

Consumer

Swamped first week

County now has own consumer watchdog

By MARY BARNETT

Gloria Lorenzo, Santa Cruz County's first consumer affairs representative, is finding that there are a lot of irate consumers in Santa Cruz County.

She noted that the Santa Clara County department of consumer affairs had only 11 complaints from consumers during its first month of operation.

But Miss Lorenzo had received complaints from 14 individuals about 20 incidents—one unhappy woman had six—before she had been in office five days.

"And nobody knows I'm here yet except the district attorney's office," she said in a Green Sheet interview.

Complaints were received about faulty carpeting, misleading advertising, discourteous salespeople, misrepresented merchandise, undelivered merchandise, illegible cash register tapes, heavily-watered produce, and unfair chicken-packaging practices.

When word really gets out that she is in business, Miss Lorenzo expects to be swamped.

The consumer affairs division was created recently by the Board of Supervisors as part of the Department of Weights and Measures, which has now become the Department of Weights, Measures and Consumer Affairs.

Funds are provided by the federal Emergency Employment Act.

The new consumer's representative is a veteran Santa Cruz County newspaperwoman with seven years of experience as a KSCO reporter and another seven years experience as an employee of the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian. She was most recently employed with the Tuberculosis and Health Association.

Miss Lorenzo feels that her experience as an investigative reporter will be useful to her in her new job. She described her role as one of investigation, mediation, and public education.

As a last resort, she will refer consumer complaints to the district attorney's office for action against the offender. But

she hopes that most matters will be settled short of court action, she said.

Miss Lorenzo found her first complaint waiting for her when she came to work on Jan. 24. An Aptos man complained that not all of the carpeting he had paid for was color-matched. The rug company said it was up to the retailer to make the colors match.

"We sent the man a questionnaire," Miss Lorenzo said. "When we get it back, we will call the retailer, talk to the decorator, and get their version. If we get nowhere with them, we will go to the carpet company. And if we still get nowhere, we will go to the district attorney."

It will be a matter for the district attorney's office to decide whether the situation is a matter of poor business ethics or whether there has actually been a violation of the law.

An Aptos woman (Aptos people seemed to be having a lot of trouble) had a complaint about misleading advertising.

She received a telephone call from a photography studio asking her to answer some questions. They were very easy, and she answered them all correctly. She was congratulated and informed that she was entitled to an eight by 10 photographic portrait if she would just pay a \$12.50 delivery charge.

"As an extra bonus, she was entitled to a package vacation at Reno or Tahoe or one of those places," Miss Lorenzo reported. "She had to pay her own way, and when she got there she was supposed to attend some dinner and listen to a sales pitch to sell her some vacation property."

Checking out the complaint, Miss Lorenzo learned that there is a firm in the city of Santa Cruz that is licensed to operate in this manner. However, the city officials did not listen to the telephone pitch when they approved the license, she said.

"I'm going to drop by, listen to the phone pitch, and if it's the kind of thing that would be misleading, I'm going to suggest changes."

Leafing through her folder, Miss Lorenzo commented, "This is a bad one," and told the sad story of a young Soquel man, father of a new baby, who signed up with a shopping service with headquarters in San Jose.

He agreed to pay \$625 for the privilege of buying through this service, which advertised that its prices would be lower than those of any discount store.

"But he tried them eight times and found out their prices were not lower than other prices," Miss Lorenzo said. "When he tried to complain to the shopping service he found that it had moved to Roseville, and his contract had been sold to a finance company."

Miss Lorenzo referred the young man to Legal Aid, which found he was ineligible for its services, and to the Better Business Bureau in San Jose, "which was nasty to him."

Miss Lorenzo has sent him a questionnaire, and requested a copy of his contract for perusal by the district attorney's office, to determine if there has been a criminal violation. Meanwhile, the dissatisfied customer plans to contact complaint services of newspapers and radio stations serving the area.

On the basis of the complaints she has received already, Miss Lorenzo has some advice for the buying public.

"Remember there is no such thing as a freebee," she said. "Much as we'd all like to believe in Santa Claus, we never get something for nothing."

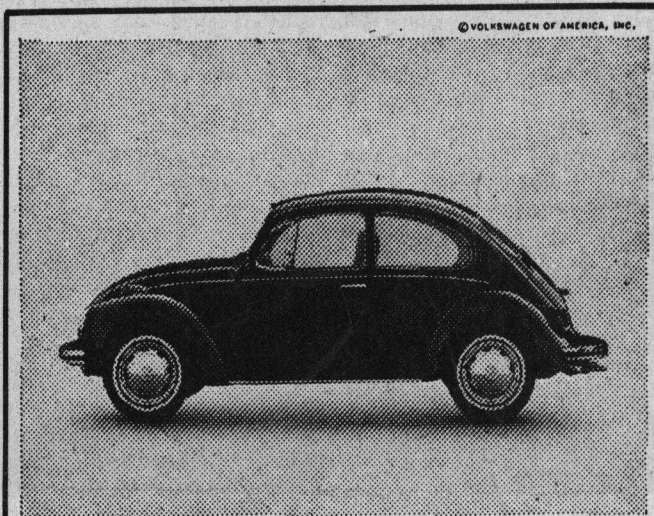
"Remember it's your telephone—you don't have to listen to that sales pitch if you don't want to."

"And always, always, read the fine print!"

Usually, she feels, the best and

fastest way for a consumer to solve a problem is to complain right away to the seller, because most business people give immediate attention to customer complaints.

But if this doesn't work, the next step is to call Consumer Affairs Representative Gloria Lorenzo at 425-2445 between 8 a.m. and noon or 1-5 p.m. weekdays.



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