Warm your heart this holiday!

Volunteer service pays back

Also inside:
• Dodge debit overdrafts
• Snag a job, not a scam
• Stay safe at the spa
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The holiday season holds special meaning for many of us. However, for scammers and rip-off artists, the season means additional opportunities to separate us from our money, our identity, and even our sense of security. It’s enough to turn ho, ho, ho into woe, woe, woe.

It doesn’t have to happen to you. This edition of the Consumer Connection magazine can help you focus on smart ways to shop and be safe this holiday. Here’s a sampling of the articles:

With California’s current double-digit unemployment continuing, it’s not surprising that one of the biggest trends in the world of cons is “employment fraud.” Bogus jobs that boast of big bucks made working at home, filling vending machines, stuffing envelopes and the like continue to snare people. We have tips on how to spot a job scam and where to get free assistance from pros, as close as your local library.

If you’re using your debit card while making the retail rounds, you know to keep an eye on your checking account balance to avoid your bank’s overdraft fees. But did you know that sometimes the bank’s processing methods can leave you at greater risk? (Hint: Float time when you write a check is a thing of the past.) And did you know that using a debit card at the gas pump can lead to an overdraft you may not anticipate? Read about it.

A relaxing massage, facial, or aromatherapy may be just what the doctor ordered this holiday season, but smart consumers need to know what they’re getting from whom. Some spa services such as laser hair removal and collagen injections are medical procedures and can only be done by licensed medical personnel—doctors and nurses. We help you figure out the licensing requirements and how to verify a person’s credentials.

This issue also looks at the phenomenon of the acai berry. Products containing the unusual tropical fruit are advertised in magazines and all over the Internet. Acai berries may or may not improve your health (experts are skeptical), but falling victim to an acai berry sales scam can really hit you where it hurts.

Finally, because celebrating the season can include reaching out to others, we present information and links to a statewide database to help you volunteer for a cause that’s rewarding and meaningful to you. In 2008, Californians contributed volunteer service hours to the tune of $18 billion. That’s a song that can warm hearts all year long.

I hope you find these articles valuable, not only as you prepare for the holidays, but as nuggets of information you can keep in mind year-round. Information found in the Consumer Connection is the best way to empower consumers to make wise decisions in the marketplace. And empowering consumers is one of the top priorities of the California Department of Consumer Affairs.

Happy Holidays!

Brian J. Stiger, Director
California Department of Consumer Affairs
Volunteer!
Service without a salary is worth billions

Mentoring children, cleaning up beaches and parks, building affordable housing, feeding the hungry, visiting seniors, caring for pets. These are some of the jobs performed every day by millions of Californians. For roughly 7.1 million of them, the job comes without a salary. They are volunteers. According to a study by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Californians over the age of 16 put in 989.2 million hours of volunteer work in 2008, totaling $18.4 billion in service (calculated at $20.25 per hour, based on estimates published by Independent Sector).

Experts say people volunteer for a number of reasons: personal growth, giving something back, learning new skills, dedication to a cause, or even to gain experience for a career. Whatever the reason, the key is to find the right opportunity to make a contribution that is lasting and meaningful for you and the people or organization you are helping.

According to the study, roughly one in every four people in California does volunteer work. Many people volunteer through faith-based groups or community-based organizations. Other people come forward when they hear of specific needs in their communities. Finding an organization or cause that could use your volunteer help became easier in California in 2006 with the creation of a Web site, www.CaliforniaVolunteers.org, which matches volunteers and organizations looking for them. The site is sponsored by CaliforniaVolunteers, the State office charged with managing programs and initiatives to increase the number and impact of Californians involved with service and volunteering.

The California Volunteer Matching Network, hosted at CaliforniaVolunteers.org, is the largest statewide online matching network in the country. The network lists more than 50,000 opportunities throughout the State involving the arts, education, animals, disaster preparedness, the environment, and other areas.

In addition, the CaliforniaVolunteers Web site has extensive information on disaster volunteering, including how to donate money during relief and recovery operations, how health professionals can register for service, and how to become trained through organizations such as the American Red Cross.

