

The Consumer's Edge

Consumer Protection Division, Maryland Attorney General's Office

Issue # 142

Online Piracy Prevention: Navigating Dangerous Waters

The Internet has revolutionized the concept of finding the perfect holiday present. Millions of items are available for consumers to purchase, easily acquired with a few clicks of the mouse - letting anyone play the role of Jolly St. Nick. However, modern online counterfeiters and pirates are out there, luring you in with legitimate looking websites for their "amazing" deals that are actually counterfeit products.

Many of these sites look like websites belonging to genuine companies, with corporate advertising, credit card acceptance and enticing graphic design. The sites can sell anything from pharmaceuticals to cosmetics to handbags. Purchasing items from these sites may contribute to a criminal network's source of income for other illegal activities, and the use of these items can be hazardous to YOUR health. For example, drugs bought online can be ineffective or toxic. Counterfeit cosmetics have been found to contain chemicals such as antifreeze or harmful bacteria. Counterfeit toys could harm the children playing with them. The sites that allow you to download unapproved music or movies may also contain malware that allows the scammer to access your personal and financial information.

Although it's important to pay attention to the online retailer from whom you are buying the products, Marylanders should not be discouraged from shopping online. Shopping from legitimate companies and websites is not only convenient but it boosts the economy. The Office of the Attorney General has five easy tips for to protect you against purchasing counterfeit products or from online pirates:

1. If it's too good to be true...it probably is. Use your common sense. If you think something is fishy with the website, it very well may be an illegitimate company. Look out for sites with poor quality photos, spelling mistakes and lack of terms. If you are purchasing items from an auction site, see how many identical products they have available – for example, if they have too many of an expensive couture handbag, the handbags are probably fake. Avoid websites offering unlimited downloads of music or movies, or offering mixed versions of songs.

2. Look for Secure Websites. Shop from online sites that display "https://" rather than "http://" in the address bar. Also look for a padlock image at the bottom of the browser. These indicate the website is secure, and has a safe encrypted connection. Sites that do not have secure connections are not storing customer data in a secure manner.

3. Authorized Retail Sites. Many companies have lists on their websites or product packaging of sites where you can buy their goods. These are sites that are considered authorized online retail stores, and you are guaranteed to purchase a legitimate product. If you are uncertain that a site is selling genuine products, ask the retailer where they got the goods and for other verifiable information.

4. Product Shipping. Unfortunately, many illegitimate goods may look genuine, and unless you are a professional working at



the company in question, you may not be able to tell the difference. However, look for the small details. Are the “use by” dates missing or expired? Are the safety seals broken or missing? Did it come with the appropriate warranty information? Is there anything unusual about the packaging?

5. Prescriptions. Be extra careful about ordering your prescription drugs online. Only buy drugs from a reputable pharmacy. If you purchase medicine from a website you haven’t used before, compare the new drugs to your current ones – do they match up in size, shape, color and taste? Are you experiencing any new side effects after taking a dosage? You may also contact your pharmacist or the manufacturer to determine if the new vendor is a legitimate company. Remember, all online pharmacies located in the United States must be licensed by the state board of pharmacy where the online vendor is located. Check www.napb.net for a list of state boards of pharmacy.

In addition, make sure to check your credit report and credit card balances regularly, in case you do have malware installed on your computer. For more information on credit reports, visit <http://www.oag.state.md.us/consumer/edge121.htm>. Also, use antivirus and firewall software to protect you and your loved ones. This software will help shield your computer from viruses and malware software hidden in downloadable files.

Education and word of mouth is key in the fight to protect consumers from purchasing illegitimate products from online pirates. Make sure to explain to your children about the dangers of downloading software, music or movies from questionable websites. If you find yourself looking at a website that looks suspicious, or have purchased goods from a website that are defective or pirated, warn your family and friends to stay away. Also, ask family and friends for a safe, reliable and affordable website that they have used.

If you are led to a site selling pirated products, report the information to the legitimate company they are copying from, and to the proper authorities. If you believe you purchased a counterfeit product, contact the vendor and request a refund. You can report

unsafe products and illegitimate companies to the Consumer Protection Division online at <http://www.oag.state.md.us/Consumer>, or call 410-528-8662 or 1-888-743-0023 (toll-free in Maryland).



Attorney General’s Consumer Offices

Consumer Protection Division
200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl.
Baltimore, MD 21202-2021

- 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
- Medical Billing Complaints: 410-528-1840
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
To appeal health plan claims decisions:
Toll-free within Maryland 1-877-261-8807

Branch Offices

- **Cumberland**
301-722-2000; 9 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. 3rd Tuesdays
- **Frederick**
301-600-1071; 9 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. 2nd and 4th Thursdays
- **Hagerstown**
301-791-4780; 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Prince George’s**
301-386-6200; 9:00 a.m. to 5:00p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Salisbury**
410-713-3620; 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Southern Maryland (Hughesville)**
301-274-4620 Toll-free 1-866-366-8343
9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesdays

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