

CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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VACATION PACKAGES: MORE STRESS THAN RELAXATION?

A retired couple from La Plata received a call saying they had won a free trip, but to claim it they had to attend a sales presentation about a vacation membership club. At the office, the salesperson said that if they joined the club, they could stay in deluxe accommodations for the price normally paid to stay in motels. He showed them photos of beautiful resorts and was very persistent. They joined the club and paid \$2,500. Their free trip turned out to be to a run-down hotel in Atlantic City, and it did not include transportation. Also, the club never honored their requests to arrange a vacation to Mexico. In fact, the club went out of business a few months later, taking the couple's money with it.

Promises of a free trip and deep discounts on future vacations can be very appealing. The problem is, many consumers who sign up for vacation or travel clubs, timeshares, or campground memberships don't get what they were promised, or the cost puts more of a bite in their monthly budget than they had anticipated. They spend a lot of money up front for services that either are not available or turn out to be of poor quality, only to learn that they can't get a refund.



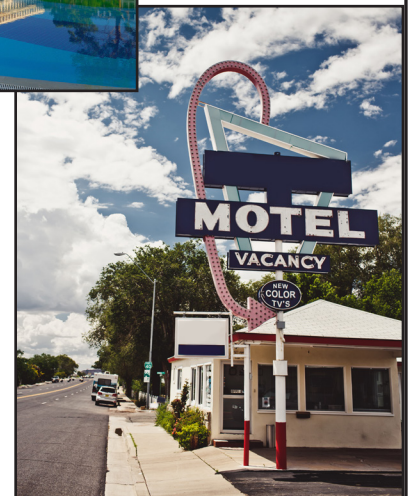
Vacation sales promotions typically begin with a postcard, letter, or telephone call. You're led to believe the company tried hard to contact you because you've been selected to receive a car, vacation, or other valuable prize. The mailing may use words like "grand finalist," "urgent,"

or "winner," and appear to be sent by special mail or courier. In fact, bulk rate postage is usually used to mail the same card to thousands of people. In addition, the company often doesn't say what it's selling.

The purpose of these come-ons is to get you to the company's place of business, where you'll be pressured to submit to a sales presentation. Before receiving your prize, you're asked to take a tour of the campground or timeshare facility, or speak with the travel club's representative. A series of salespeople will use high-pressure tactics to try to get you to make a major purchasing decision on the spot. They may offer a "great deal" that's "only available that day," so you can't take the contract home to think it over.



Some consumers have reported sales pitches lasting up to nine hours, during which they felt so hungry and exhausted, they signed a confusing contract just to go home. And when they finally got their promised "fabulous" prize, it was of little value.



Disappointing Reality

Many consumers who spent a lot of money on vacation packages didn't get what was promised during the sales pitch.

Some weren't able to get the dates or locations they requested. Others didn't receive the promised savings because of added fees, dues, and costs. Others found the ac-



commodations to be very poor—so poor that they refused to stay in them and paid for other accommodations. Worst of all, some consumers never got to take a single vacation and lost all the money they had paid because their travel company abruptly went out of business.

How to Resist the Hard Sell

A company shouldn't need to lure you to a sales presentation by promising a prize. Go only if you know what the company is selling and if it's a service you're interested in. If you go, ask detailed questions and insist on clear answers.

Also:

- Check out the company beforehand. Ask for the names of customers you can call. Call the Consumer Protection Division and the Better Business Bureau to see if there are any complaints against the company. Note that many of these companies are so new that no complaints have yet been filed, but that doesn't mean that there won't be problems in the future.
- Never make your decision on the spot. Insist on taking the contract home to study it, and if the business won't allow you to do that, leave. Claims about offers being for "today only" are usually bogus; they will be only too happy to see you if you return another day.
- Even after reviewing the contract at home, never sign up unless you're sure about your decision. Although you have 10 days to cancel a timeshare, vacation, or campground membership sold in Maryland, exercising your right to cancel isn't always easy. While the salesperson may imply that you'll be able to easily sell your interest in a timeshare or campground, many consumers have found that to be difficult or impossible. Understand all the costs. What is and isn't included? Are there extra fees for maintenance, processing, dues, peak season, upgrades, hotels, airlines, port taxes, and meals?
- Make sure the company's rules suit your needs. How far in advance must you request accommodations? How does the company obtain accommodations for you? When will the company confirm your reservations? Don't buy deals "subject to availability" unless you can easily change your plans.
- Finally, be very wary about paying a lot of money up front. What if you invest thousands of dollars and the company goes out of business? There are few, if any options, available for consumers in this situation.

You can find the contact information for your local Better Business Bureau on their website, at www.bbb.org.



HOW TO CONTACT US

Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandcares.org
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit: www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx

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