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Consumer Advisory Bulletin- August 2007

How to Deal With Credit Card Offers

Have you received a solicitation by mail or telephone offering you a new credit card? Should you sign up -- or tear it up? If you're interested, how do you "shop" for credit cards?

First of all, consider just saying, NO! Use a minimum number of credit cards to avoid falling into expensive credit card debt. Don't sign up for a credit card just to get so-called "free" items! Reduce your credit card solicitations by asking the credit reporting agencies not to sell your name to credit card marketers and others. Call 888-567-8688 or go to www.OptOutPrescreen.com to opt out of solicitations for two years, or permanently.

Second, if you are considering a card, shop and compare. Take your time. Get all the information before you decide whether to apply and which card to pick. Contact your financial institution or your current credit cards, and see if they will match other offers.

Key questions when you "shop" for a credit card:

- What are the interest rates? Cards often have multiple rates, stated as the APR, or annual percentage rate of interest. Very low advertised rates are usually only "teaser" rates, and a much higher regular rate kicks in after a few months.
- Are there steep "penalty" rates? Penalty rates may be triggered by as little as one late payment (even on a different credit card or other loan) and they can soar as high as 24% to 30% APR for some out-of-state card issuers. Check what triggers penalty rates and how long they apply.
- Are there other hidden fees? Most cards have cash-advance fees with no "grace period" -- interest charges start immediately. Late fees and over-the-limit fees can go as high as \$30 on some out-of-state cards. (Cards from Iowa issuers can't go that high -- another reason to consider cards from Iowa credit unions and banks.) See if the card charges an annual fee. Also, avoid expensive "add-on" items such as credit card protection plans, insurance, or buyers' clubs.

Manage your credit cards carefully to avoid expensive credit card debt. Pay on time and pay the full balance each month if you possibly can. Most credit card companies will not impose a finance charge (except on cash advances) if you pay in full before the due-date on your bill. Avoid "maxing-out" on cards or paying only the minimum amount due. For many more tips on how to avoid credit card hazards and how to choose the best credit card for you, go to: www.truthaboutcredit.com/roadmap.html.

To file a complaint, write to the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division, Des Moines, Iowa 50319. Call 515-281-5926 or 888-777-4590 (toll-free.) The web site is www.IowaAttorneyGeneral.org (click on "protecting consumers.")

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