

[inside story]

Consumer stories that make a difference



Vodafone waives £15,300 phone bill

Bonnie's massive bill was run up by a thief

Mobile giant Vodafone has waived a £15,300 bill for calls made from a stolen phone after *Which?* intervened.

The amount, run up by a thief in just three weeks, is believed to be one of the biggest waived in such a case. But Vodafone's magnanimous move followed its failure to halt the soaring bill.

The victim, 24-year-old Bonnie So, from London, said: 'In the seven years I've been a Vodafone customer, my bill has been about £70 a month. When I made a lot of calls in December my mobile was barred as the bill came close to £200, so I don't understand how Vodafone let it reach £15,312.'

About 700,000 mobiles are stolen each year, according to latest figures. The government and police have launched initiatives such as Immobilise (see below) to tackle the problem. Mobile companies also monitor spending patterns.

'Vodafone was aggressive until I contacted Which?'

Bonnie So

Bonnie didn't miss her phone when it was stolen because she'd just bought a new one. Under her contract, she had to keep the old number live for a while, so she just redirected calls to the new phone.

But then she started receiving calls from people asking for 'Kenny'. Bonnie realised the phone was gone, possibly stolen when she went to buy the new

one. She called the police and Vodafone. Then she got her first inkling of the thief's taste for sex lines and other expensive numbers. 'When I contacted Vodafone, the adviser told me that the bill for two weeks in March was nearly £10,000, and for the first week of April was more than £5,000.'

Vodafone told her she was liable because she hadn't alerted it to the phone's theft. 'Vodafone was aggressive until I contacted *Which?*,' said Bonnie. 'Then it changed its tone and waived the bill.'

Vodafone told us it decides such issues on a case-by-case basis. We asked why it no longer offers credit limits, which Virgin Mobile, for example, does. Vodafone said limits hadn't worked because it can take days for calls made abroad to reach its system.

The company said its monitoring had picked up Bonnie's usage last December when it barred the phone, but that when she'd given notice to end the old phone's contract, this had put her into a different system with no such controls. Vodafone said it has since tightened procedures.

Bonnie, who works for the police as a data analyst, said officers investigating the theft had dropped her case due to 'lack of resources'. She's made a formal complaint. The Metropolitan Police told us it had pursued 'all lines of inquiry'.

ACTION POINT

Register phone details at www.immobilise.com, so if a stolen phone is recovered, police can trace you. Always know where your phone is, especially if you own more than one, and report a stolen phone immediately.

Law Society slammed ...again

For a group of highly qualified professionals, the Law Society seems surprisingly confused when it comes to counting consumers' complaints – some end up as 'enquiries'.

This was one of several criticisms made recently by Zahida Manzoor, the 'tsar' appointed to sort out how the legal profession handles its consumer complaints. And this month she is expected to heap further criticism on the society in her annual reports as Legal Services Complaints Commissioner and Legal Services Ombudsman.

Ms Manzoor's team audited more than 100 complaint files last summer and unearthed widespread delays, some as long as 27 months, as well as ten per cent of cases wrongly designated as enquiries. The last ombudsman pulled the society up over the same issue in 2002.

The Law Society says it now resolves more than half of cases in less than three months and further improvements are underway. We think massive reform is needed.

round-up

CHILD SEATS

The government has promised to consult on tougher testing of child car seats by the end of this year after we called for ten seats to be taken off the market. We want tests to ensure that seats protect children as effectively as seat belts protect adults in a 40mph crash and side-on collision.

CUP VICTORY

Football fans who paid bank transfer fees to buy World Cup 2006 tickets will get a refund. An exclusive deal had meant that fans without a MasterCard credit card or a German bank account had to pay as much as £35 extra for an international bank transfer. After our complaint to the European Commission, fairer payment methods were introduced.

HEALTH RISK

Ibuprofen and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatories can raise the risk of heart attack, the *British Medical Journal* said last month. The authors have told patients to continue taking the drugs until more research is done.

