

# Scams Awareness Month

Assessment of the outputs of the Scams Awareness campaign

September 2011

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# 1 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The term 'scam' is not precisely defined. The OFT defines a mass marketed scam as: 'A misleading or deceptive business practice where you receive an unsolicited or uninvited contact and false promises are made to con you out of your money'. This can include prize draw/sweepstake scams, foreign lottery scams, miracle health cure scams, vehicle matching scams, and working from home scams.
- 1.2 Mass marketed scams cause approximately £3.5 billion<sup>1</sup> of detriment to UK consumers every year. In addition, the psychological impact of scams can seriously damage individual consumers' trust in markets. Previous research found that one in twelve people admitted to having been the victim of a ticket scam, and that about half of consumers had at some point been targeted by a mass marketed scam<sup>2</sup>.
- 1.3 Scams are customised to fit the profile of the people being targeted. However, victims are often vulnerable people who may be in financial distress or are elderly or socially-isolated<sup>3</sup>.

## Campaigns

- 1.4 Increasing people's awareness and knowledge of scams is an important preventative tool to reduce the number of scam victims. We aim to raise people's awareness through targeted campaigns.
- 1.5 The OFT has run a scams awareness month campaigns since 2005, in partnership with local authority Trading Standards Services (TSS). Scams awareness month is also the OFT's contribution to the international initiative 'Fraud Prevention Month', organised by the International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network (ICPEN).

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<sup>1</sup> Research on impact of mass marketed scams, OFT883, December 2006

<sup>2</sup> Research on impact of mass marketed scams, OFT883, December 2006

<sup>3</sup> Research on impact of mass marketed scams, OFT883, December 2006

## **2 CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW**

2.1 Scams awareness month ran from 1 to 28 February 2011 and comprised the following themes:

- Weeks one to four: Scamnesty
- Week three: Ticket scams – Just tick it
- Week four: Bogus holiday clubs

### **Scamnesty**

#### **Objectives**

- increase awareness of mass marketed scams nationally
- work in partnership with and support TSS to deliver Scamnesty and wider scams messages locally
- increase awareness of scam reporting via the online 'Report a Scam' function on Consumer Direct's website.

#### **Target audience**

2.2 UK consumers in all socio economic groups. However, greater targeting emphasis was placed on vulnerable consumers such as the elderly and their intermediaries including friends, family, and neighbours.

#### **Key messages**

- Scams are smart. Prove you're smarter. Bin them.
- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Pass on the warnings. Tell your friends and family if you discover a scam.
- Your actions may help protect others from becoming a scam victim.

- If you are unsure of an offer, speak to family or friends, and seek advice from Consumer Direct on 08454 04 05 06 or visit [www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/scams](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/scams)
- Report scams to: [www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/reportascam](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/reportascam)

### **Activities**

- 2.3 TSS placed Scamnesty bins in their local communities and encouraged consumers to collect their scam mailings and deposit them to raise awareness of mass marketed scam types and issues, for example, clairvoyant/psychic, prize draws/sweepstakes, lotteries, miracle health cures.
- 2.4 The OFT produced a campaign resource pack and support materials including an information booklet to distribute to consumers.
- 2.5 TSS sent their Scamnesty mailings to the National Fraud Authority which was able to use the intelligence gathered to help inform its work moving forward.

### **Just tick it**

#### **Objectives**

- increase awareness of online ticketing scams
- help consumers identify fake ticketing websites
- increase the number of unique visitors to the Just tick it fake website ([www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets)) and ticketing scams section of the Consumer Direct website
- increase awareness of scam reporting via the online 'Report a Scam' function on Consumer Direct's website.

## Target Audience

- 2.6 Younger event ticket buyers aged 16 to 25 years and older buyers aged 30 to 45 years in all socio economic groups.

### Key messages

- 1 in 12 people are scammed by fake ticket websites. Don't be one of them. Before you buy, check it.
- Watch out for fake ticketing websites. There are lots of legitimate websites but scammers make it difficult to spot a fake.
- Don't let them con you. Ask yourself - how can this website guarantee tickets to an event that is already sold out, or that are not on sale yet?
- Never buy event tickets from a website you're unsure of. Ask others about it and search online for comments.
- You can 'tick off' a number of things to look out before purchasing your tickets online by visiting our fake ticket website:  
[www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets)
- Report fake ticketing websites or suspected ones to:  
[www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/reportascam](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/reportascam)

### Activities

- 2.7 Building on the success of the 2010 Just tick it campaign, we reached the target audience through the Just tick it Facebook profile and Twitter account, and by securing free national and local media. Dan Hipgrave from Toploader produced a short film warning consumers about fake ticketing websites. This was hosted on the Consumer Direct website.
- 2.8 Consumers were directed to the Just tick it fake ticketing website housed on Consumer Direct's website

([www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/tickets)) for information on avoiding fake ticket websites.

## **Bogus holiday clubs**

### **Objectives**

- increase awareness of bogus holiday clubs
- inform consumers of the new protection offered by the Timeshare, Holiday Products, Resale and Exchange Contracts Regulations 2010
- increase unique visitors to the holiday clubs section of the Consumer Direct website.

