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The Division of Consumer Services within the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services takes its role as the state's clearinghouse for consumer complaints, protection and information very seriously. While the Division saw the total number of complaints filed during the 2010 calendar year increase by 7% to just over 40,000, more than 88% of those complaints were successfully closed or resolved. Data ascertained from these complaints can be extremely valuable in helping to determine the direction of future investigations and targeted education.

Already this year, the Division's Bureau of Investigations has assisted local law enforcement in central Florida with three separate enforcement actions against telemarketers after seeing the number of complaints for this category increase by 138% in 2010. This increase was, by far, the most dynamic change among our top ten complaint categories. The next largest increase was in Real Estate Broker/Salesperson complaints, which rose by 36%, followed by a 32% rise in Medical complaints over the previous year. The only other categories that showed a significant upward trend were Do Not Call and Motor Vehicle Repair complaints, both increasing by 17%. Conversely, complaints involving Travel/Vacation Plans showed a downward trend for the second year in a row, decreasing by 29% from 2009 to 2010 after a 22% reduction from 2008 to 2009. Many of our previous editions of the Florida Consumer E-Newsletter have been dedicated to topics that focus on these complaint categories. Consumers are encouraged to peruse the archived editions by visiting [www.800helpfla.com](http://www.800helpfla.com). They can be extremely useful when seeking advice on a particular subject area.

*Regardless of the complaint subject matter, here are a few general tips for all consumers in our great state:*

- 1.** Be skeptical immediately of any unsolicited telephone call, text, postcard/letter or e-mail.
- 2.** Be wary of anyone requiring that payment be made through wire transfer, money order or by sending cash with an overnight courier. This is usually one of the first indications of a scam. Purchases made by credit card will usually allow the consumer the ability to dispute charges, thus offering the most protection.
- 3.** Get details in writing (terms and conditions, cancellation policies etc.) before signing any agreements, sending money or giving out any credit card or bank information.
- 4.** Check a company's complaint history and how any complaints were resolved before agreeing to do business with them. This can be done by visiting [www.800helpfla.com](http://www.800helpfla.com) and utilizing the "Business/Complaint Lookup", or by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) and allowing a member of the Consumer Assistance Center to retrieve the information. If the particular business that you are checking on is regulated by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, be sure to find out if they are properly registered.
- 5.** If you are being solicited to contribute to a charitable organization, ask if the person contacting you is a paid solicitor/fundraiser. If the answer is yes, as much as 80-90% or more of your contribution may actually be going to this paid solicitor/fundraiser, not the charitable organization. In these instances, if you are inclined to give, it may be more prudent to contact the charitable organization itself and make your donation directly to

them. Consumers can utilize the “[Gift Givers Guide](#)” at [www.800helpfla.com](http://www.800helpfla.com) or call the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ Consumer Assistance Center at 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) to inquire about the registration status or financial information for a particular charity.

6. Research and verify where an offer is originating. Try to find the physical address (not just a P.O. Box) and phone number of the company that has contacted you. With VoIP and other web-based technologies, it can sometimes be difficult to determine where someone is physically located. Look for negative reviews online by typing the company’s name, followed by the word “complaints” or “scams” into an internet search engine.

Keep in mind, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has developed the [A-Z Resource Guide](#), an online directory of government-related information that is, by far, one of the most useful tools available in the quest to inform, educate and protect Florida’s consumers. Users are encouraged to utilize the search function within the guide to let the database do the looking for you. Simply typing in a key word or two into the subject field will allow you to narrow your search in order to find needed services and assistance fast - and it’s online 24 hours a day. Let the A-Z Resource Guide steer you toward the proper resource for assistance. Information can be accessed directly by visiting [www.800helpfla.com](http://www.800helpfla.com), or by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) Monday through Friday during business hours and asking for help from a member of the Consumer Assistance Center staff. Remember, an educated consumer is the best defense against fraud and deception!



You’re welcome to get in touch with us through the [Contact Us](#) page of our website at [www.800helpfla.com](http://www.800helpfla.com).