

Consumers: Most Internet Sites Now Safe to Buy Electronic Goods

Buying popular electronic goods like digital cameras and music players on the internet is now much safer following a crackdown on problematic websites. 84% of the websites selling electronics, checked for breach of EU* consumer rules, now comply with EU law (compared with only 44% in 2009). The "sweep" investigation was launched in May 2009 and carried out by national authorities in 26 member states, Norway and Iceland. The problems identified included misleading information on consumer rights, incorrect prices, and missing contact details of the trader. These sites have now been corrected and penalties have been imposed where necessary. The Commission also announced the initial findings of the 2010 Sweep targeting online sales of tickets for cultural and sporting events.

②

Health and Consumer Commissioner John Dalli said: "The sweeps are all about making sure that EU laws benefiting consumers are enforced with vigor, to deliver transparent pricing and truthful information. Today's results show that the sweeps are working. The boost to consumer confidence which they can generate will also benefit reputable businesses. We are determined to continue these joint enforcement actions and already have the next problem sector in our sights".

The sweep

A "sweep" is an enforcement action led by the EU and carried out by national enforcement authorities. Member States carry out simultaneous, coordinated checks for breaches in consumer law in a particular sector. They contact operators about suspected irregularities and ask them to take corrective action.

The electronic goods sweep took place in May 2009. Enforcement authorities across Europe checked websites selling electronic goods for compliance with EU consumer law. Six popular product categories were selected for the check, including e.g. personal music players, digital cameras, and mobile phones. Since then, national authorities have followed up on the problematic sites, requesting corrections and imposing sanctions when necessary.

Electronics sweep results

Overall, of 369 websites originally checked, 310 sites (84%) now comply with EU-wide consumer rules, compared with only 163 sites (44%) in May 2009. Sanctions for confirmed breaches included fines and closure of websites.

In terms of the main problems which were identified initially:

- information about consumer rights: 86% of the websites checked now display clear and accurate information as required by law (e.g. on the right to return the product without giving a reason and on the legal guarantee period), compared with 64% in May 2009;
- information about the total price: 94% of the websites checked now display clear, and accurate information about the total cost (including delivery charges and all other extra costs), compared with 75% in May 2009;
- contact details of the trader: 95% of the websites checked now provide the required trader details such as the name, address and e-mail, compared with 82% in May 2009.

What happens next?

National authorities will continue to work on the outstanding cases. For cross-border cases, they are in contact with their counterparts in other countries. The new system of EU-wide sweep investigations will continue, with new sweeps and joint actions planned for next year.

The new sweep: ticketing sites

The latest sweep is now investigating online sales of tickets for cultural and sporting events. 414 sites have been checked, 167 (40%) were compliant, but 247 (60%) were flagged for further investigation for breach of consumer rules. National authorities are now in the enforcement phase when they contact the traders concerned and ask them to clarify their position or correct the problems identified.

The main problem areas were:

- Missing, incomplete or misleading information about the price (e.g. hidden taxes or handling charges): 74% of problem websites.
- Unfair terms and conditions (e.g. ticket delivery was not guaranteed on time or a refund was excluded in the event of cancellation): 73% of problem websites.
- Missing, incomplete or misleading information about the trader (e.g. the trader falsely claiming to be an authorized representative): 48% of problem websites.

* **EU:** European Union