

RESCUE SQUADS

BY SAMANTHA LEVINE

The brand-new computer sizzled and fizzled. The roofer's handiwork led to an indoor flood of biblical proportions. The HMO won't send you a copy of your medical records even though they charged a copying fee to your credit card. You've written letters, sent E-mails, left voice mails filled with phrases like "no choice but to call a lawyer." And nothing. Zilch. Not a whit of satisfaction did you get.

As newweeklies like to say: You are not alone. A number of reputable groups and individuals stand ready to take your case.

Historically, consumers with complaints have turned to Uncle Sam and friends: the Federal Trade Commission, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and state attorneys general or local district attorneys. Budget cuts have taken a toll, but these groups still soldier on.

AB-SURD. The 89-year-old FTC uses a massive database of consumer complaints to squash scams. Victims may even get some restitution. In "Project ABSurd," which began in May 2002, the FTC filed complaints against the companies marketing three electronic abdominal exercise belts—Fast Abs, AbTronic, and Ab Energizer—after consumer complaints that the devices did not create the promised "six-pack abs." (Whodathunkit?) "The claims were outrageous," says Heather Hipsley, assistant director of the FTC's advertising practices division. A few weeks ago, the FTC slammed the ab scammers, winning a \$5 million settlement to give consumers some portion of their money back.

"Every complaint," says FTC spokeswoman Lois Greisman, "is potentially the one we've been looking for." The FTC accepts complaints online (www.ftc.gov), by snail mail (Federal Trade Commission, CRC-240, Washington, DC 20580), or at (877) 382-4357. You'll hear back only if your complaint is used in a larger case.

The CPSC, which protects consumers from the hazards of everyday products,



is itself suffering from the hazards of budget cuts. The employee roll is down to 471 full-timers, an all-time low. That's bad news for efforts to modernize, but the agency is still effective: In June, more than 1 million car seat carriers were recalled because of faulty handle locks that can break and flip infants to the ground. The CPSC processes about 10,000 reports of product-related injuries and deaths per year. Gripe by E-mail (hazard@cpsc.gov), phone (800-638-2772, Ext. 650), fax (800-809-0924), or letter (U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Injury Report, Washington, DC 20207). After reading your complaint, the CPSC sends a letter describing how it may use the information and gives you a chance to make additions or corrections. If you have fingered a manufacturer, the CPSC will send your complaint to the company, which may respond directly to you. If the CPSC does a more comprehensive probe—that happens with only a few cases—an investigator will contact you by phone or mail.

If Penelope the Plumber stiffes you, try a local consumer protection agency, district attorney, or your state's attorney general. But you may need to be patient. Budget cuts forced the Sacramento, Calif., district attorney's office to "just stop taking cases for four months," says Russ Detrick, head of the office's consumer division. That situation turned around in July, but Detrick says that they'll still "have to scrutinize the cases we take a lot more. There have to be more victims."

Even in tough times, consumer protection bureaus can be seriously hands-on. In Montgomery County, Md., a resident's complaint that his water heater installation was too expensive triggered a visit from a county investigator and a plumbing expert. They deemed the price reasonable but will still investigate the company that did the work—it never got a county permit or inspection. "It's critical that people complain," says Eric Friedman, investiga-

tive administrator for the county's division of consumer affairs. "They are our eyes and ears." For a list of state and local programs, go to www.pueblo.gsa.gov/crh/state.htm.

Among nonprofit crusaders, the Better Business Bureau is the most well known—and the busiest. The 124 BBB offices nationwide have seen complaints shoot up by more than 50 percent in the past two years to more than 626,000. Among the fastest-growing subjects of complaint are confusing cellphone plans, Internet services, and computer dealers. A new online complaint form also has boosted the numbers. That has meant longer turnarounds for answers. To deal with the backlog, the Dallas bureau, which received 17,671 complaints last year—the highest total in 10 years—provides "express" handling for \$20 to folks who don't want to wait up to six weeks or so for resolution.

