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Recent Legislative Activity

Kevin Riley

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RECENT LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY

by Kevin Riley

Internet *In Fieri*

The title of this section, "Internet *In Fieri*," refers to the Internet in a state of growth or development. Just as adolescence is a period of radical change in our growth as individuals, so too is the adolescence of the Internet becoming a period of vast changes with inevitable growing pains.

While the battle over regulation of information content is being debated in the courts, the Internet continues to evolve and expand its influence. Therefore, the myriad consumer interest web sites is of little surprise and illustrates one of the truly useful aspects of the Internet, dissemination of information to the public.

It is no secret that the consumer advocate's greatest weapon may be the educated consumer. This section explores some of the consumer oriented resources available online, where individuals can go to educate themselves on issues which perhaps most directly affect their daily lives. As information becomes more and more of a commodity in and of itself, it too becomes increasingly important for consumers to remain capable of disseminating this tidal wave of input. Whether by a private organization, concerned individual, or the state and federal government, consumers now have access to incredible resources on the Net.

For those who are not already familiar with the Internet, the terminology alone can be daunting. Unfortunately, it would be quite difficult to comment on consumer resources on the Internet without indulging in some degree of technobabble. Briefly, some terms which will be used

in this section:

Web page, page, or site - These refer to the actual location where the information is stored. This location will be in the form of a "page" which contains text and/or graphics.

Uniform Resource Locator ("URL"), or Address - Indicates the code used to locate the desired web page on the Internet.

Link - Indicates a special type of text known as hypertext, which is usually underlined and in a different color from other text. Links provide access to other web pages by taking the user to another, predetermined site on the Internet. Transference is facilitated by pointing the mouse on a link and clicking the mouse-button.

Frequently Asked Question ("FAQ") - The FAQ refers not only to a commonly posed inquiry, but to a structure for posting those questions and their answers in a place for others to view them as well. The questions and answers are usually posted in a message board format, and can prove a invaluable resource for learning about an unfamiliar web page or topic.

General consumer information resources

The Internet Advocacy Center

Created by the California Alliance For Consumer Protection, this site boasts a wide variety of consumer information and resources. This web page is also exceptionally interactive, providing numerous E-mail addresses, links, message boards, FAQs, and consumer polls. This site con-

tains information on Automobile Lemon Laws in various states, the legislative agenda information, access to domestic violence resources, and many links to web pages hosted by other consumer advocacy groups. URL - <http://www.consumers.com>

Internet Scambusters

This service is provided by two individuals at NETrageous, Inc., an Internet business advisory company. The Internet Scambusters is actually a free electronic magazine ("e-zine"), and offers users the ability to register their E-mail addresses for delivery of the publication. Internet Scambusters reports on various consumer fraud schemes either those directly perpetrated on the Internet or by more conventional means. URL - <http://www2.scambusters.org/scambusters/>

CyberCop Complaint Center

Utility Consumers' Action Network ("UCAN"), a consumer advocacy organization based in San Diego, California, launched the CyberCop Complaint Center in July of 1996. The site provides a variety of consumer services, including an interactive form for posting Internet-related consumer complaints, a library of consumer alerts and tip sheets; a "Holding Cell" list of suspected Internet bad actors; an Internet Service Provider ("ISP") Rating Site, where visitors may grade their ISPs and view ratings provided by others; and archives of UCAN position

papers, filings and press releases on a wide range of Internet telecommunications and utility issues. Utility Consumers' Action Network and CyberCop Complaint Desk: URL - <http://www.ucan.org/>

Electronic Privacy Information Center

The Electronic Privacy Information Center ("EPIC") is a Washington, D.C. based advocacy group active in promoting privacy and freedom of information issues. This web page provides information on many of EPIC's latest lobbying and litigation efforts, as well as the status of various hot topics in the information and the Internet. This site presents an advocate's point of view on many of the issues covered. Updated frequently, this site is an excellent source for learning about the current battle grounds in information freedom and privacy. URL - <http://www.epic.org/>

