

CONSUMER ALERT

A Publication from the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs



ATTORNEY GENERAL IMPOSTER SCAM

One of the most popular type of scams reported in South Carolina is the government imposter scam. From July 2014 to June 2015, South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs received over 1,000 reports of government imposter scams. A common scam report in recent months has fraudsters posing as part of the S.C. Attorney General's office, claiming that the consumer must pay a fine or face prosecution or arrest.

To avoid falling victim to a scammer, be suspicious if someone claiming to be from the government:

- **Calls or emails** - Government agencies will not initiate contact with you about lawsuits or fraud by phone or email. Any legal action will be sent in the mail.
- **Asks for personal information** - Government agencies will not cold call to ask for personal information, such as a social security or bank account numbers.
- **Wants specific form of payment** - A government agency won't require that

a payment be made by wire transfer or prepaid debit cards.

- **Wants you to act NOW** - A major scam red flag is a time sensitive demand. They insist that action must be taken right then or you'll be sued or arrested.

If you are contacted by a government agency demanding money, follow these steps:

1. Don't fall for high pressure tactics

2. Be suspicious of wire transfer or reloadable debit card payment requests

3. When in doubt, hang up and follow up

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NATIONAL CONSUMER PROTECTION WEEK

Each year, SCDCA serves as a facilitator of the National Consumer Protection Week campaign within South Carolina. This year, we partnered with various businesses and government agencies to provide activities and initiatives aimed to aid South Carolina consumers.

Multiple events were scheduled during the week to help raise awareness of consumer issues, such as identity theft and scams. To kick off the celebration, SCDCA partnered with the Office of Regulatory Staff (ORS) to hold a drop-in at the Richland County Public Library. At the event, consumers were offered valuable educational material on identity theft, scams, and personal finance.



NEED A PRESENTER?

Contact SCDCA today with your request!

Be sure to include preferred topic, duration, estimated attendees, and location in your request.

email: jharris@scconsumer.gov
fax: 803-734-4060

This year, SCDCA also coordinated three free shredding events in Charleston, Irmo, and Greenville.

These shredding events allowed consumers to dispose of confidential documents in a safe manner. Overall, along with our partner Shred360, SCDCA facilitated the shredding of 15,000 lbs. of paper!

On March 5, SCDCA participated in a phone bank, in conjunction with WIS-TV in Columbia. Consumers were encouraged to call in with questions about debt collection, scams and privacy concerns. Six staffers from SCDCA manned the telephones, fielding calls from more than 150 South Carolina consumers throughout the night.

PALMETTO AFFORDABLE HOUSING FORUM

On April 21 and 22, the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs (SCDCA) participated in the 20th Annual Palmetto Affordable Housing Forum (PAHF). SCDCA was one of the five agencies to sponsor as well as participate in the forum, which was held at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. PAHF is a platform for both novice and experienced housing professionals to network and collaborate to help improve and expand the affordable housing choices in South Carolina.

Three of the presentations SCDCA offered to the 530 attendees were part of the legal track, which after the success of previous years, was once again offered as a way for professionals to gain credit for both continuing legal education and continuing professional education. These presentations, offered by staff attorneys and SCDCA Administrator Carri Grube Lybarker, included Understanding the Enigma: Credit Reports, Items of Interest for the Credit Counseling Industry, and Mortgage Law Update.

CPSC RECALL ROUNDUP

Otteroo Inflatable Baby Floats

The seam on the flotation device can leak air and deflate, posing a risk of drowning.



Beats Pill XL Speaker

The battery can overheat, posing a fire hazard.



Lululemon Women's Top

When the elastic draw cord with a hard tip is pulled or caught on something and released, it can snap back, impact the face area and result in injury.



Nest Booster Seat

The stitching on the restraint straps can loosen which allows the straps to separate from the seat, posing a fall hazard to children.

