

village view

by Andrea Leonard

What do you do when you've purchased a new stove, complete with a self-cleaning oven and a control panel making it look as complicated as the cockpit of a B-25, and the oven refuses to self-clean?

What do you do when you buy a new car and it ends up spending more time in the service department, at your expense, than in your driveway, awaiting your convenience?

What do you do when you've moved into your new house, complete with mortgage, a leaky cellar window, and four closet doors that either won't close or, if you get them shut, you can't open?

What do you do when you've had your livingroom carpeted, wall to wall, and now six months later you find the carpet is fading badly and one edge is fraying and worn?

What do you do when you've ordered merchandise through the mail, paid for it by check, and now after several months have passed, the thing has never arrived?

What do you do when your new-to-you second-hand-car develops a serious mechanical flaw while you're driving it home from the used-car-dealer's lot?

Do you have any recourse?

You can, of course, call the appliance dealer, talk with the automobile dealer, discuss your complaints with your builder, confront the rug salesman with your disappointments, write a follow-up letter to the mail-order house and hope for a reply, and discuss with the used-car broker his obligation to put the heap in running condition.

Let's hope, of course, you're not having all these problems at the same time. And let's hope, also, at least some of the people you're dealing with will without argument assume responsibility for inferior goods, repairs you need done, and fulfillment of their commitment to you.

In most instances, whoever sold you the stove will send a serviceman to put the oven in operating condition; the new car dealer will do his best to satisfy you; the builder will fix the cellar window and plane the doors to fit; and the store that sold the carpet will replace the areas that have faded and worn.

A great many mail-order houses are as reliable as your local grocery and, if your order didn't reach you, your money will be refunded or a duplicate order sent.

Even used-car salesmen will often make good on repairing a car they've just sold you. Since it's the law in Massachusetts that it's the seller's responsibility to sell products that work the way they are intended to work, most sellers honor their warranties.

As a matter of fact, most merchants are honest. Most businessmen value their reputations and realize their best customers are the ones who come back time and again because they've always been treated fairly.

Once in a while though, everyone gets stuck.

When we get stuck, we get angry. We get angry with the person we blame for taking advantage of us, and we also get angry with ourselves for being dumb enough to get stuck. And we turn that anger onto the other person, even when his intention wasn't to harm us in the first place.

When we get stuck, we blame ourselves for letting a sharp operator bamboozle us; in such cases, too often, we let a sharpie get away with it.

After all, it's embarrassing to admit you've been taken. It's humiliating to have the wool pulled over your eyes and to admit you were naive and got fooled.

If you just take your lumps and don't complain, however, you're only encouraging shoddy practices. If encouraged, they're bound to spread and more of us will be taken, more often. And there are ways you can fight back.

Waiting to hear from you in such instances is the Cape Cod Consumer Assistance Council, Inc., and its volunteer staff whose hands and hearts are offered free-of-charge to Cape consumers who need help.

What can they do that you can't? They can accomplish a lot on your behalf for several reasons. First, most of them were successful business people themselves, before retirement. They come from all walks of life; they have been practicing lawyers, bankers, nurses, secretaries and teachers, for

They are experienced in dealing with difficult human problems and they can recognize the difference between an honest misunderstanding and an attempt to trick you.

Secondly, as members of the Cape Cod Retired Senior Volunteer Program, they have received training in consumer education and protection. The course they've taken is offered by the Massachusetts Attorney General's staff, HEW, the FDA, and other experts.

Thirdly, when these people sit down with you to help you work out a solution they depend on one another's expertise. Because they are objective, they approach your problem logically, without anger or feelings of humiliation. They're ready to talk, in ways you can't, with the person you feel has robbed you.

Your feelings get in the way; you're angry, you look angry, you sound angry. The person you're talking with feels threatened and he becomes angry too. Finding good solutions isn't likely when two people are facing off, head to head and toe to toe, each ready to do battle.

An intermediary with no personal axe to grind can often do a lot to keep the fur from flying and bring about a satisfactory compromise, one fair to both parties.

For the past four years the Cape Cod Consumer Assistance Council has been helping people with consumer problems. The Council will help you, too, if you call them at 771-0700 or write P.O.Box 546, Hyannis, MA 02601. Their office in the School Administration Building at 230 South Street, Hyannis, is open from 9:00 to 3:00 Monday through Friday.

In addition to helping individuals, the Council also offers speakers for meetings of organizations and groups.

The Council is looking for volunteers willing to give from one hour to one day a week and also seeks contributions to permit its work to continue. At up-coming annual town meetings the Council will ask for financial assistance from Cape tax-payers.

What do they need money for if they're staffed by volunteers? For telephone bills so you can call them and so they can contact whomever you're complaining about. For stationery so they can write letters to you and for you. For postage. For reimbursing volunteers for gas they use to visit a merchant to discuss your problems.

The Cape Cod Consumer Assistance Council exists to provide help to you when you've done what you can to straighten out a problem, and you're still not satisfied, and are feeling frustrated and helpless.

Since its inception in March, 1972, the council has processed over 4,000 complaints, saving consumers well over \$50,000 in adjustments, refunds and credits. The savings in legal fees and court costs are incalculable but might easily add up to an amount nearly as great.

If you need help, call them. If you'd like to help others, call them. If you need a speaker, just call them.

Considering how much this group of retired persons is doing for citizens of all Cape towns, it might be quite appropriate to take affirmative action on their request for public funding.

You never know -- you could be the very next person needing help in a dispute with a merchant. Now, at least, there's a place to turn and people willing to assist you in finding solutions: The Cape Cod Consumer Assistance Council.