**Tax deductions**

The value of the time you spend working for a charity is not deductible on your income taxes (it is volunteer work, after all), but some of your expenses—such as transportation, uniforms, and out-of-pocket expenses—may be. Check with your tax professional or the Internal Revenue Service at www.irs.gov for specifics.
How to find a volunteer opportunity

1. **Go to www.CaliforniaVolunteers.org**

2. **Search by the type of work you’d like to do**
   - Animals and the environment (parks, humane societies, advocacy groups)
   - Arts and culture (theaters, museums, media, sports, recreation)
   - Children and youth (mentoring, reading, coaching)
   - Civic and community (development efforts, employment, business, support groups)
   - Education and technology (tutoring, literacy programs, libraries)
   - Faith-based organizations
   - Health (veterans hospitals, clinics, hospices)
   - Hunger, homelessness, and human services
   - Public safety and disaster preparedness (homeland security, emergency response, relief)
   - Seniors
   - All interest categories if you would like to browse a variety of topics

3. **Search by the type of opportunity**
   - One time/episodic
   - Ongoing
   - Full time

4. **Search by who you are**
   - Child or teen
   - Over 55
   - Group

5. **Search where to serve**
   - By zip code or by California county
   - By distance from your home or office

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**Other places to look**

In addition to CaliforniaVolunteers.org, opportunities can be found at [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov), a Federal agency that supports national service programs such as AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America. These programs provide people of all ages with service opportunities.
It’s a sinking feeling once you realize it’s gone. Your mind races as you think about the lost cash, credit cards, and personal information that could now be in the wrong hands.
For most of us, it's panic time as we run in circles looking for old credit card statements or furiously flip through the Yellow Pages trying to find the phone numbers needed to report lost or stolen cards. This delay could result in unauthorized charges on your credit cards or, even worse, identity theft that could take years to resolve.

Wouldn't it be better to have all the important contact information already in a secure place at home? Then, all you would need to do is make a few telephone calls to report the loss that should prevent unauthorized use of your cards, license, and personal information.

**What to do NOW**
Photocopy the entire contents of your wallet. Copy both sides of each license, credit card, debit card, club membership card, library card, etc. Transfer all this information to one sheet of paper. List all your cards, the credit card numbers, and their toll-free numbers so you'll know whom to call. Keep this list at home in a safe place where a family member can find it in case you're out of town. Now you will know exactly what you had in your wallet and will have all the account numbers and phone numbers to call to report your lost or stolen cards.

**What to do AFTER**
- As soon as you realize your wallet is lost, start calling your bank and credit card companies. If your checkbook is missing, you'll want to stop payment on any new checks, plus get new ATM and credit cards with new numbers.
- In addition to credit cards, place a fraud alert on your credit report by contacting the three major credit reporting agencies:
  - Equifax: (800) 525-6285
  - Experian: (888) 397-3742
  - TransUnion: (800) 680 7289
- File a police report immediately in the city where your wallet was either lost or stolen. Keep a copy of the report.
- If you carry your Social Security card with you or any other card that has your Social Security number on it, contact Social Security at (800) 772-1213. (Keep in mind, most experts advise consumers NOT to carry their Social Security card in their wallets).
- You'll need to go to a Department of Motor Vehicles office in person to replace your driver's license. To save time, make an appointment online at www.dmv.ca.gov. A replacement license will cost $22.
- If you have a library card, be sure to contact the library immediately. You could be held financially responsible for any material borrowed if the loss isn't reported immediately.
- If you carry a health insurance card in your wallet, be sure to let your insurance company know your card was lost or stolen.
- After a few weeks, you may want to get a free copy of your credit report to be sure no one has used your personal information. Go online to www.annualcreditreport.com for a free copy of your credit report. You can also call (877) 322-8228 to request your credit report by mail.

The California Office of Information Security and Privacy Protection has more information on what to do if you think you may be a victim of identity theft. Find the information online at www.oispp.ca.gov.
Job Hunters: Beware of Bogus Offers

If you’re out of work, it can be tempting to jump on attractive-sounding offers online or in classified ads before checking all the facts. But beware: Scammers are out in force, especially in tough economic times, hoping to hook those who may be increasingly desperate to find a job.