For a complete listing of recalled products, visit the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission at www.cpsc.gov. If you purchased a recalled product, the retailer should have information for you. If you find a recalled item on the shelf or have questions about recalled products, contact the CPSC at 800.638.2772

NATIONAL LIFE SMARTS COMPETITION

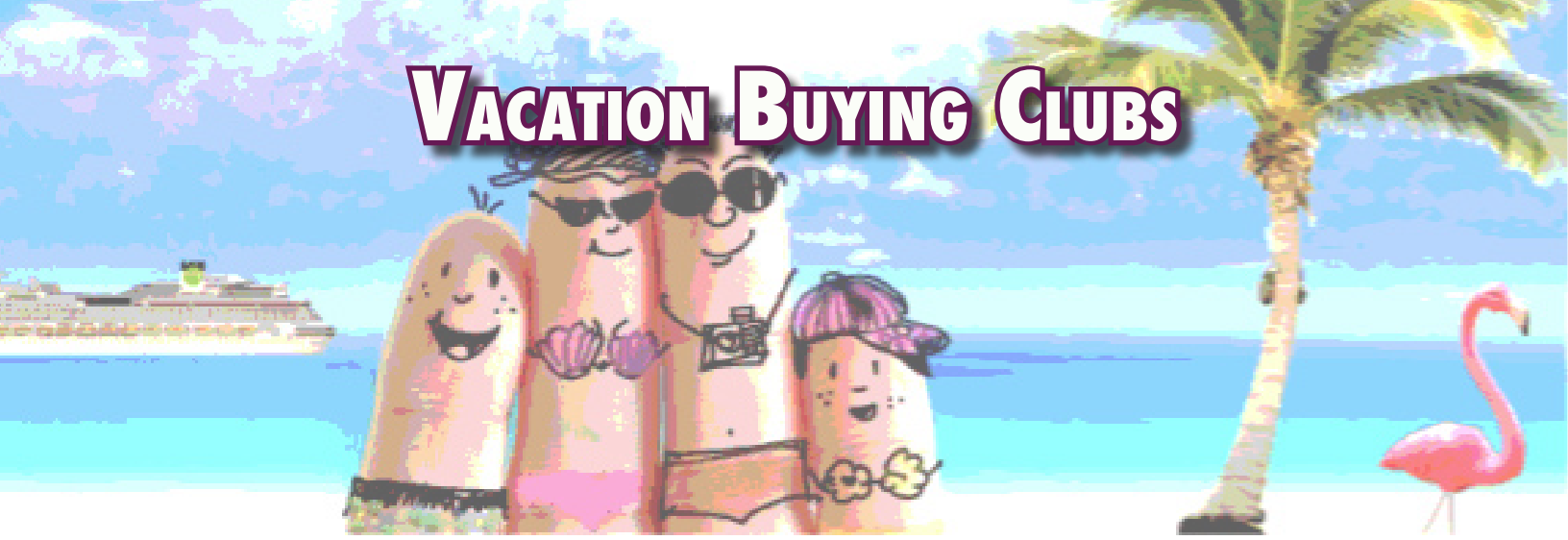
From April 17 to 20, Lower Richland High School represented South Carolina at the 2015 National LifeSmarts Competition. The game show-like competition, held in Seattle, Washington this year, consisted of individual assessments, team competition, and online multi-media content creation. LifeSmarts Competition is designed to test students grade 6-12 on their knowledge of personal finance, consumer rights and responsibilities, health and safety, technology and the environment.

This year, the Lower Richland High School team qualified to represent South Carolina at the national competition. The team consisted of team captain David Smith, and members Deena Smith, Kira McKelvy, Quest Morris, Jodie Crawford and Teera Sumter, led by Coach Tari Tucker.

Throughout the competition, the Lower Richland High School team reached an all-time best ranking of 21st place. At the conclusion of the competition, South Carolina's representative team finished 24th out of 34 teams, while team captain David Smith, finished 4th in the individual consolation round.



VACATION BUYING CLUBS



With Summer in full swing, take a moment to educate yourself on avoiding the high pressure sales tactics often associated with vacation buying club presentations.

