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Bureau of Consumer Protection

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Consumers Find Internet Offers That Just Don't Click

You find that rare collectible on an Internet auction site, place a bid, and “win” the item. But you don't receive it, or the item you receive is not as described.

You receive a check in the mail for a small amount of money, and assume it's a refund or a rebate for a product you bought. You cash the check, neglecting to read the fine print on the back. A month or so later, you find charges for Internet access on your phone bill, even though you don't own a computer.

You're about to click onto an adult site on your computer, but a disclaimer pops up telling you that you must be 18 or older to enter the site. You're asked for your credit card number as proof of identification and age. A month later, you see charges on your credit card bill for items you didn't buy.

Internet auctions, Internet access services that use gimmicks like misleading rebate checks, and unauthorized use of credit cards are among consumers' top 10 Internet-related complaints, according to the Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection champion. Other subjects that consumers complained about most include modem dialing that resulted in exorbitant and unauthorized long-distance telephone charges; charges for web services crammed onto phone bills; pyramid schemes; misleading travel and vacation offers; unsubstantiated “get rich quick” opportunities; day trading products that promised to predict the market with 100 percent accuracy; and health care products and services that made questionable claims about their potential to cure serious diseases and conditions.

The agency announced the “Top 10 Dot Cons” as part of an international law enforcement effort to “sweep” the most prevalent fraudulent practices off the web. The top 10 list is based on complaints entered into Consumer Sentinel, a secure investigative cybertool, maintained at the FTC, that provides more than 240 law enforcement agencies immediate access to hundreds of thousands of consumer fraud complaints.

According to Jodie Bernstein, director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, the agency and its partners have announced cases against some 100 fraudulent operators during its Top 10 Dot Cons campaign. “These promoters used 21st-century technology and Internet accessibility to take old-fashioned advantage of consumers,” she said.

Bernstein said the international law enforcement effort represents “an important, ongoing effort in the U.S. and around the world to weed out those players who don't want to play by the rules” of the new economy. “The Internet is revolutionizing the way we gather information, shop and do business,” she said. “But it takes collaboration among law enforcement agencies, industry and consumers to cultivate a climate where ecommerce can be conducted with confidence.”

The FTC offers these tips to consumers who are going “dot com” on the web:

- ◆ Read the fine print and check out all relevant links for disclosures related to an agreement or sale.
 - ◆ Be wary of extravagant claims about performance or earnings potential.
 - ◆ Look for a privacy policy. If you don't see one – or can't understand it – consider taking your business elsewhere.
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- ◆ Be skeptical of any company that doesn't clearly state its name, physical address and telephone number. Check it out with a local Better Business Bureau, consumer protection office or the state Attorney General where the organization is located.
- ◆ Visit the FTC's Top 10 Dot Cons website at www.ftc.gov/dotcons for more information about Internet scams and how to spot and avoid them.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint, or to get free information on any of 150 consumer topics, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP, or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing and other fraud-related complaints into the **Consumer Sentinel** database.

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