CAMERA MAP

The AA has launched a new road atlas costing £15 that marks the location of fixed speed cameras. There is a separate section showing where mobile cameras are used.

BA cuts fares for one-way flyers

British Airways has stopped charging huge fares for its single short-haul flights less than a year after we highlighted its controversial pricing policy.

Last August we revealed that the airline was charging three times as much for a single flight on European routes as it was for a return ('BA humbug to one-way flyers,' p5). In one case, reader Simon Gavron was quoted £451 for a single from Marseilles to London when a return was only £175.

At the same time – and in common with other airlines – BA was also operating a policy to stop one-way passengers saving cash by using just the return portion of a return ticket.

Since then we've monitored BA's single flight

'The new fares recognise the need for flexibility'

British Airways

ticket prices and found that on some routes they were over four times more than an economy return.

Before the pricing restructure, the airline quoted return fares to Athens for £144. But a single flight would have cost a massive £605. Similarly, we found return flights to Copenhagen for £104

(single £411), Geneva for £83 (single £409), Paris for £78 (single £347) and Stockholm for £104 (single, £460). These huge single-fare prices were because BA was forcing one-way flyers to go club class, even though economy seats were available.

But that's now changed and passengers can buy one-way economy flights on most short-haul routes. We were quoted a single to Athens, for example, for £118, and to Paris for £55.

The new fares structure applies to all BA's European destinations except Barcelona, Madrid, St Petersburg and Moscow.

BA said: 'The new fares recognise the need of our customers to have flexibility. We hope to introduce the fare structure on our Spanish routes and are working with our partner, Iberia. We will not be introducing the new fares on our Russian routes as they are primarily business routes.'

BA hopes to cut single fares to Barcelona soon

Fight back against rogue traders

A new initiative will help protect consumers from rogue traders such as Roy Williams, the plumber caught urinating in a household water tank.

TrustMark, which will be up and running from

this autumn, will make it easier for people to find reputable firms to carry out work. It replaces the Quality Mark scheme, which was scrapped after not getting many firms on board.

Which? has played a part in setting up the new TrustMark scheme.

'Anyone choosing a TrustMark-registered firm will know it has signed up to a code of practice and rigorous complaints handling process,' said *Which?* researcher Pete Tynan, who advised on the scheme. 'The quality of its work and trading practices will also be

regularly checked.'

TrustMark was devised to safeguard people from cowboys such as Williams, who last month was convicted of attempted deception and making a false trades description and reckless statement.

Williams, 46, of East Grinstead was secretly filmed by Surrey Trading Standards when he was called to fix a fault at a house in Leatherhead.

Jurors at Guildford Crown Court watched footage of Williams urinating in a vase and tipping it in a central heating tank, an action he partly blamed on a

weak bladder after a botched childhood operation for piles.

'I'm so deeply sorry from the bottom of my heart,' Williams said. 'All I can put it down to would be the bright lights and the sound of running water.'

The court also heard how Williams changed two valves after falsely claiming they were faulty, while £675 had to be spent cleaning the water system following his actions.

Sentencing was adjourned for reports. Williams was warned that prison remained an option.



Roy Williams was convicted last month

Food supplements ban under threat

The European Union's (EU) highest court is set to rule this month on a celebrity-backed campaign against tighter controls on vitamins and minerals.

Jenny Seagrove is among the stars supporting the British health-food industry's fight against the Food Supplements Directive. They argue it will mean many supplements vanishing from the shelves. If the European Court of Justice rules the directive is invalid, the ban might not go ahead.

Which? believes this would be a backward step. We have campaigned for more protection.

Manufacturers must submit evidence for any supplements not on the EU list by 12 July or they'll be banned from sale after that.

All vitamins and minerals must be safety-approved



Michelle Smyth, who has campaigned on this for Which?, said: 'These rules will give consumers confidence that what they are taking is safe and that they're not wasting money on useless supplements.'

There's no formal way for doctors to report reactions to supplements, so potential adverse effects often remain unknown.

The UK Food Standards Agency is offering supplement makers an expert to help produce safety data after the industry raised fears that some supplements could vanish because the costs of producing evidence are prohibitive for small firms.

