

MoneySavingExpert.com

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Dear Will

On behalf of MoneySavingExpert (MSE) I would like to thank you for your invitation to contribute to the Digital Markets Taskforce's call for information.

We are delighted to see that while the Taskforce's focus is competition regulation, it also intends to consider the protection of consumers from online harms in its proposals. Our response to this call for information explains how and why the digital advertising marketplace specifically does not effectively safeguard consumers – resulting in victims too often losing thousands of pounds, and even life savings, to criminals, with no recourse of getting their money returned.

This issue was first brought to our attention more than three years ago due to the extensive fraudulent use of MSE Founder Martin Lewis's name and image. He is one of many public figures whose false endorsements are similarly used to scam consumers through dodgy 'investment' schemes, fake diet pills and more.

To give a small snapshot of the scale of the harm caused by these scams: every year, hundreds of MSE users report being targeted by fake advertising using Martin's image alone – last year we received 730 notifications. And that's of course just a fraction of the total, factoring in people reporting to other organisations, and indeed the multitude of adverts that go unreported. The scammers are sophisticated and the sums that victims lose are often devastating; the biggest loss that we have heard of directly is £56,000.

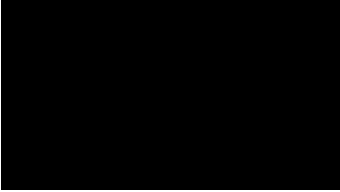
However, since we began campaigning on this matter, we have uncovered systemic issues – beyond the advertising platforms themselves – which allow these scams to take place. We have identified crucial gaps in protection leaving consumers out in the cold, including: a lack of meaningful regulation or governance; a lack of information-sharing across the board; toothless enforcement; and, until the creation of Citizens Advice Scams Action (which was set up as a direct result of campaigning by Martin Lewis and MSE), no one-to-one help for victims.

As well as talking to digital, regulatory, consumer protection and enforcement stakeholders, we have responded to several Government and regulator consultations with our evidence of the online harms posed to consumers in the digital marketplace – particularly those caused by the self-regulated, independent online advertising industry. Most recently, in May 2020, MSE was pleased to submit a full consultation response to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's call for evidence about online advertising. Given how recent, comprehensive and relevant the response is,

we wish to submit it in its entirety as our reply to this call for information. It is attached for the consideration of the Taskforce.

I would be very happy to discuss any of the issues in our response further.

Kind regards,



Kirsty Good
Head of Campaigns, MoneySavingExpert.com