If you post your résumé online, scammers may be the quickest to respond to it and may even extend an “offer” without even meeting you. If the offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is. The most common employment scams require job seekers to pay money in advance.
for supplies or training materials, or to provide their personal information which is then used for identity theft.

Employment fraud has most often been associated with promotions for vending machine, display racks, medical billing, and some Internet-related businesses, says the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). According to the FTC, if an ad claims those who “buy in” can make a certain amount of money, the law says the promoter must give the number and percentage of previous purchasers who earned that particular income. If an earnings claim is there, but the additional information isn’t, contact the company and ask for it. The business opportunity seller who doesn’t provide the information may be violating the law.

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) warned recently about an employment scam using Twitter that required the purchase of an instructional CD-ROM, with a limited trial and cancellation period that actually began when the training material was ordered. Consumers didn’t have enough time to cancel, and were subsequently billed additional ongoing subscription fees.

Here’s how to protect yourself

Withhold sensitive information. First and foremost, don’t give out personal information until absolutely necessary. Don’t respond to requests for your name, address, or anything else in exchange for job details. If the employer and the opening are real, you can look up a phone number and call for additional information. Never turn over personal bank account information to a new or potential employer. Bank information is only necessary to sign up for direct deposit after you’re working for the company. Also think twice before responding to a photo request. Unless you’re applying for a modeling, acting, or similar job, your résumé should be enough for an interview.

Research the company. Investigate the company’s background through the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org) and the Secretary of State’s office (www.sos.ca.gov), and check with the California Department of Consumer Affairs (www.dca.ca.gov) to verify any required licenses. Conduct an Internet search for the company or hiring manager in question. Read every word on the company’s Web site: It should provide answers to the following questions: How long has it been in business? How long has the owner been in the business? How many employees and locations does it have? Where are these offices located? When researching a corporation, look for names of key personnel and investor relations links. An authentic company Web site would have this information and more, or have someone you can contact to ask. If not, look elsewhere for a job.

Don’t spend money to make money. Unless you’re investing in your education to further your career, this is a risky proposition. The BBB warns that job seekers should never have to pay money up front to be considered for a job. This includes job placement agencies or “headhunters.” Reputable staffing companies
and individuals will not charge you any fees for finding you employment. They are paid by their clients, who are the employers.

Go to the source. Legitimate offers of employment don’t come in an unsolicited e-mail. Scammers and spammers often use the same name, graphics, logos, and marketing language of real companies. Read the ads carefully—you’ll find bad grammar, misspellings, and other clues that challenge their legitimacy. Look at the contact information. Is there a brick-and-mortar address you can visit? Meet locally with a professional to discuss particulars or to sign anything.

Get full details. Never accept a position if you do not understand your compensation and benefits, and be sure to get the whole offer and job duties in writing. Any legitimate employer would be upfront about salary and commission figures and would let you talk with others employed by the program to learn their experiences.

Report fraud. If you think you’re being targeted or have been a victim of an employment scam, you can contact the FTC (www.ftc.gov), the California Attorney General’s Office (www.ag.ca.gov); or the U.S. Postal Inspection Service (https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov) which investigates mail fraud, such as scams or deceptive ads sent through the mail.

The job hunt

There’s free and low-cost help out there. Some of the best employment help out there is FREE. Don’t pay for services like résumé writing, mock interview videos, or job-hunt seminars until you’ve tried your local resources first. These include community-based career centers, city and county services (including libraries), churches, colleges and the California Employment Development Department (www.edd.ca.gov). EDD provides access to job fairs, one-stop career centers, and “Experience Unlimited,” a free program that provides a place where job seekers can meet regularly with other career professionals to share employment leads, provide support, and update their job search skills. In addition, its California Training Benefits Program allows eligible people receiving unemployment insurance benefits to keep their benefits while attending a training program approved by EDD. Other EDD resources include:

» Use of computers, printers, copiers, telephone, fax, and Internet.

» Workshops on job search strategies, résumés, interview techniques, and networking.