The FSA said: 'We support the sale of supplements which are safe, properly labelled and of adequate quality.'

Scrap over online car sales

Toyota and Volkswagen have denied using anti-competitive tactics to prevent dealers selling new cars through internet car brokers.

Online retailer www.drivethedeal.com has been selling cars online for the past six years and is run by Richard Sanders.

But he says: 'In my view, changes in the way both companies reward dealers mean consumers are having to pay more.'

He says this is because both are now paying bonuses to dealers based on good customer satisfaction surveys rather than the number of cars sold.

Dealers have told him that in the case of Toyota, it's impossible to receive a good score on the survey if they sell via online brokers because most of the questions relate to the customer visiting the showroom they buy from.

As dealers need the bonuses in addition to

their margin just to stay in business, this makes them reluctant to offer big discounts to brokers, and means consumers pay more.

'To me this has nothing to do with customer satisfaction,' said Richard. 'Toyota dealers have told us that if they sell more than a few cars to our customers, they could go out of business.'

Toyota strenuously denied this. It says that dealer margin is based on several business criteria and not just on customer satisfaction scores. It added that

dealers could earn full bonuses regardless of their score and could in theory sell all their cars via brokers.

However, VW admitted that it now rewards dealers solely based on customer satisfaction.

'We do not believe this is anti-competitive,' said a spokesman. 'Our industry is receiving a great deal of criticism in the area of customer satisfaction and we've decided that this is the single most important factor for our future success.'



Is Toyota driving its dealers away from online car brokers?



The grocery grapevine has it that Tesco plans to sell homes. It seems to be trialling the idea by gazumping prices.

Martin Braithwaite and Liz Miller spotted Wynns Michael Shiraz on Tesco's website at £9.75 a bottle.

[fighting your corner]

Which?'s Liz Edwards takes on big companies for you

Staff confirmed £9.75 to Martin, twice. So did his and Liz's 'order confirmation' emails. But a week later, Tesco told Martin that the price was double. He cancelled his order in disgust.

In Liz's case, half the wine at double the price she'd ordered it for arrived, so she sent it packing. Tesco took her money anyway.

I asked Tesco how it

could confirm a price, then double it. Surely that's a breach of contract? In time-honoured fashion, it pointed to the small print: 'The contract...is made at the point of dispatch, which is when money will be debited.'

The same small print says that if Tesco has 'underpriced' an item by mistake, it can change the price as long as it

tells you before delivery.

Normally, a contract exists when I agree to pay the asking price for goods and you confirm

you'll supply them – as in 'order confirmation'. Our lawyers concluded the terms were legal but the 'confirmation' was misleading.

Tesco admitted mistakes in Liz's case and she got the wine for free. Other buyers, who'd had a chance to cancel after the hike, got a £20 voucher. Every little helps, I suppose.



You've won... a dodgy pencil!

A catalogue shopping giant encouraged thousands of loyal customers to place an order with the promise of a free camcorder, then sent a pen and pencil instead.

Several thousand 'valued customers' thought their number had come up when they got the misleading letter from Empire Stores in April.

In what the company called a 'cock-up', an arrow linked each customer's 'gift claim number' to a photo of a Samsung camcorder. They had to order goods to claim their gift, but no one got the camcorder.

Evelyn Gormley, from Essex, said: 'I ordered a sheet for £15 to claim my camcorder; a pen and

**'The pencil doesn't even work
- the lead falls out'**

Evelyn Gormley

pop-up pencil arrived. The pencil doesn't even work - the lead falls out. That was the "mystery gift".

