

# Ohio Attorney General's Consumer Advocate Newsletter

Keeping Consumers Safe and Informed



## Consumer Advocate

October 2020

### Tips to Shop Smart During Black Friday Sales

It's already October and before you know it, the holiday shopping season will begin. As like many things this year, in-person shopping on Black Friday, Cyber Monday and other holiday promotions may be different than in years past.

This holiday shopping season, consumers should keep these tips in mind:

**Check store hours:** Stores that have previously been open may have reduced hours or may have limits on the number of customers in the store. Be sure to call or check the store's website to confirm their hours and regulations.

**Research products and sellers carefully:** Search for complaints filed with the Ohio Attorney General's Office and the Better Business Bureau. Also, look up customer reviews online and find out what previous customers have said about the product or seller especially if it's your first time shopping with a particular seller.

**Beware of scams:** Watch out for phony Black Friday coupons, such as those offering hundreds of dollars to spend at a store and other claims that sound too good to be true. Be wary if someone asks you to pay using high-amount gift cards, which are commonly requested by scam artists.

**Know stores' return policies:** Under Ohio's consumer protection laws, sellers can choose to set their own return policies, including policies of no returns, but they must clearly tell you their policies before you complete the purchase. Also, ask if a return policy is different due to COVID or around the holiday season, as some stores increase their return periods during this time.

**Important exclusions and limitations should be disclosed:** Ads should clearly disclose important exclusions and limitations of an offer, so check to see if limited quantities are available, if a sale is valid only during certain hours or if other terms and conditions apply.

**Rain checks apply only in certain situations:** If a seller advertises a product at a certain price but sells out of that product by the time you respond to the ad, you may have the right to a rain check. However, sellers are not required to provide rain checks if they clearly disclose the number of goods available at that price or if they clearly state that no rain checks will be given.

**Understand differences between gift cards:** Gift cards are the most requested type of gift, according to the National Retail Federation, but not all gift cards carry the same protections. A gift card that is branded by a credit card company and can be used almost anywhere may reduce in value faster than a single-store gift card. Also, promotional cards, such as those that come free with a purchase, may not carry the same

protections as other cards and may last only a short period of time. If you receive a gift card, it's generally best to use it as quickly as possible to reduce the chance it will be lost, stolen or diminish in value. Be aware that if a business stops operating, you may not be able to use the gift card or receive a refund.

**Keep cybersecurity in mind:** When shopping for deals online, don't use free public Wi-Fi when entering sensitive information like your credit card number. Keep apps, software and operating systems up to date and use secure websites when you need to enter personal information.

**Paying with a credit card usually offers greater protection:** In general, with a credit card, your responsibility for unauthorized charges is limited to \$50, and you have certain rights to dispute charges that you may not have with a debit card or other forms of payment.

If you suspect a scam or an unfair business practice, contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.

## October is National Cybersecurity Awareness Month: Online Tips for Parents

With October being National Cybersecurity Awareness Month, the Ohio Attorney General's Office is educating parents and their children with tips to help keep them safe while online especially in light of so many children being on line for extended hours due to COVID.

The theme this year for the national awareness month campaign is "Do Your Part. #BeCyberSmart," and parents certainly have an important role to play in protecting their children and themselves as they increasingly do more online and through the internet.

Teaching children wise tips to stay safe online begins with communicating with your kids about how to protect your devices and their personal information. For example,

- Give your children instructions to protect their personal identifying information, especially including their passwords. Make sure they know not to give this information to friends or to strangers.
- Beware of "free" products or services - such as photo apps and games. Teach your kids that whatever they download could include malware or could pose a threat to their privacy. Never allow your children to download something unless you trust where it's coming from.
- Teach children how to develop long, unique passwords or passphrases for any online accounts. The longer, the better since long passwords are harder for hackers to crack. Children shouldn't use obvious passwords such as their names or personal information that someone could easily guess.
- Explain that children should not reply to unexpected emails, popups or text messages; that they should not click on links in these communications; and that they should be extremely careful about downloading files or opening unexpected attachments. Know that apps may share your information with other companies. Help your kids learn how to check privacy policies and their privacy settings to better understand what information can be accessed by the app.

As parents, you can review the settings on your devices to determine if you can restrict content that may not be suitable based on your child's age. You may also be able to set passwords to restrict the downloading of new apps and/or the purchasing of digital items. Also, if you want to restrict use of the

internet entirely, know that you can typically put a device in “airplane mode” or turn off Wi-Fi and data services.

Be sure to update your internet browser, operating system, apps and anti-virus program to ensure you are getting protection against the latest viruses and have installed needed security patches. Then, wherever possible, set your devices to automatically update these programs.

For more information about protecting children while they are online, you can find resources at the [Federal Trade Commission](#).

The Ohio Attorney General’s Human Trafficking Initiative offers [a parent resource guide](#) to help start conversations with kids about online dangers. It also shares tools to help families stay informed and make smart online decisions.

Consumers who suspect an unfair business practice or want help addressing a consumer problem should contact the Ohio Attorney General’s Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.

## Consumers Bombarded with Credit Card Interest Rate Phone Calls

Imagine picking up the telephone and hearing a message supposedly from your credit card company telling you that you’re eligible for a lower interest rate. Every credit card customer would like a lower rate, but these calls are often illegal automated messages that are from a third party (not your actual credit card company). In those cases, they may have a scam to offer you but not a legitimate lower rate to save you money.

