

Monday, 18th January 2010

MORE COMPLAINTS WHEN TIMES ARE TOUGH

More SA consumers sought help last financial year, with complaints to the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs climbing past six thousand for the first time.

Minister for Consumer Affairs Gail Gago says the financial pressures felt by both consumers and traders may have led to increased numbers.

“It’s been a tough year financially for South Australian consumers and businesses and this may be one reason why OCBA has seen such a dramatic jump in calls and complaints,” says Minister Gago.

Complaints in 2009 totalled more than 6,030 compared with 5,625 the previous year.

Minister Gago says “In the past consumers would have written off some of their losses, but in more recent times they’ve had to fight for every dollar if they’ve experienced difficulty with a trader.”

Complaints about consumer products topped the list, overtaking scams and building and renovation concerns. The top 5 complaints lodged during 2009 were:

1. General consumer products (1,665) - e.g. *clothes, furniture, electrical goods*
2. Scams (1,020)
3. Building/renovating (995)
4. General services (970) - e.g. *fitness centres, training providers*
5. Communication and information (555) - e.g. *telephone, Internet, computers*

Common concerns were about the quality of products or services and contractual disputes.

“Many consumers also complained about misrepresentations made by traders and the sales tactics used, which suggests that some traders felt under greater pressure to keep their business ticking over during difficult times,” says Minister Gago.

The majority of complaints were resolved with consumers receiving full or partial redress, and the Minister encourages consumers to contact OCBA if they need help negotiating with a trader.

“Sometimes just being clear about what your legal rights are can make all the difference in getting a problem resolved,” says the Minister.

OCBA also responded to more than 93,000 enquiries; the majority from consumers wanting to find out about their rights and responsibilities, and some traders also phoned for advice.

Serious matters raised through consumer complaints or detected during OCBA's ongoing monitoring of South Australian traders resulted in further investigation and enforcement action, including formal warnings, written assurances from traders, expiation notices and prosecutions.

To report any fair trading concerns consumers can contact OCBA on 8204 9777, or for country callers 131 882. Further information about consumer rights and responsibilities is available at www.ocba.sa.gov.au