

7-8-82

Dealing With The Hard Sell

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel Staff Writer

Joe Cortez thought something was suspicious about the door-to-door salesman who came to his Blackburn Street home Tuesday, offering to sell him educational books at a discount.

"I became suspicious when the salesman, who identified himself as Pedro Medina, said he would take my deposit money now and send me the books in September," Cortez recalled.

So Cortez decided to check out the salesman with the county office of consumer affairs, a division of the district attorney's office.

The result was swift.

Consumer Affairs watchdog Gloria Lorenzo, knowing that door-to-door selling is prohibited in the city of Santa Cruz, called police, who quickly dispatched an officer to the Blackburn Street home.

"When Medina saw the patrol car coming he said, 'I guess this is for me,'" said Cortez. "He was gone real fast."

Cortez said the officer gave Medina a warning to be gone and not to return.

"Door-to-door salesmen are a real problem," said Lorenzo adding that to her knowledge, the practice is prohibited in all four of the county's cities.

Often complaints are received months after people have bought items that were never sent, she observed. Then it is too late to do much.

As it turns out, Medina was working for The Southwestern Co., of Nashville, Tenn., which is licensed with the Direct Selling Association. That group attempts to monitor problems with door-to-door peddlers.

Medina is now living in Los Gatos, although he lists an address of Virginia. His landlord

said he doubts Medina was aware that what he was doing is illegal.

"He works really hard," the man said.

Nevertheless, door-to-door selling is illegal, and should be reported to police, said Lorenzo.

Cortez said when Medina approached him Tuesday afternoon, he appeared experienced in the hard-sell. Cortez said Medina told him he had been working in San Jose until a school teacher friend told him to come to Santa Cruz and give it a try.

Cortez said Medina was offering four books for sale for \$150, and claimed that the books would cost between \$350 and \$450 "over the counter."

Medina was selling two math books, a religious book and one on history, said Cortez. He added that he would have liked the books for his two young grandchildren.

Medina mentioned a lot of names of purported customers who had bought his books, said Cortez.

"He seemed to know people I knew by name," said Cortez.

This, and the fact that Medina did not identify himself right off, made Cortez suspicious.

When Cortez asked for an identification card, Medina showed him a letter from The Southwestern Co. and a surety bond from Los Gatos. The letter did not have Medina's name on it, said Cortez.

"He took out a receipt book and we started talking about money," said Cortez. Medina said some of his customers had already put down \$90 deposits on the books, but that the price of a deposit was negotiable.

When Medina said the books wouldn't be delivered until September, Cortez said he decided to make some calls.

He phoned the consumer affairs office because he had read in the newspapers about how people were getting ripped off, he said.

Cortez said he had a bad experience four years ago when a photographer took him for \$3. While it wasn't a lot of money, Cortez said he learned a valuable lesson.

"It never hurts to make a call and find out about these guys," he observed.

Lorenzo said door-to-door salesmen, where allowed, should follow several rules, including:

- Identifying themselves and their companies right off.

- Stating the kinds of goods being offered for sale.

- Letting customers know that there is a three-day right-to-cancel clause with any purchase over \$50.

- Providing a written contract or purchase offer.