



▶ CONSUMER COMPLAINTS
TOP TEN OF 2013

Ohio Attorney General's Consumer Advocate Newsletter

FEBRUARY 2014

Top Ten Complaints of 2013

The Attorney General's Office works every day to protect Ohio families from unfair and deceptive business practices and scams. The office accepts and handles consumer complaints through an informal dispute resolution process to assist consumers and businesses in reaching a mutual agreement to resolve issues.

In 2013, the top 10 most frequent consumer complaint categories were:

1. Motor vehicles
2. Collections, credit reporting, or financial services
3. Do Not Call violations
4. Internet, phone, or TV services
5. Household goods or property improvement
6. Professional services
7. Shopping, food, or beverage
8. Health and beauty
9. Sweepstakes and prizes
10. Mortgage

Among motor vehicle complaints, consumers reported the most problems with used car sales and obtaining titles. Attorney General Mike DeWine reminds consumers to contact his office if a car dealership fails to provide a title within 30 days of the sale.

Also among the nearly 26,500 total complaints filed in 2013 were 578 complaints involving identity theft, a fast-growing complaint category. Attorney General DeWine launched the Identity Theft Unit in September 2012, so 2013 marked the unit's first full year in operation. The unit helps identity theft victims rectify the effects of identity theft, such as fraudulently opened accounts or purchases made on existing accounts.

Consumers who believe they have been treated unfairly or been the victim of identity theft should contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at 800-282-0515 or visit www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov for more information.

Avoid Sweetheart Scams this Valentine's Day

With Valentine's Day approaching, love is on many people's minds. Some Ohioans are sure to meet that special someone online, perhaps through a dating website or social media. Some may truly find companionship, but others may actually be connecting with potential scammers.

In a typical sweetheart scam, a scammer will use dating websites or social media to identify and develop relationships with potential victims. The scammer may communicate with victims by phone calls, text messages, emails, instant messages, or postal mail. Once a relationship is established, the scammer will request money, usually through wire-transfer or a pre-paid money card. The scammer will likely provide an elaborate story, explaining that the money will cover airfare to visit the victim, medical expenses, or costs associated with taking military leave. Regardless of the pitch, the result is always the same. Any money sent using a wire-transfer service or pre-paid money card will be lost.

Since January 2013, the Ohio Attorney General's Office has received at least 55 complaints related to sweetheart scams. The average reported financial loss was more than \$25,000.

Consider the following tips for avoiding sweetheart scams:

- Do your research; never solely rely on what the person tells you. Perform Internet searches and consider a background check on your "sweetheart."
- If the person provides a photo, conduct an image search to determine where else the photo appears online. This may reveal if the photo has been copied from another online profile or website.
- Be cautious of individuals who claim it was destiny or fate that brought you together. Scammers may use emotional angles to manipulate potential victims.
- Talk to friends and family members about online relationships, especially if you plan to meet the person face-to-face. Consider bringing a friend with you.
- Never send money via wire-transfer or pre-paid money card to someone you meet online, even if you have developed a relationship.
- Never reveal personal information, such as your address, credit card number, bank account number, or Social Security number to someone online.

Consumers who suspect a scam should contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at 800-282-0515 or www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov.

AG Seeks Reimbursement from Five Car Dealerships

The Ohio Attorney General's Office recently filed five lawsuits against Northeast Ohio car dealerships for failing to deliver motor vehicle titles as required by law. The Attorney General is seeking more than \$32,000 in total reimbursements from the dealerships for payments made to resolve consumer complaints.

The Attorney General filed lawsuits against the following dealerships and/or their owners:

- Auto Bahn, 13305 Lorain Ave., Cleveland
- The Car Shack, 355½ Arlington St., Akron
- R&M Auto Service & Sales Inc., 3559 W. 140th St., Cleveland
- Selective Auto Mart, 4675 Warner Road, Garfield Heights
- Y-Town Auto Sales, 3205 Market St., Youngstown

According to the lawsuits, the dealerships violated Ohio's Consumer Sales Practices Act by failing to obtain titles in the purchasers' names within the required timeframe. In the lawsuits, the Attorney

General seeks full reimbursement to the Title Defect Recision (TDR) Fund, injunctive relief, and civil penalties.

The Ohio Attorney General's Office administers the TDR Fund to assist retail purchasers of motor vehicles when dealers fail to provide a valid title or memorandum of title to the purchaser within 30 days or engage in other deceptive acts.

Under Ohio law, the retail purchaser may have a right to rescind the transaction and receive a refund of all monies paid to the dealer if any of these circumstances apply:

- The dealer fails to obtain a title in your name within 30 days of the purchase date
- The title indicates the vehicle is a rebuilt salvage vehicle and that was not disclosed to you in writing before the purchase agreement was executed
- The title indicates the vehicle is a lemon buyback and that was not disclosed to you in writing before the purchase agreement was executed
- The title indicates the dealer has made an inaccurate odometer disclosure to you

Consumers who believe they have been treated unfairly should file a complaint with the Ohio Attorney General's Office at www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov or 800-282-0515.

Ohio Businesses Report Phony Invoice Scam

Imagine receiving a fax or letter from an unfamiliar company attempting to collect payment for a product or service. The company provides a legitimate-looking "invoice" and requests immediate payment. Unfortunately, businesses across the state are reporting similar experiences to the Attorney General's Office.

Just like consumers, businesses can be the target of scams and deceptive behavior in the marketplace. Ohio businesses should review all invoices and bills closely before submitting payment. Many scammers create and distribute phony invoices to businesses, hoping that some businesses may not confirm whether the invoice corresponds with an actual purchase and pay for products or services the business never received.

Recently, a Columbus-based animal hospital reported receiving faxes from a "telephone directory company," stating the hospital owed nearly \$800, even though the hospital had not agreed to purchase any products or services. A truck equipment company in Circleville, a yogurt shop in Youngstown, and a heating and cooling company in Columbus reported similar experiences. All received unfamiliar invoices from a telephone directory service. Fortunately, the businesses were able to protect their money by recognizing the scam and reporting it to the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

Avoid phony invoice scams by following these tips:

- Centralize office management so one person oversees all of the vendors. This will help prevent scammers from pretending they've done business with your company.
- Immediately report any unordered merchandise or invoices to the vendor.
- Read all invoices closely to make sure that you've done business with the vendor and that the charges are legitimate before providing payment.
- Request contact information from those offering services over the telephone or by email.

- Before doing business with a vendor, ask for references from past or current customers, and check the references. Also check with the Ohio Attorney General's Office and the Better Business Bureau to determine if complaints have been filed against the vendor.

If you suspect a scam or an unfair business practice, report it to the Ohio Attorney General's Office by visiting www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov or calling 800-282-0515.



For more information, contact Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine's Consumer Protection Section at **800-282-0515** or **www.OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov**.