



# CONSUMER ADVOCATE

*A publication from the Consumer Protection Section of the Office of Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray*

## TOP TEN CONSUMER RESOLUTIONS

If you're having trouble sticking to your New Year's resolutions, try some of ours. We put together the top ten consumer resolutions for 2010:

**1. Check your free credit report from [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).** This is the only site that's federally guaranteed to provide your free credit report, so watch out for look-a-like "free credit report" sites that will charge you for the service.

**2. Avoid refund anticipation loans.** These may be advertised as "instant tax refunds" or "fast cash refunds" but usually they're high-cost, short-term loans that may cost consumers up to 25 percent of their refund.

**3. Check a company's reputation with the AG and the BBB.** On the Ohio Attorney General's Web site, [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/SearchConsumerComplaints](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/SearchConsumerComplaints), you can

check to see if other consumers have filed complaints against a particular company. Similarly, you can check companies' Reliability Reports from the Better Business Bureau (BBB) at [www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org).

**4. Know who to call if you're worried about foreclosure.** Save the Dream is Ohio's statewide foreclosure prevention effort. It helps connect homeowners to foreclosure prevention assistance and legal aid. For more information, call (888) 404-4674 or visit [www.savethedream.ohio.gov](http://www.savethedream.ohio.gov).

**5. Consider "freezing" your credit report.** You have the right to "freeze" each one of your three credit reports (from Equifax, Experian and TransUnion). A freeze prohibits a credit reporting agency from disclosing your information to third parties without your consent. Each freeze costs \$5 (removing a freeze will cost an

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## GIFT CARD 101

Still have unused holiday gift cards? Follow these gift card tips:

**Spend gift cards quickly.** The longer you wait to redeem your gift card the greater the risk that the card will expire, or become lost or stolen. Also, if a company goes out of business, unredeemed gift cards may no longer be of any value.

**Look for exclusions and limitations.** Understand any restrictions on where, how or when you can use the card. For example, some gift cards can only be used at certain store locations.

**Look for fees.** Determine what fees, if any, apply to the gift card, including those that apply after the sale and reduce the value of the card. Be aware that bank-issued gift cards may carry fees and restrictions.

**Know your rights.** Under Ohio law, most retail gift cards cannot expire or be assessed fees within 2 years of the date they were issued. Generally, if a gift card does not have an expiration date, it's valid until you use it.

## FREE TAX PREPARATION, TAX CREDITS AVAILABLE TO ELIGIBLE CONSUMERS

If you earn low to moderate income, you may be eligible for free tax preparation services and a federal tax benefit called the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

The EITC is a federal program that lets employees who work for low to moderate wages get a larger tax refund. The amount of money you can receive through EITC is based on your annual taxable income and the number of children in your household.

A Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (or "VITA") program can help you determine your eligibility and fill out the forms. With VITA, certified volunteers prepare returns at no cost for taxpayers of low to moderate income (generally \$49,000 and below). To find a VITA site near you, call the IRS at (800) 906-9887.

In several areas of Ohio, local coalitions of government and social service representatives are working to help families and individuals see if they qualify for the EITC. Check here to see if there is an Ohio EITC Coalition in your area: [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/EITC](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/EITC).

You also may be able to get tax filing help from the Ohio Benefit Bank. Call (800) 648-1176 or visit [www.ohiofilesfree.com](http://www.ohiofilesfree.com) for more information.

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additional \$5). You must temporarily lift the freeze before you can apply for credit.

**6. Know your cancellation rights.** You do **not** have the right to cancel any contract or purchase you make. Under Ohio law, cancellation rights apply only to certain types of contracts, including: gym memberships (three days), door-to-door sales (three days), credit and debt counseling services (three days) and business opportunities (five days). Read your contract to fully understand a particular cancellation policy.

**7. Put your number on the Do Not Call Registry.** The National Do Not Call Registry helps consumers reduce unwanted telemarketing calls. Registration is permanent and after signing up, you should receive fewer calls within 31 days. Register online at [www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov) or by calling (888) 382-1222 from the number you want to register.

**8. See if you qualify for free tax preparation.** Consumers who earn low to moderate income may qualify to receive free tax preparation services and a federal tax benefit called the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Find out if you're eligible by visiting [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/EITC](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/EITC).

**9. Look for the "s" when shopping online.** Before you make a purchase online, look for the "https" in the Web address. The "s" means the site is secure. If you don't see the "s", don't enter your bank account or personal information.

**10. Read the fine print.** Take the time to read the fine print in any contract you sign or for any purchase you make. Doing so will help you understand important terms and conditions and even save you money.

## WANT UPDATES?

- Receive the Consumer Advocate via e-mail by signing up at [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/ConsumerAdvocate](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/ConsumerAdvocate).
- Receive news and updates from the Ohio Attorney General's Office by signing up at [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov).
- Visit [www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov) for more information.

## CONSUMER COMPLAINTS HIT RECORD IN 2009

Consumer complaints filed with Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray's office reached a historical high in 2009 with 30,259 complaints—a 20 percent increase from 2008.

Attorney General Cordray noted that the year was extremely challenging financially for many Ohioans and that Ohio consumers simply have no tolerance for companies that fail to deliver promises and services.

The year's top 10 complaint categories were:

- 1) Motorized vehicles (auto sales, services and repairs)
- 2) Collections, credit reporting and financial services (wrong information on credit reports, credit repair services, collection calls for debts not owed)
- 3) Household goods and property improvement
- 4) Internet and phone
- 5) Shopping, food and beverages
- 6) Mortgage (lenders, servicers, foreclosure rescue companies)
- 7) Computers and electronics
- 8) Professional services
- 9) Health and beauty
- 10) Utilities

In 2009, largely in response to consumer complaints, Attorney General Cordray filed 37 lawsuits against companies that were taking advantage of Ohioans.

The office generated approximately \$7 million in consumer restitution, civil penalties, costs and other relief through the office's complaint resolution process and legal action. The office also expanded its consumer education efforts, developing new presentations and publications for consumers statewide.

To view available publications, go to:

[www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/Publications](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/Publications)

To view available consumer presentations, go to:

[www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/SpeakOutOhio/Consumers/Consumer-Awareness-Workshops](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/SpeakOutOhio/Consumers/Consumer-Awareness-Workshops)

To view a full list of 2009 cases and statistics, go to:

[www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/2009ConsumerProtectionReport](http://www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov/2009ConsumerProtectionReport)