### **Target audience**

2.9 UK consumers aged 35+ in all socio economic groups.

### **Key messages**

- Some holiday clubs are reputable but there are a lot of bogus ones out there that make exaggerated claims about their product.
- If you are approached by a scratchcard tout or pressured to attend a presentation while on holiday think about:
  - Whether you really want to sit through a lengthy sales pitch?
  - What is the salesperson offering? Have they overpromised? Do you know exactly what you are getting for your money?
  - Avoid pressure to sign a contract at the presentation. Insist on taking away the contract to consider at your leisure.
- Consumers are entitled to a 14-day cooling off period after signing up to a holiday club in European Member States.

- If you have signed up for a holiday club and need further advice, contact Consumer Direct on 08454 04 05 06 or visit [www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/holidayclubs](http://www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/holidayclubs)

## **Activities**

- 2.10 The OFT and TSS coordinated a day of action which took place on the 21 February to coincide with changes to consumers' rights across Europe. Consumer rights increased from 23 February 2011 to give people new protection if they purchase membership to a holiday club.
- 2.11 As the new legislation is a European Directive, we worked with the International Consumer Enforcement and Protection Network (ICPEN) members, the European Consumer Centre United Kingdom (ECC) and the Spanish European Consumer Centre (CEC) - to increase impact internationally.
- 2.12 Seven UK airports took part in the campaign, Bristol, Dundee, Gatwick, Manchester, Newcastle, Newquay and Stansted.
- 2.13 TSS from Bristol, Dundee City, West Sussex, Luton, Liverpool, Newcastle, Gateshead, Cornwall and Essex handed out scratchcards (similar to those handed out by bogus holiday club representatives) and consumer information leaflets at UK airports to holiday makers travelling to Spain and the Canary Islands. Representatives from the European Consumer Centre for Services distributed the materials alongside West Sussex Trading Standards at Gatwick Airport.
- 2.14 Representatives from the Canarias Authorities, with support from Spanish European Consumer Centre, distributed information at airports in Tenerife and Gran Canaria.

### **3 OUTPUTS**

#### **Media coverage**

##### **Print and online coverage**

- 3.1 53 items of print coverage were generated. The launch generated four items of national coverage, and there were 34 items in local and regional publications focusing on scamnesty. Highlights included stories in Metro, The Sun (page 2), a feature spread in the Daily Telegraph and coverage by BBC Online.

##### **Broadcast coverage**

- 3.2 205 items of broadcast coverage were generated, including four items in the national broadcast media. 25 interviews were undertaken by OFT staff. Highlights include Michele Shambrook on ITV's Daybreak, David Murphy on the Gaby Logan show on BBC Radio 5 Live and Esther Rantzen on ITV's Loose Women.

#### **Scamnesty bins**

- 3.3 95 local authority Trading Standards Services participated in the campaign.
- 3.4 9,000 – 10,000 scam mailings were collected via the bins (15,652 collected in 2010). The top five scam mailing types were as follows:
- mail order / shopping catalogues - prize draw / sweepstakes – 4,000 to 4,500
  - other prize draw / sweepstakes – 2,000
  - clairvoyant - 700
  - lottery - 600
  - charity - 500.

- 3.5 Post campaign feedback<sup>4</sup> showed 95 per cent of TSS respondents indicated overall satisfaction with the support and information provided by the OFT to run their campaign elements. These included drop-in surgeries, shopping centre events, coffee mornings, Student Union events and scams leaflets being distributed to 500 clients of the Books on Wheel Service.
- 3.6 Feedback from 59 TSS indicated that 724 Scamnesty bins were placed throughout the UK in, for example, local libraries, supermarkets, and police stations.

### **Reporting to Consumer Direct**

- 3.7 1,009 calls were made to Consumer Direct about scams from January to March 2011 in comparison to 832 from October 2010 to December 2010.
- 3.8 1,975 scams were reported via the online reporting function on Consumer Direct's website from January to March 2011 in comparison to 1514 from October 2010 to December 2010.

### **Web statistics**

- 3.9 The scams advice section on Consumer Direct's website received 41,837 visitors between January – March 2011, compared with a monthly average of 13,946.
- 3.10 Over the same period, the bogus holiday clubs page received 1,372 visitors (monthly average of 457) and the ticket scams page received 6,274 visitors (monthly average of 2,091).
- 3.11 Dan Hipgrave from 'Toploader' filmed a short video to warn consumers about buying fake tickets online. This was hosted on the Consumer Direct website for the month of February and received 143 views.

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<sup>4</sup> A campaign feedback / evaluation form was sent to 94 participating TSS. 59 TSS responded.

## **Leaflet distribution**

- 3.12 Approximately 6,000 scratchcards and information leaflets were handed out at UK airports.
- 3.13 146,223 copies of the Scambuster booklet (OFT831) and 1, 012 copies of the welsh Scambuster booklet (OFT831w) were ordered direct from the OFT mailing house between December 2010 and March 2011.
- 3.14 In addition 39,144 organisations or groups such as Advice Centres, GP surgeries and health visitors ordered 195,720 copies of the Scambusters booklet via the Central Office of Information's (COI) publicity register.