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Shopping The Web For Consumer Law

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The Web is like America -- a consumer's paradise. And here in the land of plenty, online and off, we want the goods, and the good legal information to go with 'em. What should shoppers and small businesspeople know about laws governing the sale and purchase of retail merchandise? This week, invest a few moments at law shops in Web town hawking valuable information to help businesses and consumers appreciate their rights and duties in the great American marketplace.

Start with the basics -- food, beverages, medicine, cosmetics. Who's making sure it's all consumer-ready and safe? Meet the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration**, one of the nation's oldest consumer protection agencies. The **FDA** (yes, it's part of the **Department of Health and Human Services**) monitors one trillion dollars worth of products per year and regulates 95,000 businesses.

The agency watches over the production, ingredients, safety and packaging of food, cosmetics and prescription drugs as well as food and drugs for farm critters and pets. It also oversees safety of the nation's blood supply, radiation-emitting products such as microwave ovens, medical devices and more. Busy, busy, busy.

So eat your green and blues, powder your nose, take two aspirin with a fresh glass of juice and pop over to the FDA's Web store for updates, news, fact sheets, regulations and more for businesses and consumers. Find out about everything from the shelf life of cosmetics (one to three years generally, but no current regulations require that manufacturers supply this information) to food label reform. (Incidentally, according to the FDA, "In 1202, King John of England proclaimed the first English food law, the Assize of Bread, which prohibited adulteration of bread with such ingredients as ground peas or beans." **Law Buzz** loves this sort of tasty legal tidbit.)

Browse a big display case of **laws enforced by the FDA** (including such regulatory gems as the **Egg Products Inspection Act** and the **Lead Based Paint Poisoning Prevention Act**).

And retailers, don't miss the **Small Business Guide to FDA**. The **FDA** online is a buyer's market of consumer-related legal bargains.

Next, steer your cart over to the **Better Business Bureau** (BBB). The **BBB** is on a mission "to promote and foster the highest ethical relationship between businesses and the public through voluntary self-regulation, consumer and business education, and service excellence." Offerings include reliability reports on businesses and charities, scam alerts, buying guides, ethics and advertising guidelines, and dispute resolution services. And from this main site zip over to a **bureau office** serving your area.

Get comfortable with the **Consumer Products Safety Commission**,

the independent federal agency that protects the public from unreasonable risk of injury or death from 15,000 types of consumer products "from automatic-drip coffee makers to toys to lawn mowers." Deadly bean bag cushions, choking baby rattles, flammable sleepwear, there's no limit to the consumer hazards worrying the CPSC. The Commission posts product warnings, **recall notices**, tips, publications on child and home safety, reports, and even a guide to throwing a "**baby safety shower**." Businesspeople keep up with **guidance, regulations and other information** for manufacturers, retailers and distributors.

Cars are big ticket consumer goods. And some of them are lemons. **Law Buzz** could pucker up and spend a whole week sampling lemons law sites and consumer resources for unhappy car buyers. But make your own lemonade with these sweet offerings that satisfy consumers when the car deal goes sour. Start with an overview of warranties, lemon laws and car buyers rights, along with a good mix of lemony links on **The Lemon Car Page** from the law offices of T. Michael Fink. On **Autopedia's** bright yellow **Lemon Law Information and Sites**, sample California's lemon law and follow links to summaries and full text of the lemon laws in each state. And keep in mind many state lemon laws do not apply to motorcycles. Here's a roaring roundup of **Motorcycles & State Lemon Laws**.

While you're peeling out, make a pit stop for crash test scores, safety features data or theft ratings for cars, trucks, vans or sports utility vehicles. And air your complaints or questions about motor vehicles, child car seats and air bags. Where? At the **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration** (NHTSA), of course, the arm of the **Department of Transportation** that oversees motor vehicles safety. **NHTSA** also concerns itself with fuel economy standards, drunk drivers, odometer fraud, vehicle theft and more. And while you're there, check for **recalls**, file a **defect report** or search the **complaints database** at the **NHTSA** Office of Defects Investigation.

Consumers of everything and anything need legal information. At **The Consumer Law Page**, The Alexander Law Firm, representing consumers in cases involving defective products, toxic chemicals, consumer fraud and other legal areas, presents a substantial collection of the firm's articles along with government and corporate guides and publications for interested, injured, angry or just curious consumers. Stroll the aisles at **The Consumer Law Page** for information on generic drugs to video games, warranties to water treatment units and more.

Here's a hidden treasure: Dig into the **1998-99 Consumer's Resource Handbook** from the Consumer Information Center of the U.S. General Services Administration. The Handbook is brimming over with tips on how to shop smart and avoid fraud. It features a comprehensive directory of links to and contact info for consumer rights organizations as well as state and local **consumer protection offices**.

The **National Consumer Law Center** works on a range of legal and policy issues addressing the needs of lower income consumers.

Tobacco is a hot product, and not just for smokers. The **FDA's Children & Tobacco** site offers information for retailers and consumers on federal regulations governing the sale of tobacco to children and adolescents. **FDA** rules prohibit retailers from selling cigarettes, loose cigarette tobacco, and smokeless tobacco to anyone under age 18, and require retailers to verify by means of photo identification the age of anyone under age 27 who wants to buy these products.

On the state level if you are interested in the latest in the battles over smoking rights, blaze a trail over to **State Tobacco Information Center** as attorneys general across the country sue the tobacco industry to recover medical costs associated with treating tobacco-related disease. Former Maine Attorney General Jim Tierney presents a library of legal documents in these pending actions. Wear your asbestos gloves or bring your lawyer. And don't inhale.

What about wired fraudsters, scammers, con artists and quacks? You know they're out there. Can the Web help protect consumers from devious and dastardly bandits out to swindle cash from innocent deal hunters and other shoppers? Bet on it. Here's an outpost for unmasking hustlers both online and off: The **National Fraud Information Center** (NFIC), a project of the National Consumers League (which bills itself as "America's oldest consumer organization").

Drop by and wise up. The fraud busters offer a safe house for information, news, articles and advice on telemarketing scams and dirty digital deals. The NFIC compiles incident reports and invites victims of fraud and observers of suspicious behavior to report in.

And before you e-shop until you drop at the cybermall near you, eyeball **Internet Fraud Watch** for the latest Net sucker deals to look out for. And don't be fooled by online pyramid schemes, work-at-home plans, prizes/sweepstakes or other "deals" that seem to drop out of the virtual sky. If it sounds too good to be true, it's probably an e-scam.

The **Federal Trade Commission** also watches over the marketplace and stocks its Web shelves with publications and alerts for consumers, and rules and guides for businesses. Watch out for the "**dirty dozen**" -- 12 scams most likely to arrive via bulk e-mail. Stop in for the latest on labeling requirements for alternative fuels. Polish up your knowledge of rules for the jewelry industry. And use the **electronic complaint form** to report consumer fraud.

Buying artwork? Here's some sketchy background on the FBI's **National Stolen Art File**. Unfortunately, the feds do not make this computerized file available on the Web. **Law Buzz** says, tsk, tsk.

So be savvy and always get what you pay for. Tap into the online legal offerings that help you become a smarter consumer. And remember, you have the right to consume all the legal information on the Web.

Jesse Londin, Esq.

Jesse ("Buzz") Londin is a lawyer, writer, online editor and Web forum host. She lives in New York where she sometimes sleeps but her browser windows never close. Jesse would love to hear your comments and questions. (And yes, you can call her Buzz.)

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