Some irate consumers are so tired of "free" help, they're willing to pony up cash to a handful of Web sites that pester companies for you. Your money buys a little more follow-up than you might get from a government or nonprofit group. Attorney Carl Shoolman's cx.org made the difference for one annoyed consumer. In this case, a client tried to get a refund from Sears after ordering a garage-door opener—and get-

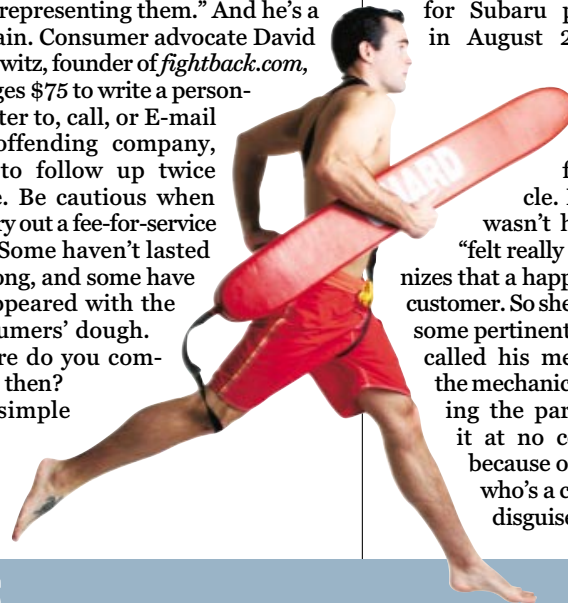
ting a deep-fat fryer instead. The man called Sears several times. The company told him to purchase another opener and said that if it found the first one, it would refund its cost. The flummoxed deep-fat fryer owner contacted Shoolman, who was able to direct a letter to the right person at Sears. The company made the refund.

PIT BULLS. Shoolman says the customer service reps probably aren't programmed to stonewall customers, but their "job is to get yelled at all day and say no." The \$43 fee Shoolman charges pays for his loyalty: "It's the only way consumers can be sure that we are fully representing them." And he's a bargain. Consumer advocate David Horowitz, founder of fightback.com, charges \$75 to write a personal letter to, call, or E-mail the offending company, and to follow up twice more. Be cautious when you try out a fee-for-service site. Some haven't lasted too long, and some have disappeared with the consumers' dough. Where do you complain then?

A simple

online rant might get you satisfaction—and won't cost a penny. The Web is full of sites where disgruntled folks dump on the source of their discontent. And the corporate world is a little nervous about bad Internet karma. Most companies ignore the "sucks" sites like sucks500.com, which posts laments on everything from George W. Bush to Microsoft. But they monitor sites like complaints.com and thecomplaintstation.com, and once in a great while, they take unsolicited action.

As Subaru's quality control and training leader, Patricia Mickel spends 10 hours a week trolling the Net for Subaru problems. One day in August 2001, she found a Subaru owner venting on car Web site edmunds.com about a broken differential on his vehicle. He said that Subaru wasn't helping him. Mickel "felt really bad." She also recognizes that a happy customer is a loyal customer. So she E-mailed him, asked some pertinent questions, and then called his mechanic. Eventually, the mechanic confessed to damaging the part and agreed to fix it at no cost. And it was all because of a corporate captain who's a consumer crusader in disguise. ●



OH COME, ALL YE HELPLESS

No, they won't lend a hand if the dog ate your tax return. But these groups promise a measure of aid for folks with legit gripes.

GROUP	HOW IT WORKS	FEE	COMMENT
PlanetFeedback www.planetfeedback.com/consumer	Fill out a form and the Feedbackians turn it into a well-phrased letter you can send via E-mail or snail mail. They even tell you the best person to send it to.	None. To survive, they sell consumer data to corporations.	Too busy (or too intimidated) to write your own letters? You've got nothing to lose.
Better Business Bureau www.bbb.org , (703) 276-0100	Has online complaint forms. The BBB forwards the complaint to the company, requesting resolution. Typically a three-week time lag before a response comes.	Free online; two chapters charge for phone help.	If a company doesn't reply, BBB can only note that fact in its records.
Call For Action www.callforaction.org , (301) 657-8260	They'll assign one of their 1,200 volunteers to your case until it's resolved.	None.	Partners with TV stations in 22 cities. Strong on telemarketing scams and Internet fraud.
Fight Back! www.fightback.com	Founded by TV journalist David Horowitz. His group considers your complaint and takes it on if it seems you have a case.	\$75 to pursue a complaint, \$25 to answer a question	Horowitz's reputation carries clout. Maybe that's why his picture is plastered all over the site.
ConsumerXchange www.cx.org , (585) 271-7170	Lawyer Carl Shoolman promises to pursue a case with letters and phone calls until you get an offer you deem acceptable.	\$43	Limited track record, but anyone who can get AOL to correct a billing error deserves consideration.
Complaints.com www.complaints.com	You post your complaint for all to see (and if you're so inclined, you can share this fact with the target of your wrath).	None.	For people who want to vent (and hope someone will notice). — <i>Channing Joseph and Jennifer Bauser</i>