Empire offered customers who took part a refund of this order and a discount on their next. However,

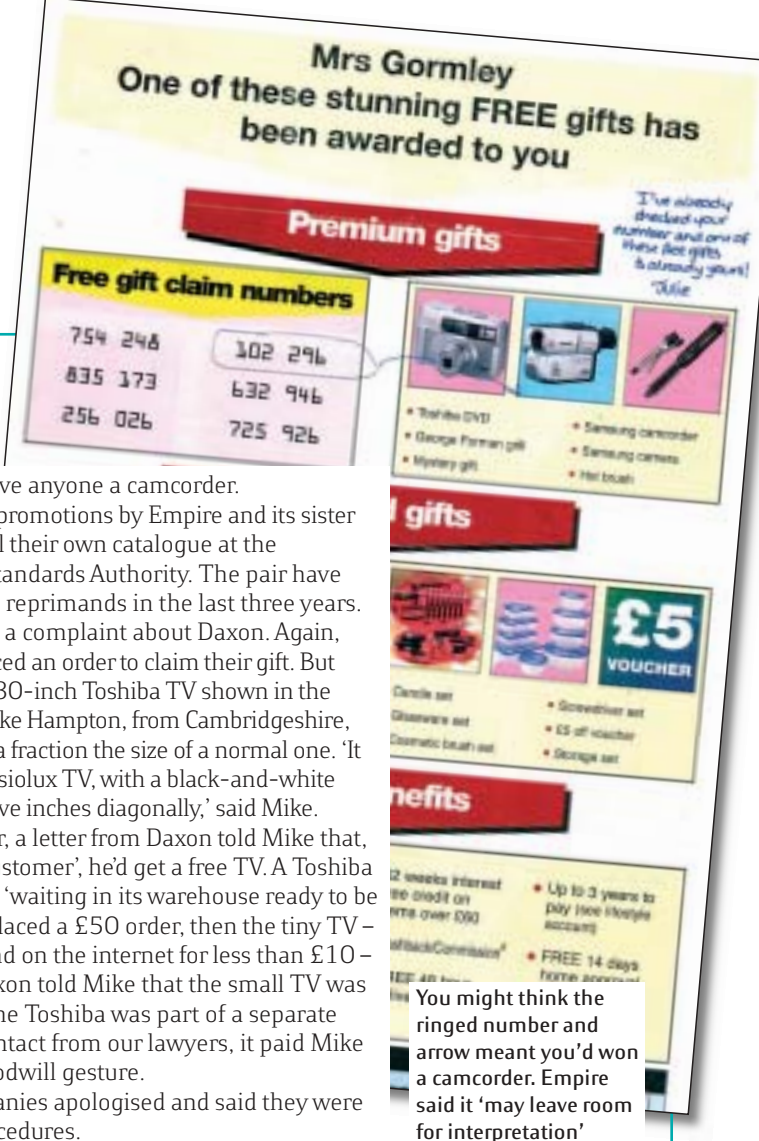
it refused to give anyone a camcorder.

Misleading promotions by Empire and its sister store Daxon fill their own catalogue at the Advertising Standards Authority. The pair have clocked up 14 reprimands in the last three years.

We also got a complaint about Daxon. Again, customers placed an order to claim their gift. But instead of the 30-inch Toshiba TV shown in the promotion, Mike Hampton, from Cambridgeshire, received a TV a fraction the size of a normal one. 'It was called a Visiolux TV, with a black-and-white screen about five inches diagonally,' said Mike.

Last October, a letter from Daxon told Mike that, as a 'valued customer', he'd get a free TV. A Toshiba colour TV was 'waiting in its warehouse ready to be sent out'. He placed a £50 order, then the tiny TV - which we found on the internet for less than £10 - turned up. Daxon told Mike that the small TV was the free gift; the Toshiba was part of a separate draw. After contact from our lawyers, it paid Mike £350 as a goodwill gesture.

Both companies apologised and said they were reviewing procedures.



Don't pack a travel money card

Foreign exchange providers are promoting travellers' cheque cards this summer as the clever way to carry your money abroad, but we've found that convenience comes at a cost.

American Express (Amex) and MasterCard both

offer the cards, which are the size of a credit card. They can be loaded with euros, dollars or sterling before your holiday and used abroad at cash machines or to pay for goods and services.

The Pin-protected cards are ideal if you want to fix a budget for your trip in advance.

