

Customer *First*

Devon County Council



DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL

MEMBER'S NEWSLETTER NEW YEAR 2006

SPECIAL EDITION

Welcome to this special edition designed to fill you in on some important developments affecting the Customer *First* Scheme.

We need to hear what you think - please take a few moments to fill in the attached questionnaire and send it back to us.

We look forward to hearing from you!



Exciting days ahead for Customer *First*

Devon County Council Trading Standards Service is pleased to announce some exciting changes planned for its Customer *First* Scheme. As you are probably aware, Customer *First* is a Devon based initiative and is not available to businesses outside the area. But all this may soon change and should herald better promotion and awareness of the Scheme for your business.

The South West Regional Trading Standards Group (SWERCOTS) which consists of 15 Local Authorities from Cornwall to Gloucestershire have agreed that if they adopt a trader assurance scheme it will align with Customer *First*. The actual implementation of Customer *First* within each local authority will depend on their resources and other priorities but we are currently exploring whether Customer *First* could be running throughout the South West within three years. This is a wonderful boost for Customer *First* as it demonstrates the potential value to both members and consumers. The more businesses that are on board, the more publicity there will be and the more consumers will be aware of and use the Scheme. You, our members, will have access to a larger customer base and wider promotional opportunities.



Members of Hampshire Trading Standards Service with some of their latest Buy with Confidence Members

The Wider Picture

Hampshire County Council run a similar scheme called “Buy with Confidence”. This Scheme has been adopted by 17 Local Authorities in the South East (in a similar way as that outlined above for *CustomerFirst*).



It has been agreed between SWERCOTS and Trading Standards South East Regional Group (TSSE) to explore a possible merger of the two schemes. At present this idea is still at the very early stages, it will involve a lot of work from the relevant local authorities, but no change at present for business members. We hope that by combining Buy with Confidence and *CustomerFirst* we will be able to incorporate the best elements of each into one unified scheme. Businesses, consumers and the local authorities involved will also benefit from a consistent approach to running and promoting the Scheme.

We are proposing that these two developments run in parallel and that within three years there may be a *CustomerFirst* /Buy with Confidence unified scheme covering the whole of the South of England. However, your views on this are important to us please complete the questionnaire that accompanies this letter and return it to us in the enclosed pre-paid envelope.

What will it mean for you?

At present Buy with Confidence is provided at an additional cost in some of the local authorities. Should the proposed merger take place, there is likely to be an introduction of an annual fee for membership. The fee would cover administration of the Scheme and publicity; it would not be used for any other purposes. We hope that it will lead to a better promotion of the Scheme to consumers and businesses in the South of England, generating greater public awareness and increasing membership numbers.

Devon County Council Trading Standards Service is very excited by the potential of having a Scheme that may even lay the framework for a National scheme. And just think - you have been part of it from its very early stages!!

For more information on our counterpart, the Buy with Confidence Scheme check out:
www.buywithconfidence.info/

What about Office of Fair Trading Approval?

We also have an update on our quest to have the CustomerFirst Code of Practice recognised by the OFT's Consumer Codes Approval Scheme. The Code of Practice has now been accepted as meeting all the criteria except one. The final obstacle to overcome requires us to have some form of protection for consumers who pay a deposit to a member business.

We are considering introducing into the CustomerFirst Code of Practice a requirement that allows members to choose from one of four of possible options:

- 1 Not to keep deposits for more than 48 hours.
- 2 Show evidence of existing pre-payment protection for customers, for example via membership of a trade association scheme.
- 3 Purchase their own approved pre-payment protection insurance policy.
- 4 Buy into a CustomerFirst endorsed policy to cover this requirement

The benefits of this requirement to consumers are obvious and, although we recognise that it may pose an additional burden on some businesses, we believe that the potential benefits in encouraging consumers to actively search for Scheme members will outweigh these disadvantages.

The application for OFT Approval progresses in parallel with the other developments mentioned and when combined together offer wide promotional opportunities for members.

Please note that there are no plans to introduce a fee or a requirement for pre-payment protection in the immediate future. It is only as these new developments take hold that we will consider introducing these requirements. However, we would welcome your comments and opinions, even at this early stage, in order that we can take your views into account when considering the best way forward.

