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In 1 Year, Do-Not-Call List Passes 62 Million

Complaints About Telemarketers Pile Up

By Caroline E. Mayer
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The federal agency that runs the do-not-call list has reached a few numbers of its own.

In the year since the anti-telemarketing registry was officially launched, more than 62 million telephone numbers have been posted to the list, according to the Federal Trade Commission.

The FTC, which is celebrating the one-year anniversary today, said that as of Friday, 428,000 complaints had been filed against more than 130,000 companies said to have made telemarketing calls to numbers on the do-not-call list. About 200 companies are repeat offenders with 100 or more complaints each.

Telemarketers risk a fine of up to \$11,000 for each number they call on the list. But so far, the FTC has brought only one action, against a credit-repair firm that was allegedly masquerading as a nonprofit debt-negotiation firm to get around the government's do-not-call rules.

Lois Greisman, the agency's associate director, said there are "a whole lot of matters under investigation; the pipeline is full."

A recent survey on how well the do-not-call list was working showed that 87 percent of consumers who registered said they have received fewer phone calls. According to the study by the Customer Care Alliance, these consumers received an average 30 sales calls a month before the list was put into effect; now they are receiving six.

Consumers began signing up for the list on June 27, 2003, but telemarketers did not have to abide by it until October.

Although the industry has no precise numbers on the effect of the do-not-call list, its officials note that many call centers have cut back employees or closed as a result. And the \$103 billion in annual sales once made by telemarketers is expected to drop significantly.

The Direct Marketing Association, which represents the companies that make products sold by telemarketers, said the do-not-call list was working. "Most legitimate marketers are working hard to comply," said the association's president, H. Robert Wientzen. But, he said, that has meant a "loss of jobs and some companies closing." MCI, for example, announced in March that it was laying off 4,000 employees, or more than 7 percent of its workforce, because of the do-not-call list.

Wientzen said he would like to see more aggressive enforcement against the biggest offenders. "We

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certainly want to see those people prosecuted. They are taking advantage of the fact that everyone is complying and they want to get out there and beat the prosecution."

The do-not-call list is still facing a legal challenge. Although a U.S. appeals court has upheld its constitutionality, the American Teleservices Association, which represents many call centers, has asked the Supreme Court to review the decision.

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