

Media Outlet: UK Wired News

Date: 12.06.13

URL: <http://www.ukwirednews.com/news.php/1489471-Name-firms-that-mistreat-consumers-says-Citizens-Advice>

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Name firms that mistreat consumers says Citizens Advice

Regulators should name and shame businesses which fail to correct bad practices that affect consumers, a charity has said.

Citizens Advice said the move would give consumers more chance to know which firms and services would treat them fairly.

The call comes as the government publishes a draft Consumer Bill of Rights.

This would update and clarify protection for shoppers, it said.

Various consumer laws are in place at present, but the government has described them as "unnecessarily complex", leading to confusion for consumers fighting for their rights.

The proposed new Bill would bring these under one umbrella and update a number of regulations that have been in place for decades.

In general, if faulty goods are not repaired properly, then the customer will be entitled to some compensation, under the new rules.

One grey area - the timescale for refunds of faulty goods - will also be made clear by the Bill. Consumers will have 30 days to return any faulty goods and receive a full refund. After that deadline has expired, they will still be able to get a repair or replacement.

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Reputable retailers usually solve problems without the need for legal intervention”

"For too long the rules that apply when buying goods and services have been murky for both consumers and businesses. The situation is even worse in relation to digital content," said Consumer Minister Jo Swinson.

Under the proposed new rules, consumers will have the right to a repair or replacement of faulty digital music, games and software.

"It is about time consumers knew what their rights are and businesses have clearer information on what is expected of them when problems inevitably do arise. That is why we have put clarity and fairness at the heart of the proposed Consumer Bill of Rights," she added.

"We want to make sure consumers are confident about their rights in everyday situations be it their washing machine breaking down or an online game they purchased always crashing. This will also benefit businesses as they are going to spend less time working out their legal obligations when they get complaints from customers."

The plans have been generally welcomed for by watchdogs and consumer groups as a much-needed update of the law.

But Citizens Advice wants the Bill of Rights to be backed up with warnings to rogue firms that treat customers badly.

"Regulators should name and shame businesses which refuse to put right bad practice so that customers know who they can trust to treat them fairly," said Gillian Guy, the charity's chief executive.

"As well as protecting customers, naming and shaming by enforcers would prevent dodgy businesses gaining a competitive advantage over companies that abide by the law."

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She said that people who used Citizens Advice collectively spent £185m on goods, like clothes, that were not up to scratch.

It called on the government to give consumers the right to take collective action when seeking compensation, and for consumer rights to be displayed prominently at the point of sale. These are not included in the draft Bill.

The Trading Standards Institute (TSI), which represents trading standards officers, also welcomed the clarification. However, it raised concerns about a new proposal that would require officers to give businesses prior warning of an inspection.

"If trading standards officers cannot exercise their powers of entry without prior notification, it is clear that rogues can always stay one step ahead," said Leon Livermore, TSI chief executive.

The British Retail Consortium (BRC), which represents businesses, said clearer laws would be welcome.

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"Reputable retailers usually solve problems without the need for legal intervention but this Bill helps to clarify the law," said the BRC's director general Helen Dickinson.

However, Chris Havemann, chief executive of trader website RatedPeople.com, said that the proposals did not do enough to protect the small businesses that could be in dispute with their customers.

"The trade industry at present requires a great deal of trust for both the tradesman and the consumer, and it is just as likely that a tradesman will be left in difficult circumstances due to delayed payments or customers changing their mind about agreed activity as it is for consumers to be faced by poorly completed projects," he said.