

Background Briefing

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) works to maintain the highest standards in advertising by taking action to prevent ads from being misleading, harmful or offensive. Visit www.asa.org.uk for more information about our activities, to view the Advertising Codes or to access our database of adjudications.

Overseas mailings

Problem mailings

Many UK consumers are on the receiving end of 'scam' e-mails sent from outside the UK. The most useful advice we can offer consumers is "if a claim looks too good to be true it normally is"!

The content of scam mailings originating outside of the UK usually fall into one of the following categories:

- Big wins - promotions that wrongly suggest that the recipient has won a major prize and asks them to send money to claim that prize
- Miracle creams and pills - health, beauty and slimming products for which 'miracle' claims are made
- Psychic mailing - clairvoyants, lucky charms or other superstitions for which unproven claims are made seeking to exploit the vulnerability of those who may be down on their luck

Don't respond

Many of the mailings are cleverly designed and can look like official correspondence. The scam lottery mailings inform recipients they have won a large prize, but in order to claim the prize they must first submit an administration fee so the funds can be released. A genuine lottery win would not require you to pay to have your funds 'released' and consumers should not respond to such requests. Consumers who respond to overseas mailings are very likely to have their details passed, rented or sold to other direct marketers and may quickly find they are inundated with similar mailings requesting money.

What you can do to reduce overseas mail?

Do not respond to the mailing if you have any doubts about the legitimacy of the offer or the advertiser.

Try returning the mailings to the company sending them along with a covering letter asking to be removed from their mailing list.

If you want to reduce all postal marketing material including those from the UK, register with the Mailing Preference Service (details can be found at the end of this briefing).

Complain

If you wish to complain about the content of a mailing or if you have asked to be removed from a mailing list and you are still receiving mailings make a complaint to the ASA.

What can the ASA do?

Unfortunately, there is no direct action the ASA can take against mailings that originate abroad. The advertising Codes we administer apply only to the British Isles and advertisers based abroad are under no obligation to comply with the UK advertising Codes. However, we are able to refer some complaints about overseas mailings to our equivalent regulatory bodies abroad, via the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA), of which the ASA is a member. In the majority of cases complaints will be forwarded to the appropriate regulatory body and we'll inform the complainant of any response, once we receive it. This process can be rather lengthy and there are no guarantees that they will be able to resolve the issue.

Working with others

The ASA and other regulatory bodies such as the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) are aware of the problems and distress that these overseas mailings can cause, especially to vulnerable consumers. Together we are seeking ways both to maximise the effect of the present system and to explore what other means might be developed to do something about tackling overseas mailings that persistently mislead or offend UK consumers.

Where to go for further help and advice

Consumer Direct offers information and advice on consumer issues. Their regionally based advisors are specially trained to give practical advice on all kinds of issues and their website provides lots of practical advice on how to avoid becoming a victim of a scam - www.consumerdirect.gov.uk/watch_out/. To speak to an adviser call 08454 04 05 06.

Register with the **Mailing Preference Service** if you wish to reduce all direct mail, including mail sent from UK companies - www.mpsonline.org.uk or call 0845 703 4599.

To make a complaint to the **ASA** please complete our online complaints form at www.asa.org.uk/Complaints-and-ASA-action/How-to-complain.aspx or call 020 7492 2222.