» Résumé evaluations and mock interviews.

» Networking opportunities.

» Access to online job listings.

» Online résumé postings through www.CalJobs.ca.gov.

In addition, JobStar Central (www.jobstar.org), fueled by the public library system, offers a wealth of services including tips on résumé and cover letter writing, salary information, employment listings, and other career research and advice. Remember that attending job search workshops not only allows you to increase your network, it’s also a forum for sharing information, advice, and frustrations with others.
Shining a light on window replacement

What’s wrong with single-pane windows?
Single-pane windows generally have poor insulating qualities and allow heat to escape in the winter and cool air to escape in the summer. Single-pane windows also do little to block outside noises such as barking dogs and traffic.

What are the benefits of new windows?
New, dual-pane windows can improve the appearance of your home and reduce outside noise. They can also save on home heating and cooling costs. For more details on the various types of dual-pane windows, visit the Flex Your Power Web site, www.fypower.org. Click on Residential and Product Guides.
How do I find someone to replace my windows?
Talk with friends or neighbors who recently had windows replaced in their home. If they had a positive experience with a specific contractor, consider calling that contractor. Get an estimate from at least three contractors licensed by the Contractors State License Board. Be sure to verify the contractor’s license online at www.cslb.ca.gov or by calling (800) 321-CSLB or (800) 321-2752. You can also check out a contractor through the Better Business Bureau (BBB) online at www.bbb.org, or by calling a BBB office in your area. When you decide on a window replacement firm, be sure to read the contract carefully and sign only if you understand the work that will be done and the cost. Do not make a down payment that is more than 10 percent of the bill or $1,000, whichever is less.

Are there government incentives or rebates available for replacement windows?
The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 offers incentives for improving your home’s energy efficiency. Through 2010, the tax credit for qualified energy efficient improvements has increased to 30 percent. If you purchase windows that qualify, you may be able to deduct 30 percent of the cost of the windows (a maximum of $1,500). Go online to www.energystar.gov/taxcredits for more information about tax credits. Not all windows qualify for the tax credit. Your local utility company may also have information on rebates or financing assistance. Check with your local utility for information or visit Flex Your Power online at www.fypower.org.

Will new windows help save money on home heating or cooling?
The energy savings depends on your climate and how much energy you use to heat or cool your home. The benefits of new windows will be greater in extreme weather climates than in mild climates like Los Angeles, San Diego, or the Bay Area. In a typical home, you can save $126 to $465 when replacing single-pane windows with Energy Star-qualified windows, according to Federal government estimates. View the approximate cost savings for various cities by going online to www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=windows_doors.pr_savemoney.
The most wonderful time of the year? Maybe. The most stressful time of the year? Absolutely. This year, the weight of the current economic climate has been added to the stresses of holidays past, threatening to make everything a little less wonderful. These new worries can keep you distracted. You may forget your regular routine and safety precautions in order to hurry and get all of your errands done.

The bad guys are counting on that.

While many Californians take time off during the holiday season, scammers and rip-off artists are busy working overtime to try to separate you from your money, your personal identification, and your sense of security. Here are a few things to keep in mind during the holiday rush.

**WHILE SHOPPING ONLINE**

**The holiday Internet scam**

A scammer creates a Web site that appears to offer popular and hard-to-find holiday items at, of course, a “steal” of a price. The site looks professional, appears to offer security protection, and may include testimonials from satisfied customers. When you place an order, however, the scammer takes your money and sends you an off-brand look-alike, sends you nothing at all, and/or uses your credit card information to steal your identity.
The E-card scam
You receive an e-mail that says, “A friend has sent you a holiday e-card.” The e-mail appears to be from a legitimate electronic greeting card company; however, when you click on the link, malware or a virus is downloaded onto your computer.

- If you don’t recognize the e-card’s sender, delete it.
- If you are instructed to download an “executable program” to view the e-card, delete it.
- Make sure that your computer has adequate anti-virus protection.

To report these or other online scams, contact the Federal Trade Commission at 1-877-FTC-HELP or online at [http://www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov).