If the card is stolen, you don't need to worry about your bank account being cleared out. With the Amex card the balance is refunded within 24 hours and the card replaced.

But topping up the card and spending your money isn't cheap. The Amex card is an initial £20.

MasterCard charges £5 for the card plus 1 per cent of the amount loaded or £5, whichever is higher. Top-ups are a £3 flat fee.

Once loaded, it costs £1.75 to take money out at a cash machine. Withdrawals with the

Amex and around £12 with MasterCard.

ACTION POINT

Avoid both cards and take a Best Buy Nationwide debit or credit card on holiday with you. Neither charges the common

Topping up and spending your money isn't cheap

Amex card are €2, \$2.50 or £1.50 (depending on the currency on the card).

In short, buying one of these cards, loading it up with €600 and making one cash withdrawal will cost more than £21 with

2.75 per cent foreign exchange fee. The debit card has no ATM fee. For the credit card it's 1.5 per cent (£1.50 minimum). Make sure you have more than one way to pay in case you lose your cards.



The travellers' cheque card from MasterCard

Drugs watchdog misled the public

The body appointed to ensure medicines are safe has admitted misleading the public over the findings of a consultation after a Which? publication exposed it.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) last year allowed a cholesterol-lowering heart drug, Zocor Heart-Pro, to go on sale at pharmacies without a prescription. It was the first drug of its type ever to be sold this way.

The move followed analysis by safety advisers and a consultation of industry bodies and medical and patient groups. The agency claimed on its website last year that two thirds of about 100 respondents were in favour. But the Which? journal for doctors, *Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin* (DTB), analysed responses and found the true number in favour was less than half of the total. After initially disputing DTB's findings, the MHRA has now conceded that only a third were in favour, a third were against and the rest 'were not opposed but raised issues'. It blamed an 'administrative error', adding that its safety advisers had been given the correct result.

DTB – among those against – says the evidence for Zocor's benefits is 'flimsy' and those buying it are being used as 'guinea pigs'. We believe the episode underlines the need to reform the MHRA.



THE PUBLIC'S VIEW

The government has announced plans for road-use pricing. We asked car users: would you be prepared to pay a tax based on how many miles you drive and how busy the roads are, in return for road tax and fuel tax being scrapped?

YES: 40%

DON'T KNOW: 18%

NO: 42%

Survey of 704 car owners carried out online for Which? by Explorandum between 13 and 15 June. Findings don't necessarily represent our views.

Scorching tale of a vacuum cleaner

Which? has helped a primary-school teacher get nearly £1,000 worth of new carpet after her Electrolux vacuum cleaner burnt her old one.

Tina Lutman contacted us when her frustration with the electrical firm reached fever pitch after it told her the marks were her fault.

In fact, far from blaming the scorch marks on using her Electrolux HiLight Z2915 in a vacuuming frenzy, Electrolux claimed the opposite. Tina said: 'It said the marks were caused by leaving the vacuum standing in one place for too long and dragging it while the tools were being used.'

'I couldn't believe I was told I wasn't using it properly. Electrolux has been very unco-operative in resolving the matter, which started in December. It didn't reply to my letters or phone calls and, after sending a team of people to inspect the carpet in February, didn't contact me until I wrote again in April.'

When we got in touch, Electrolux said it would compensate Tina for the damage to her carpet: 'We have not been able to identify any problem with Ms Lutman's current Electrolux vacuum. We have suggested that a different type of product, a cylinder rather than



The Electrolux vacuum cleaner left marks on Tina's carpet

upright cleaner, may suit her better and we will be supplying this.' It added that customer complaints are normally resolved more quickly and it wasn't aware of other customers having problems with the model.

In our reliability survey last month we found that few people would recommend Electrolux uprights to a friend.

Visit www.which.co.uk/vacuumcleaners for more details.

And finally... Land of milk

Norway: where milk flows freely from mountain streams...not from cows. This purer-than-pure cheese is 'slightly nutty', says Waitrose. Indeed. Thanks to spotter Michael Robinson.



Send your examples of daft or misleading products or promotions to us at: Dept LE, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH

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