

Promoter being probed apparently kills himself

By RICK WARNER
Herald Staff Writer

Sidney Levine was the ultimate salesman. No matter what he was peddling — skateboard parks, tanning booths, Indian jewelry or exotic plants — the fast-talking Broward promoter was the picture of confidence.

When the state attorney general's office ordered Levine to refund more than \$125,000 to investors throughout South Florida in his electronic watch-repair operation, Levine smiled and said he would.

When dozens of his mail-order firms went down the tubes, leaving angry investors from Puerto Rico to Seattle in their wake, Levine said he was "a schmuck" and pledged to start anew.

He never did.

Distraught over a federal grand jury investigation into his business activities, Levine apparently killed himself Tuesday in a Hollywood hotel room after sending suicide notes to his attorney and a government prosecutor.

Levine's body was discovered Wednesday about 11 a.m. in a room at the Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge, 2501 N. Ocean Dr., Hollywood Detective T.J. Loewke said. He was found lying on a bed in his pajamas with a nearly empty bottle of pills at his side.

Loewke said it appeared that Levine had been dead at least 24 hours. At his side was a note containing the message: "Call my lawyer."

"It definitely appears to be a suicide," Loewke said.

Earlier in the day, Levine's attor-

ney and assistant U.S. Attorney Ken Lipman had received letters from Levine in which he revealed his plan to kill himself.

Lipman, who headed the investigation into Levine's mail-order firms, said the letter indicated Levine was depressed by his inability to pay back customers who had invested in his companies.

"He said he had tried everything to rectify his mistakes, but that everything had failed," Lipman said. "He said he wanted to spare everyone a lot of pain."

Lipman said Levine apparently was heavily in debt and was worried about his legal problems. Lipman said he would turn the letter over to the Hollywood police.

Levine's lawyer, Dennis Schaefer, said his office received a similar letter Wednesday.

Schaefer said he knew his client was distressed by the grand jury investigation in Fort Lauderdale, which was focusing on Levine-operated franchises involving electronic video games and portable cookie stores.

"Who wouldn't be?" Schaefer asked. "He knew he was going to be indicted and he didn't want to go to jail."

Schaefer said he last saw Levine, 55, Monday morning.

"We met for breakfast," he said. "He told me he was going to California to speak to some business associates about borrowing some money."

Loewke said Levine checked into the Howard Johnson's Monday at 11 a.m. and ate at the coffee shop later that afternoon. That apparent-

ly was the last time he was seen alive, Loewke said.

Over the past 10 years, Levine persuaded hundreds of aspiring entrepreneurs to invest in a series of do-it-yourself franchises featuring everything from skateboard parks to exotic plants.

But the results rarely matched the promises.

One after another the businesses went bust, leaving angry customers with empty pockets and broken dreams.

Levine's International Bio-Medical Centers Inc. drew attention in North Miami Beach late in 1979. One of his employees was charged with attempted rape and impersonating a doctor after he allegedly assaulted an 18-year-old North Dade woman who came into the center for a breast-reduction operation. Levine was charged with running a business without a license.

Disposition of either case could not be determined Wednesday.

At the time of the incident, Levine either owned or was a partner in at least 30 South Florida corporations, according to the Better Business Institute of Greater Miami.

Prior to the medical center's troubles, the Better Business Institute had received 250 complaints against various Levine corporations, a spokesman said at the time.

Lipman said Wednesday that the grand jury investigation will probably continue since it involves people other than Levine.