

Postmaster warns

Some mail order houses offer empty promises

Mail order offers that look too good to be true probably are. That's the word from Farmington Postmaster Kenneth Harris for consumers considering unbelievable offers in a magazine.

"The public must be constantly on guard against fantastic claims and get-rich-quick schemes," Harris said. "The nation's best defense against unscrupulous con artists using the mails is an informed public."

Harris' advice was part of Postal Consumer Protection Week, April 10-15, which reminds patrons they have an outlet to retaliate against questionable mail-order businesses.

In Farmington, most of the complaints Harris receives concern delays in mail-order businesses.

This year, he has received about 10 such complaints. One other complaint deals with a chain letter. Last year, complaints to the Farmington Post Office numbered less than 50, according to Harris. None have been prosecuted.

WHEN a complaint is reported to Harris, he passes it on to Postal Inspector L.O. Poindexter of the Detroit General Post Office. Once a complaint is lodged with Poindexter, Harris' role in the procedure has ended.

Investigations are conducted without the knowledge of the local postmaster or employees, according to Harris.

The procedure guards against the possibility of dishonest employees being tipped off during an investigation.

Consumers can bypass the extra trouble of reporting mail fraud by exercising caution before they send in their money.

Fantastic schemes are sure to remain fantasies. But if a customer is sure that the offer is legitimate, an

added assurance comes in the form of a post office box number, according to Harris.

"We're strict in renting out the post office boxes. With a post office box we have a good identification on the renter. We require a driver's license and other identification," Harris said.

"But a post office box isn't a guarantee that the business is legitimate. It means that it's easier to track down," he said.

WHILE stressing that a large percentage of companies making up the \$60 billion mail order industry are honest, Harris cautions that some of them are out to bilk the public.

"Schemes directed at consumers are limited only by the imagination of the con artist. They know many people are willing to invest their hard-earned money on offers which sound too good to be true," he said.

In addition to get-rich-quick plans, consumers should be on the lookout for false promises made about work-at-home-and-earn-money-in-your-

spare-time schemes, phony franchises, miracle cures, weight reducing plans without proven medical value and land offers.

Chain letters are another form of making-the-fast-bucks schemes through the mails.

These schemes have been the object of 166,917 complaints to the U.S. Postal Service during the 1977 fiscal year. The complaints involved about \$1 billion sent to fraudulent companies during 1977.

During 1976, the Postal Service investigated complaints which cost consumers about \$514 million.

Mail fraud cases involved 5,037 investigations and 1,617 convictions in 1977. Fines amounted to \$2.5 million, and \$3.2 million was returned to victims, according to postal authorities.

FALSE representation in a mail order business is a slightly lesser charge but gives the post office power to return all mail related to the

scheme back to its senders. Payment of outstanding money orders is forbidden.

During the 1977 fiscal year, the Postal Service Law Department's consumer protection office began 112 formal cases. In 60 of the misrepresentation cases, the schemes ended through action of the Postal Service Judicial Office and 52 consent agreements to stop the mailings were accepted.

If consumers have complaints about the type of advertising they are receiving through the mail, they can fill out a form which will take them off the lists of advertisers dealing in sexually oriented materials.

If a mail order purchase is the target of a complaint, consumers can write to the Direct Mail-Marketing Association, 6 East 43rd Street, New York, N.Y., 10017. The organization has an action line to handle mail order problems. After their intervention, if the problem is diagnosed as mail

fraud, it is turned over to postal authorities.

If a mail order is not received within 30 days, and the firm has neglected to inform the customer of a shipping delay, the money order can be

returned to the customer.

MAIL order companies must ship most orders within the promised time or offer a refund. If a customer wants a refund, the company is obliged to comply with the request.

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