WHILE SHOPPING AT THE MALL
- Stay alert and aware of your surroundings at all times.
- Keep your purse closed and close to your body, or keep your wallet in your front pocket.
- Travel light; take only necessary credit and identification cards with you when you shop. Do not carry your Social Security card!
When you park, be aware of your surroundings. If possible, park near well-lit areas or heavy traffic areas. Would-be thieves or aggressors are less likely to hide in those areas.

Lock purchases in the trunk of your car instead of carrying them around. Don’t leave them in plain sight in the car.

Use ATMs that are located inside of banks or other buildings. When using your ATM card in a store or bank, protect your personal identification number (PIN) from cameras or “shoulder surfers.”

Before you give any personal information to a business, ask how it will be used and protected. If you’re not comfortable with the answers, consider shopping elsewhere.

WHILE AT HOME

Tree care

A six-foot tree will use one gallon of water every two days; the stand should hold at least one gallon of water and should be checked daily.

Dried-out trees are highly flammable and should not be left in a house or garage or placed against the house.

Make sure your tree is at least three feet (one meter) away from any heat source and positioned near an outlet so that cords are not running long distances.

Decorations

Do not use lights that have frayed or worn cords or plugs.

Do not leave lit candles unattended.

Mistletoe, holly, and some varieties of lilies are poisonous to pets and children. Keep them up and out of reach.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more on how to spot, protect yourself from, and report scams, visit the Take Charge! California Web site at www.takechargeca.ca.gov.

For holiday safety tips, go to the Department of Consumer Affairs’ Web site at www.takechargeca.ca.gov/campaigns/holiday_main.shtml.


The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has information on toys, cribs, recalled consumer products, and more at www.cpsc.gov.

To learn how to safely prepare a holiday meal, visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Web site at www.foodsafety.gov/keep/events/holidays/index.html.
For decades, debit cards have been an easy way to buy things without carrying cash or running up credit card debt. This pervasive plastic form of payment has certainly made our lives easier, but there's a downside to that ease of use: overdraft fees.

Most debit cards allow you to exceed your checking account balance when making purchases, but you'll be penalized—for each purchase. In fact, many consumers are unaware of how quickly they can rack up bank fees for such overdraft protection. According to a 2008 study of bank overdraft programs published by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), 75 percent of all banks automatically enroll their customers in overdraft programs. Chances are, your bank may be among them.

In recent news reports, bank executives have said that allowing customers to exceed the balance in their account is a “courtesy” to spare them the embarrassment of having a debit card declined. One economic research firm estimated that this courtesy adds up to an annual profit of nearly $38 billion for financial institutions.

In addition, the FDIC study found that a “significant share” of banks processed overdraft transactions by size, from largest to smallest, which can increase the number of overdrafts, and, consequently, the number of fees. By processing larger purchases first, the customer’s bank account is drained faster, creating multiple fees.
Here’s How It Can Happen

Say you’re down to $15 in your checking account. Your paycheck will be posted tomorrow, so you’re not worried. You squeeze in small purchases at three different stores for just under $15, and you drop a check in the mail for $20 to pay a bill, figuring that the check will clear after your paycheck posts. Surprise! The bank processes the $20 check first, overdrawing your account. There’s the first overdraft fee. Then, it processes your three debit card purchases—adding penalties for each one. Consider that the median fee at the largest U.S. banks is $35, according to the Consumer Federation of America, you could be facing $140 ($35 x 4) in bank fees, which the bank can conveniently deduct from your paycheck when it’s deposited.

How did it happen? Debit charges, especially those using a personal identification number (PIN), post almost instantly. Checks are also processed more quickly than they used to be. Add to that the way the bank processes transactions (largest first) and the damage can be done before you ever realize your account is overdrawn.

To Protect Yourself

Monitor when deposits actually post and become truly available to you. Writing checks or making debit purchases against pending deposits may be risky. Also, set up a low-balance online alert to let you know when your account drops below a certain level. Read the account literature provided by your financial institution to be sure you understand its overdraft fee policies. If the literature is not clear, call the bank’s customer service number for an explanation.

