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Officials issue warning about traveling salesman

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Traveling salesman Thorsten Wietschel goes by the moniker "Dr. Sven Kugler" when selling his magnet-laced mattress covers to the elderly at seminars throughout California. Wietschel, 45, is witty, patient and speaks with authority, according to law enforcement officials who've observed his sales pitch. His seminars tout "magnetic field therapy" and are so popular at some locations that senior citizens are turned away due to overcrowding, according to the manager of one restaurant where an event was held. But in his home state of Arizona, the attorney general's office ordered him to stop advertising and selling his products. Glendale police arrested him Sept. 15 and booked him for commercial burglary and grand theft after an undercover sting operation. Wietschel is now free on \$20,000 bond. Josephine Cici, 80, of Pasadena became one of Wietschel's victims after she attended a July 30 seminar at the Marie Callender's restaurant at 2300 E. Foothill Blvd. in Pasadena. Cici said she and two of her friends went to the event, and after Wietschel bought the group dinner he told them that his magnetic field therapy products would eliminate their need for medication. Cici said she pays more than \$300 a month out of pocket for her medicine ... for diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer ... so the offer was enticing. Plus, Wietschel was "very friendly ... he was a nice man," she said. Cici paid Wietschel \$711.40 ... including shipping ... for a twin mattress cover with 5-cent magnets sewn inside. Of the 21 people at the seminar, six or seven others also bought mattress covers, she said. It was one of many seminars the salesman held at the location over several consecutive days. Detective John Genna of the Glendale Police Department said the mattress covers cost the alleged scam artist between \$43 and \$82.50. On Sept. 15, at a Glendale Marie Callender's restaurant, Genna listened on audio and watched on video surveillance as Wietschel sold mattress covers to seven people out of a group of 21, he said. Wietschel was a "great salesman, very patient," Genna said. "But you could see the dividends, it paid off for him." After lunch, the salesman's pitch took more than three hours and included discussing home remedies and scoffing at the Food and Drug Administration, Genna said. In the course of his presentation, Wietschel said he was a doctor ... which he isn't ... and that his products could eliminate problems like arthritis, vascular disease and heart attacks, all illegal claims, Genna said. "He says it creates a magnetic field that creates a therapeutic environment when you sleep," Genna said. Wietschel turned up the pressure by saying that he was making his audience an offer that was good "today only," according to Genna. He said a king-size cover regularly retails for \$1,300, but if a person bought it that day, she could get a special rate of \$698, Genna said. People could get an additional discount of \$100 for paying cash. When Josephine Cici's nephew, Joe Cici, heard about the deal a day after the seminar, he was incensed, he said. His aunt is on a fixed income and can't afford the loss, and now feels she's lost her independence because her family will question her ability to make good decisions, he said. Efforts to contact Wietschel were unsuccessful. Ben Green, executive director of the Pasadena Senior Center, said companies like Marie Callender's need to be gatekeepers to protect against elder abuse. "If you're renting your place out to people to make presentations to any people, particularly seniors, be more cautious, have some social responsibility," Green said. Ruben Cardoza, general manager at the Pasadena Marie Callender's restaurant, said in the future he'll be more careful about whom he allows to host seminars. Cardoza said that Wietschel's \$1,800 check bounced, and other Marie Callender's managers said the only memo they received from the corporate office was regarding the returned check. Calls to Marie Callender's corporate headquarters went unreturned. Maria Harte, general manager at the Hemet Marie Callender's restaurant, said that for the past three years Wietschel has hosted about four weeks of seminars at her restaurant. More than 40 people attend each seminar and Wietschel spends between \$4,000 and \$5,000 a week at the restaurant, she said. "I've never heard anything negative about this guy, I'm in shock," she said. Glendale police believe that at least 20 people were bilked by Wietschel in Pasadena, and ask that they report the crime to the Pasadena Police Department detectives at [626] 744-4522. -- Marshall Allen can be reached at [626] 578-6300, Ext. 4461, or by e-mail at marshall.allen@sgvn.com.

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