The Better Business Bureau

This site is hosted by the Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc., which is made up of over 150 state and local bureaus throughout the United States and Canada. The Better Business Bureau's mission is "[T]o promote and foster the highest ethical relationship between businesses and the public[.]" This site attempts to facilitate that goal online. It provides numerous consumer oriented resources, including an extensive explanation of the Bureau's creation, structure, and its sources of funding. There is also a library of other re-

sources on a variety of consumer issues, as well as reporting and question submission functions. The BBB Online is a new Internet related effort by the Bureau which provides a means for policing businesses operating on the Internet. This new initiative addresses some of the present privacy and safety concerns with online consumerism, and provides a means for reporting abuses to the Bureau. URL - <http://www.bbb.com>

U.S. Consumer Protection Resources

This page is simply a listing of links to various consumer oriented web pages. With listings from debt counselors, to consumer law, to fraud prevention, this site provides a number of choices for researching consumer issues. URL - <http://www.contact.org/usconsu.htm>

Consumer law online

Nolo Press Self-Help Law Center

This site is a series of pages set up by Nolo Press, a private self-help legal publishing company. In addition to providing online purchases of Nolo Press publications, this site offers several pages of free consumer information. Particular material includes information on areas of travel, insurance, legal malpractice, and car buying; this site offers valuable consumer information in a very accessible format. Information on patent, copyright, and trademark law is also pro-

vided with a self-help focus. URL - <http://www.nolo.com/index.html>

Legal Information Institute

Just one of many informative web pages provided by the Legal Information Institute of Cornell Law School ("LII"), this site provides access to the Uniform Commercial Code on the Internet. The U.C.C. is presented in a simple format, and may not be extremely accessible to the lay reader. However, the LII provides a great deal of legal information which includes a United States Supreme Court decision reporting service, providing same day E-mail delivery of Supreme Court decisions, as reported by the Court's Reporter of Decisions. URL - <http://www.law.cornell.edu/index.html>

The U.S. House of Representatives Law Library

The United States House of Representatives Internet Law Library provides access to both the United States Code and the Code of Federal Regulations, as well as links to numerous other law related resources on the Internet. In addition to U.S. law, this site directs the individual to, among other things, laws of local jurisdictions, information on numerous law schools, and access to legal services. This site is one of the most comprehensive law related sites available on the Internet. URL - <http://law.house.gov/>

Government agencies

Consumer Prices Indexes

Provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this site is an extensive guide to consumer price indexes in the United States. In addition to the sources and uses of statistical data which comprise the various consumer price indexes, this site includes an explanation of these indexes and how they relate to our daily lives. The most useful information to individuals lacking statistician training can be found in the extensive FAQ page, that can be accessed from the CPI home page. URL - <http://stats.bls.gov:80/cpihome.htm>

The Federal Trade Commission

The Federal Trade Commission's home page not only explains the mission and functions of the FTC, but provides the reader with frequent updates on FTC activities and initiatives. This site contains much more of a consumer focus than many of the federal government sites currently available, and does an excellent job of presenting itself in a non-technical manner. The ConsumerLine page contains several resources devoted to reporting on consumer fraud, and educating the consumer on avoiding fraud. This site also contains information on antitrust and competition issues, as well as consumer protection rules and guidelines. URL - <http://www.ftc.gov>

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

The Consumer Product Safety Commission's web page is another in the list of well constructed, informative, and concise web pages currently being published by the federal government. This site, like most government pages, informs the consumer of the Commission's mission, structure, and history. The Commission provides a library of relevant publications as well as a search engine for quickly locating information on their pages. This site also provides the consumer with the ability to report consumer product safety concerns directly to the Commission online. URL - <http://www.cpsc.gov>

Editor's note: As of publication date, the aforementioned sites were active. •