

Attorneys general urge Federal Trade Commission to strengthen advertising disclosures

Local News

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OLYMPIA — There's only one [government-authorized Web site](#) where consumers can get their free annual credit report, and it's not the one with the catchy jingles in television ads. Attorney General Rob McKenna says more needs to be done to protect consumers attempting to obtain the free credit report allowed by law.

“Credit reports are crucial in helping consumers detect whether they've become victims of identity theft or credit fraud,” McKenna said. “Credit reporting agencies are required to provide you a free copy of your report, but some see this as an opportunity to sell additional products. Under the law, 'free' means 'at no cost,' not 'free with a purchase.’”

McKenna joined 42 other state attorneys general in sending a [letter](#) this week to the Federal Trade Commission, in conjunction with the FTC's proposal to help prevent deceptive marketing of “free” credit reports. The attorneys general said they support a number of the changes proposed by the FTC but would like even clearer disclosures.

“We believe that advertising restrictions and mandatory disclosures are necessary to ensure that consumers are not misled or confused by advertisements and offers for “free” credit reports and are able to easily obtain their free annual credit reports,” the letter states.

By law, consumers are permitted one free credit report from each of the three major bureaus — Equifax, TransUnion and Experian. Consumers may request a report at

www.annualcreditreport.com or by calling 1-877-322-8228.

The state's letter identifies www.freecreditreport.com as an example of a Web site where consumers can be misled. Experian owns and heavily markets the site.

“Consumers file complaints stating they did not understand that by accessing their free credit report, they had signed up for a service that automatically charged a specific amount per month for credit monitoring,” the attorneys general wrote.

The FTC proposes that TV and radio commercials for “free” credit reports must disclose, “This is not the free credit report provided for by Federal law.” The states want advertisers to include the statement, “This report is only free if you make a purchase.”

Print and Internet ads would require similar disclosures and list the phone number and Web site for requesting the government-mandated free reports. Consumers who visited a Web site where “free” credit reports are sold would be automatically sent to a separate landing page where they could choose to continue to the commercial site or instead visit

www.annualcreditreport.com.

The attorneys general and the FTC also want to ban hyperlinks to commercial Web sites from www.annualcreditreport.com and prohibit marketing for paid services or products until after a consumer has received the free credit report.

CONSUMER TIPS

- The Washington Attorney General's Office recommends you request an annual free credit report from www.annualcreditreport.com or by calling 1-877-322-8228. The Web site is secure and your information is encrypted when you submit it.
- You are allowed one report yearly from each of the three major participating bureaus, TransUnion, Experian and Equifax. You may order all three at once. Or you may want to do your own monitoring by spacing them. Order one from TransUnion now. Four months later, order one from Experian. Then four months after that, order an Equifax report. Repeat the following year. The law doesn't require the bureaus to provide a free credit score, however.
- The government-mandated site isn't without risk. The bureaus will still try to sell you other products, such as a credit score, and clicking on the company logos at the bottom of the main page will direct you away from the government-run site. You don't need to enter a credit card number to get your free report. So if you're asked for payment info, you know you've landed elsewhere.
- You can reduce the number of credit solicitations you receive by "opting out" of the pre-approved credit lists that the bureaus sell to companies. Call 1-888-5-OPTOUT (567-8688) or make the request online at www.optoutprescreen.com.