Imagine lying on the beach, relaxing in the summer sun and sipping an ice cold drink. Now imagine being able to take this dream vacation at a fraction of the cost. This lure of premium vacations at rock bottom prices can lead consumers to buy into vacation clubs.

Vacation clubs claim to provide their members with vacations and vacation related merchandise at discount prices. However, often, these clubs charge high membership fees and offer limited vacation options, so in the end, consumers are on the hook for much more than they planned.

Consumers should be aware that some fraudsters present their vacation clubs as legitimate businesses, while they are in fact pyramid schemes. Instead of the focus being on the vacation services and merchandise, the club is designed to recruit as many members as possible, with the profits flowing to the top of the pyramid.

While there are vacation clubs that may be worth the investment, consumers should consider the following before signing on the dotted line:

- **Research the company** - Search SCDCA's complaint archive and conduct a general web search.
- **Don't ACT NOW!** - Don't give in to high pressure sales tactics. If an offer is legitimate, it will be there tomorrow, so take time to think about what you are signing up for.
- **Read the contract** - You should always read over and fully comprehend any contract before you sign it. If you don't understand something in the contract, ask questions. If a salesperson isn't willing to answer your questions, or only gives you general answers instead of specific details, you should be wary.

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VACATION BUYING CLUBS CONTINUED

- **Are there hidden fees?** – The clubs often include large one-time membership fees and a recurring annual fee. Look for additional fees hidden in the fine print.
- **Ask about your right to cancel.** – Know the cancellation policy and get it in writing. If you buy the membership at a place other than the seller's permanent business location, you generally have a 3 day right to cancel the sale for a full refund. Always send your cancellation notice certified mail, return receipt requested.
- **Will there be date limitations?** – Some clubs have blackout dates during which you cannot book your vacation.

THE PROTECTED CONSUMER FREEZE

The South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs is encouraging consumers to take advantage of a new identity theft protection available for minors under the age of 16 and incapacitated adults.

A new law allows for parents, guardians, or representatives of "protected consumers", defined as minors under 16 or incapacitated adults, to create and freeze a consumer's credit file for **FREE**.

To place the protected consumer freeze, parents, guardians, or representatives need to contact all three credit reporting agencies (CRA) and have them create a credit file in the protected consumer's name and then place a freeze on it. After receiving the request, the CRA must place the freeze within 15 days. This protection works like the regular security freeze, preventing thieves from being able to use personal information to apply for goods and services that require a credit check.

For detailed steps on placing the protected consumer freeze, see SCDCA's publication entitled "Taking advantage of the Protected Consumer Freeze". This publication and more information on identity theft can be requested by contacting SCDCA toll-free at **1-800-922-1594** or by visiting us at **www.consumer.sc.gov** and clicking on the "Identity Theft Resources" button.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PROTECTED CONSUMER FREEZE:

When placing the freeze, be sure to contact EACH of the three credit reporting agencies in writing. Make sure to keep good records of the freeze, so that your child won't have trouble accessing credit in the marketplace when they finally come of age.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT SCAMS?

SCDCA has lots of information to help you guard against scams! Look for our scam awareness billboards on the SC coast and request a FREE copy of our scam guide Ditch the Pitch today. From imposter scams to secret shopper scams, this guide will give you the tools you need to avoid a scam.

Call 800-922-1594 or email scdca@scconsumer.gov.



Your Information Destination!



Check out our
YouTube channel.
youtube.com/scdcatv



Look here for updates &
educational materials.
facebook.com/scdca



Find the latest scam
alerts and news here.
twitter.com/scdca

don't forget about the website: www.consumer.sc.gov

SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

Established by the Consumer Protection Code in 1974, the South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs represents the interests of South Carolina consumers. Our mission is to protect consumers from inequities in the marketplace through advocacy, mediation, enforcement and education. The Department strives to be a CREDIT to our State: Competence Respect Equality Dedication Intergrity Timeliness. For more information on SCDCA, visit www.consumer.sc.gov.

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