These exciting changes to the CustomerFirst Scheme will affect you, our members, and we value your opinions on the way forward.

Loose in this newsletter is a questionnaire. Please take a few minutes to let us know what you think.

What do you think?

Do you think the proposed changes will make the Scheme better?

Whatever comments you have we would like to hear from YOU!



Don't forget to look out for details of seminars coming up on a range of subject in the coming months. Also check out the website which has been improved to allow for users to search for members more easily by following the link www.devon.gov.uk or phone us on 01392 381381.

SCAMMERS ALERT!!

We receive over 100 complaints a month from consumers concerned about scams ranging from bogus Nigerian lottery winnings to letters warning of bad luck to anyone not buying a lucky charm.

Not only consumers complain to us. A diverse range of ever-changing ways of fleecing businesses from their well earned cash is at the disposal of the clever scammer. Here is a run down of the most common scams you should look out for.

Data Protection Letters

This scam cleverly exploits the requirement of the Data Protection Act for some businesses to register if they hold customer information. Businesses receive an official looking letter asking for up to £135 for registration at the Office of the Information Commissioner but the sender has no official connection with this body. Most small businesses do not need to register and if they are required to do so, need only pay a nominal fee of £35. Businesses can check whether they are required to register by contacting the Office of the Information Commissioner on **01625 545745**.

Variations on this scam make use of the threats of non compliance with the Freedom of Information Act, Money Laundering Regulations and Health and Safety legislation to demand payment from unsuspecting businesses.

Advertising Directory Scams

Your company is contacted by phone and asked whether you wish to place an advert in a directory, calendar etc sometimes with the claim that this will benefit a charity. Whether you agree to advertise or not you are then sent a directory along with an invoice. If the bill is not paid a series of threatening letters follow demanding payment, as time goes on these may include threat of legal action. A variation on this scam is that goods are received that were not ordered but are followed by a large bill. It is a criminal offence to attempt to invoice someone for goods they have not ordered and as no contract exists there is no way payment is legally enforceable.

The scammers rely on the fact that 10% of businesses will pay up when threatened with legal action. Trading Standards advise that if your business is billed for goods or services you did not agree to then you do not pay for them but contact us on **01392 381381** for further advice.



Premium Rate Fax Scam

Your business receives a fax stating that they will sell on your details or continue to send you faxes unless you fax them back on a premium rate number. This will cost £1.50 a minute and could last several minutes.

The best way to deal with this scam is to register with the fax preference service on **0845 070 0702**. Once you have registered it will be illegal for anyone to send you unsolicited faxes.

These are just some of the scams used to target businesses, further information on scams and how to avoid them can be found at our website: <http://www.devon.gov.uk> under self help advice.

Useful contacts

Mail Preference Service: **0845 7034599**

Fax Preference Service: **0845 0700702**

Telephone Preference Service: **08450700707**

E-mail Preference Service:

www.emailpreferenceservice.com

What do you think of the proposed changes?

- 1** Do you think that your business would benefit from the proposed merger and enlargement of the CustomerFirst/Buy With Confidence Schemes **YES** **NO**

If so, in what way? Or if not, why not?

- 2** a) Would you be willing to pay a fee to be a member of such a unified scheme if a commitment was given that all fees received would be used for the administration and promotion of the scheme itself? **YES** **NO**

b) If so, how do you think the membership charges should be structured?

Flat Fee **Sliding Scale Depending on Size of Business** **Other**

If not, why not?

c) Would you expect more than is currently offered from the Scheme? **YES** **NO**

d) If so what changes would you like to see?

- 3** a) Do you feel that accreditation of CustomerFirst under the OFT's Consumer Codes Approval Scheme would benefit your business **YES** **NO** **DON'T KNOW**

b) Would you agree with the proposed requirement concerning pre-payment protection if it could be shown to be of significant promotional benefit to the Scheme? **YES** **NO**

4 Any Other Comments:

Return in reply paid envelope to:
Jessica Buck, Trading Standards Service, County Hall, Topsham Rd, Exeter, EX2 4QH.