In July 2020, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announced that three marketers connected to CSG Solutions and Second Choice Horizon “targeted financially distressed people with illegal robocalls and telemarketing. Their goal, says the FTC, was to sell a bogus credit card interest rate reduction service. For an upfront fee, these companies falsely guaranteed zero percent interest rates for the life of people’s credit card debt. They also promised thousands of dollars in savings. But, says the FTC, people never got the financial relief they were looking for.”

So, what did consumers get that responded to these calls wanting lower rates? The FTC alleges many paid extra undisclosed charges, in addition to paying the companies’ huge fees. The companies collected personal information such as Social Security and credit card numbers – even security codes – over the phone.

Additionally, the FTC alleges that even consumers who declined the companies’ “services” had their information used to apply to credit cards without their consent. The companies even sent out invoices to people charging them for those credit cards.

Recently, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost announced [settlements](#) in a lawsuit against ten defendants - six companies and four individuals - that deceived Ohio consumers with illegal robocalls offering bogus credit card interest rate reduction services. This groundbreaking [lawsuit](#) was the first of its kind in the country to go after a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service provider that was knowingly facilitating the scheme.

If you get phone calls like these and want a lower interest rate, here are some tips:

- According to the FTC, the best way to lower your credit card interest rate is to do it yourself by asking your credit card company directly and for free.
- Refuse to share personal information with telemarketers who call you unexpectedly. This information could be used to commit fraud.
- Know that most robocalls are illegal unless you have given permission for a company to send you these prerecorded calls. Remember, the best advice to help you combat robocalls is: Just Don't Answer! Ohioans can report unwanted robocalls to the Ohio Attorney General's Robocall Enforcement Unit by texting "ROBO" to 888111, visiting [OhioProtects.org](http://OhioProtects.org) or calling 800-282-0515.
- Also know that it is illegal for a company to charge you fees before they provide you with a debt relief service, including reducing the interest rate on your credit card.
- Remember that there may be legitimate opportunities in the marketplace for consumers to transfer their balances to a new credit card with a low or 0% introductory rate. Be sure to read all the terms and conditions before signing up with these offers, and shop around for the best deal for you.

Consumers who suspect an unfair business practice or want help addressing a consumer problem should contact the Ohio Attorney General's Office at [www.OhioProtects.org](http://www.OhioProtects.org) or 800-282-0515.

## **Watch Out for Energy Scams and Learn Where to Get Assistance**

Energy scams occur when scammers pose as utility company representatives and threaten to discontinue service to the customer unless the consumer provides personal information or immediate payment for utility service.

As COVID-19 related protections from utility disconnections begin to lift, many consumers who are economically insecure may be feeling increased pressure to make any form of payment in order to retain electric, water and gas service to their home. Scammers will increasingly try to take advantage of this insecurity to pressure consumers to pay.

If you get a call from someone claiming to be your utility company, here are some things to keep in mind:

- If you are on the phone with the caller, hang up and then call your energy company using contact information on your bill or the company's website.
- Even if the representative is threatening to discontinue services immediately, never give banking information over the phone to someone who has contacted you unexpectedly.
- If the caller demands payment by gift card, cash reload card, wiring money or cryptocurrency, it is likely a scam.
- If the caller says you are entitled to a "rebate" from your energy company, hang up and then call your local utility or your current supplier using contact information on your bill or the company's website. The caller may be trying to get you to switch to a third-party supplier.
- Be especially careful not to provide your account number unless you know for certain you are speaking to your local utility or that you are speaking to a third-party energy supplier and have chosen to switch. Always do your homework and compare offers if you want to participate in an energy choice program.

If you have become a victim of a scam or may have difficulty paying utility bills this fall or winter, here are some resources and programs that may be able to assisting you in the payment of your utility bills:

- **Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP)** – HEAP helps lower income residents pay their cooling and heating bills. There is also an **Emergency HEAP** program that provides assistance to households that have had their utilities disconnected, those that have a 10-day supply (or less) of bulk fuel or face disconnection. The Energy Assistance Program also has a recurring monthly component, which can assist with paying ongoing monthly utility bills by offering cash grants to low income customers.
- **Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP)** – PIPP is an extended payment plan offered to qualified Ohio residents that requires regulated electric and gas companies to take payments for bills based on a percentage of household income. Low-income customers and others facing a financial hardship who heat their homes with natural gas pay as little as 5 percent of their monthly income to their gas company and as little as 3 percent to their electric company for heating and utility bills.
- **Ohio Energy Credit (OEC) Program** – Residents who are 65 years of age or older OR if they are totally and permanently disabled, will receive an increased Energy Assistance benefit beyond what they would receive under the standard HEAP utility bill grant.
- **Local Programs** – Contact your Area Agency on Aging, (866)243-5678, to see if there are local programs available to you.
- **Winter Crisis Program** – Also known as E-HEAP or Emergency HEAP, this provision of the Home Energy Assistance Program provides consumers with up to \$175 if they have been disconnected or face disconnection in order to have their service restored or maintained. The Winter Crisis Program follows the same income guidelines as the regular HEAP program.
- **Local Utilities** – Contact your local utility as soon as you suspect payment of your bill may be an issue. The utilities may offer company-specific assistance programs.

For more information about utility regulations, consumer rights and energy choice programs visit the [Public Utilities Commission of Ohio](#) and the [Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel](#).

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