president Patricia Chua said that between July and September last year, staff stopped about five to seven transactions daily. This is now down to about one or two daily.

The staff's antennae go up when such phone-in-ear customers walk in to remit money to places like China, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

To help potential victims come round, notices have been put up at all the outlets.

Ms Chua said when victims are especially resistant, it can take up to four hours to make them come to their senses.

Just yesterday, she thought she had dissuaded a 21-year-man from wiring \$1,686 to a Chinese account.

But the lottery "winner" came back later. Western Union declined the transaction.

"When it becomes clear the customer is potentially sending money to a fraudster, our staff are empowered to decline the transaction and advise him to call the police for advice," Mr Sunil Balagopal, its regional vice-president said.