



The European Consumer Centre is always searching for additional ways to help resolve consumer problems. We are now working with an online dispute resolution service (ODR) on a trial basis, in order to offer an additional means of redress. See below for more details.

Our consumer query this month comes from a consumer who has their eye on a bargain camper van.

If you have had a problem with a purchase of goods or services from another EU country, please contact us on 01 8090600 or at info@eccdublin.ie. For information on your consumer rights in Europe, see www.eccdublin.ie.

Rosaleen Quinlan

Editor

1. What's bothering you?

I read somewhere that you are now offering an ODR service? What is ODR and how could it help me?

Problems with purchases in another European country can usually be resolved via the network of 29 European Consumer Centres. If a problem cannot be resolved by the ECC network, the alternative of a cross-border court action is costly, difficult, and often impractical. As we are always seeking new means of assisting consumers, we have now begun a trial of an online dispute resolution service (ODR) for problems with online purchases of goods from UK websites. In ODR, an independent mediator will try to reach an agreement by liaising with both parties online, allowing for speedy and effective resolution of disputes.

How does it work?

If ECC Ireland cannot resolve the problem, it can now send the case for mediation to an online dispute resolution (ODR) service. An independent mediator will gather any further

information needed from the consumer online, through a specialised web page. He/she will then communicate with the consumer and the business in question in order to reach an agreeable settlement. Both parties communicate only with the online mediator and so any potential hostility is avoided. The service is free and totally confidential. If this ODR channel fails, other options are still open to the consumer e.g. litigation. For the trial period (Feb- July 2008), the ODR facility will be available to consumers' who have unresolved problems with goods bought on UK websites. (Airline bookings are not included in the trial).

2. Consumer query of the month

I'm retiring next year and my wife and I are looking forward to traveling around Europe. I'm thinking about buying a camper van, as it will save us money on hotels and allow us great flexibility. I've found a great deal on the internet. The dealer is based in France and I am planning to fly over, check it out and buy it if I can. Do you think that this is a good idea?

I think that this is a great idea.... if you are careful. We have had calls from consumers who have bought similar products from dealers in other European countries. It often emerges that the consumer has happily signed the contract of sale, thinking only of the money that they have saved. The contract is in a language that the consumer doesn't understand, and he/she doesn't even know what the contract says! Something later goes wrong, and the terms and conditions of the contract become critically important in advising them. For example, the contract may be a 'trade-only' one i.e. the purchaser is assumed to be a business and so consumer law will not apply to his/her situation.

Never sign a contract if you do not understand its contents or have not read it. Have it translated if necessary – you may find that your 'bargain' comes at a higher price than you thought. You need to know exactly what comeback you have from the vendor if something goes wrong. While there is legislation in place which may assist the consumer if there is a problem, it is also vital that the individual contract is properly understood.

You should also of course remember that if you bring a vehicle into Ireland from abroad you must register it and pay VRT by the end of the next working day following its arrival

in the State. More information is available on the Revenue website at:
<http://www.revenue.ie/index.htm?/leaflets/vrt1.htm>

The European Consumer Centre is funded by the European Commission and the National Consumer Agency.

Disclaimer: Whilst every effort is made to ensure accuracy, the European Consumer Centre cannot be held responsible for matters arising from any errors or omissions contained in this publication. The information provided is intended as a guide only and not as a legal interpretation.