

Results from the ECC-Net e-commerce questionnaire March 2014



The European Consumer Centres (ECC) in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Ireland sent 2014 a short online questionnaire regarding e-commerce issues to the whole ECC-Network. The purpose was to receive feedback from the whole network as to highlight the main problems that consumers face when engaging in cross-border transactions online and to identify emerging problem areas. Here are the results based on the ECC-Net's complaints and issues reported in the years 2012 and 2013.

These percentages below reflect the number of ECCs that reported these issues.

All the ECC-Net centres have reported that the types of products/services which are most frequently complained about in the area of e-commerce (excluding transport and accommodation sectors) are as follows (in order of importance):

1. Electronic products: 90%
2. Clothing and footwear: 86,7%
3. Cosmetics and other health products: 63,3%
4. Furniture: 50%
5. Tickets for recreational and sporting events: 46,7%
6. Dating websites: 40%
7. Household products: 40%
8. Vehicle spare parts: 36,7%
9. Other personal effects: 33,3%
10. Other for examples: Internet services, valuation websites: 20%

The most common problems encountered by consumers when engaging in e-commerce are:

1. Defective products: 96,7%
2. Non-Delivery: 93,3%
3. Non-conformity with the contract: 73,3%
4. Traders based outside EU/EEA: 56,7%¹
5. Unfair/ hidden contract terms: 50%
6. Refusal to sell/supply: 40%
7. Price mistake/transparency: 33,3%
8. Counterfeit Products: 23,3%
9. Limited withdrawal/cooling off option: 20%
10. Bankruptcy of trader: 13,3%

¹ This is not covered by the ECC-Net. and this report.

ECC-Net centres noted that the emerging e-commerce problem areas at present and foreseen to increase in the future are:

1. Free trials/ Subscription traps
2. Online gaming
3. Minors engaging in e-commerce
4. Dating websites
5. Penny auctions
6. Problems with virtual currencies (e.g. bit coins etc.)
7. Valuation services for property and vehicles
8. Others: Smartphone applications and payment by mobile phone, deceit (fraudulent websites) and fake payment requests containing a zip attachment infecting the computer with a Trojan virus. Product or services where minors have been involved in the buying process, e.g. Apps, in-app purchases, gaming, ringtones, software and music

ECC-Net has received an increasing number of complaints or information requests regarding misleading advertisements where false or misleading statements have potentially persuaded consumers to enter into commercial transactions they might otherwise have avoided.

The most common areas are:

1. Hidden contract terms/or the consumer did not read them as he/she had to open a specific document etc. (subscription traps)
2. Incorrect price information
3. Misleading product description
4. Unfair contract terms
5. Unsolicited goods
6. Currency exchange related problems

The ECC-Net experience shows that the following sectors: electronic products, clothing & footwear, vehicle sales, tickets for recreational & sporting events, cosmetics & health products (diet pills) and dating websites are most subjects to misleading advertisements or fraud.

We have identified test packages/subscription traps as a persistent and increasing problem area. The most common situation is where a consumer responds to an offer for a product or service that is advertised as either free test package, or as a “try for only 4 EUR” type of deal that, in reality, results in the consumer inadvertently paying for an on-going subscription service.²

Regarding complaints involving minors engaging in e-commerce 47% of the ECC-offices answered that they experienced these complaints.

The top-list of product/services that were involved in transactions involving minors were:

1. Apps (or making in-app purchases): 85,71%
2. Gaming (MMOGs): 57,14%
3. Ringtones: 28,57%
4. Software: 21,43%
5. Music: 21,43%

It is important that the cooperation between ECCs and traders organisations develop as traders frequently contact ECCs seeking assistance. 90% of ECCs reported receiving such contact from traders with advice on how to deal with specific consumer problems and assistance with their terms & conditions, the most common queries received. Questions about the European Small Claims Procedure and business to business issues are also commonly received.

2 More information about subscription traps can be found in the ECC-Net report “Too good to be true? It probably is! Unfair Commercial Practices and Unsolicited Goods”. http://www.konsumenteuropa.se/globalassets/rapporter/too_good_to_be_true_it_probably_is_unfair_commercial_practices_-and_unsolicited_goods.pdf

Cross-border price comparison websites

It appears that there are not many well-known cross-border price comparison websites in Europe. When seeking information from ECC-Net about websites from any sector that allow cross border comparison of prices, only 31% of ECC offices were able to identify such a service in their own country.

The result indicates that it can be difficult for consumers to research and locate good deals in other Member States. If ECC-offices find it difficult to find any cross-border price comparison site, consumers are likely to find it even more difficult.

Here are some price comparison websites (PCWs) that also have a cross-border aspect: As mentioned in a 2011 EU-report:

“PCWs are currently not playing a direct role in fostering cross-border shopping, although they may serve an indirect role as contact points through which a retailer may establish a presence in a country that is different from where it is based. PCWs can be viewed as reducing the entry costs for a foreign based retailer and thus facilitating cross-border price comparison indirectly.”³

<http://save-money.eu/>

<http://www.pricerunner.co.uk/>

<http://www.prisjakt.nu>, <http://www.pricerunner.se/>

www.shopmania.ro, www.compari.ro, www.price.ro

www.heureka.sk, www.najlepsie-ceny.sk,

www.eanfind.fr

www.kieskeurig.nl, www.vergelijk.nl

www.comparer.be, www.vergelijk.be, www.alatest.be, www.kelkoo.be

www.geizhals.at, www.checkfelix.com

The inclusion of these sites does not constitute an endorsement or recommendation by ECC-Net nor any guarantee as to their reliability.

Price comparison sites are mentioned because it is always good to check and compare price and quality but it is important to use them carefully.



3 Executive Agency for Health and Consumers, Report Consumer market study on the functioning of e-commerce and Internet marketing and selling techniques in the retail of goods, 2011. Page 81-82. http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/consumer_research/market_studies/docs/study_ecommerce_goods_en.pdf and <http://ecommercenews.eu/price-comparison-shopping-engines-in-europe/>