

Consumers warned about direct-marketing gimmicks

Direct-marketing companies don't sell their products in stores. They contact customers directly by mail or telephone, or by radio and television broadcasts - and sometimes they make offers that sound pretty good. They may say holidays in the sun, diamond bracelets or expensive sets of luggage are available for free. But shoppers ordering products they don't want just to get a terrific "gift" may be disappointed.

"By far the majority of firms engaged in direct marketing provide quality products at reasonable cost to the consumer," says Marilyn Gurevsky, expert at Ontario's Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations (MCCR). "And the convenience of shopping at home can be a bonus for busy working families, as well as for many seniors and others who may be less mobile during the winter months."

But, Gurevsky warns, a small minority of direct-marketers may not be ethical, and she advises consumers to check offers carefully before they buy.

John Gustavson, President of the Canadian Direct Marketing Association, agrees. He says consumers with complaints about Canadian direct-marketing companies should send a letter explaining the problem to his association's office, where staff will help iron out the dispute.

"Unfortunately," he says, "many consumers still aren't aware we can't help when they deal with companies from other countries."

Ontario's Consumer Ministry is also concerned about people who have problems when they buy from other provinces. Consumer protection legislation varies from one province to another, and it may be impossible to enforce Ontario laws if a good or service is supplied from another jurisdiction.

"In recent months MCCR has received complaints from people who ordered expensive water-purification systems," says Gurevsky. "Many found they were unsuitable for their plumbing systems, but couldn't be returned to another province."

The common factor in many of these cases is that some buyers may have been more interested in the "free gift" offered with the item than the article itself.

Offering free promotional gifts is a practice used by many ethical marketers; companies may sell more magazines if they add a give-away radio to sweeten

the deal. But if the value of the gift seems too high for the cost of the article being purchased, the consumer should be wary.

Experts say rule number one for buying through direct-marketing is to ask yourself if you've ever thought of buying the item before. If you haven't, perhaps you should wonder what makes it so appealing now.

Once you've decided you really want the article, make sure the price is reasonable. Does the offer sound too good to be true? If it

is, and the goods turn out to be lower quality than expected, consider that it may be difficult or impossible to return them.

If similar goods are available at retail stores, you can call to compare prices. And, often, friends, relatives or neighbors may be able to vouch for the reputation of the product and seller. The Better Business Bureau can also tell you of any complaints they have on file regarding a particular firm.

Before you order, be sure to

read the fine print on the contract closely. Does it oblige you to buy more merchandise at a later date?

Be wary of negative-option selling deals, which mean you'll have to return a form to the company every time you don't want to receive any goods. These are common among contracts for books and records, and may be fine for someone who is well-organized and won't forget to fill in the form. But others may end up paying for a lot of goods they

don't want.

Consumers who want to have their names removed from major mailing lists can write to the Canadian Direct Marketing Association, 1 Concorde Gate, Suite 607, Don Mills, Ontario, M3C 3N6. There is no charge for the service. For general information on many consumer issues, contact the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations' Consumer Information Centre, 555 Yonge Street, 1st Floor, Toronto, Ontario, M7A 2H6.

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COMPASS, a new high-tech tool for managing traffic on urban highways, keeps them informed on what conditions they can expect on a 16 km section of Canada's busiest freeway.

Designed by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, COMPASS monitors traffic flow through the use of vehicle sensors in the road and television cameras mounted high above Metro's 401 corridor.

Motorists receive this information displayed across 13 changeable message signs on Highway 401 from Martin Grove Road to Yonge Street. A typical message might say, "Collector lanes blocked at Yonge Street."

"COMPASS gives motorists up-to-date, useful information which will alert them to slow down, switch lanes or exit the highway before encountering a construction zone, vehicle collision or traffic congestion," Ontario Transportation Minister Ed Philip said. "It also provides an added safety net for drivers in need of help with the quick dispatch of emergency assistance vehicles and personnel available at any time of the day or night."