On Nov. 12, 2009, the Federal Reserve Board announced final rules—effective July 1, 2010—that prohibit financial institutions from charging consumers fees for
paying overdrafts on automated teller machine (ATM) and one-time debit card transactions, unless a consumer consents, or opts in, to the overdraft service for those types of transactions.

Before opting in, the consumer must be provided a notice that explains the financial institution’s overdraft services, including associated fees, and the consumer’s choices. The final rules, along with a model opt-in notice, are issued under Regulation E, which implements the Electronic Fund Transfer Act.

To ensure that consumers have a meaningful choice, the final rules prohibit financial institutions from discriminating against consumers who do not opt in. The rules also require institutions to provide consumers who do not opt in with the same account terms, conditions, and features [including pricing] that they provide to consumers who do opt in. For consumers who do not opt in, the institution would be prohibited from charging overdraft fees for any overdrafts it pays on ATM and one-time debit card transactions.

In addition, several bills being considered by Congress would limit these fees to one per month or six per year. The legislation also would prohibit rearranging the order in which the transactions are posted, and would require fees to be in proportion to the overdrawn amount.

More good news, according to a recent article in USA Today, is that—in the wake of public outcry and pending legislation—several major banks have modified their fee-charging processes by limiting the number of times a fee is assessed in a given day and making it easier for customers to opt out of overdraft protection. Contact your bank to find out if it has changed its policies.

**MORE PAIN AT THE PUMP**

Did you know that if you use your debit card at the gas pump, the bank may freeze a certain amount of money in your checking account, sometimes for days? This little-known practice was the focus of a recent article online at MSN Money.

When you swipe your debit card at the gas pump, the station generally requests an authorization to confirm that your account is open and active. It doesn’t actually authorize a purchase amount, because you haven’t pumped the gas yet. Many pay-at-the-pump gas purchases are initially authorized for $1, but some can earmark as much as $75, according to the article. It’s similar to what a hotel does when it swipes your credit card at check-in, and it’s done to help ensure that the merchant gets paid. With a gas purchase, it may take several business days for the actual purchase amount to come in. In the meantime, the pending transaction will reduce the amount of money in your account. If you write checks or make additional debit purchases before the pending transaction is cleared, your account could be overdrawn and be subject to fees. You can avoid this problem if you use a PIN number with the debit card transaction (you may have to go inside the gas station to do that), or by using a credit card or cash.

**ON THE WEB**

The Federal Reserve Bank has information on how to protect yourself from overdraft and bounced-check fees. [www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/bounce](http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/bounce)
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TAKES OVER ONE GALLON
What do you think of when you think about a spa? Even the word spa by itself sounds soothing. It evokes images of candles, soft lighting, calming music, pampering massages, and facials. The alluring amenities and atmosphere can certainly relax your body and your mind but should not soften your smart consumer instincts. That’s particularly true if you’re at a medical spa (also called a “med spa”) that offers minimally invasive cosmetic procedures such as Botox injections and laser hair removal, which can be done only by licensed medical personnel.

In a med spa, the lack of a clinical setting may be soothing, but it can leave consumers confused about exactly who is qualified (and licensed) to provide which services. Here’s an overview of the basic differences between a day spa and a medical spa:

• A day spa often has licensed beauty care professionals, such as cosmetologists, estheticians, and manicurists, and others such as massage therapists on staff. Services often include massages, facials, body wraps, waxing, tanning, makeup, manicures, hair care, and aromatherapy.

• A med spa has licensed medical personnel (doctors and nurses) on staff. Services may include laser hair removal, Botox and collagen injections, chemical facial peels, laser hair removal, microdermabrasion, and laser treatment of leg veins.

Here’s where it gets confusing: Some traditional med spa services can be provided at a day spa, and some traditional day spa services can be provided at a med spa. A med spa may even offer beauty care services, although the establishment has to be licensed by the Board of Barbering and Cosmetology to do so. (Verify the license online at www.barbercosmo.ca.gov.) Either type of spa may be located in a retail center, a shopping mall, or even an airport terminal.

No matter the setting, consumers should remember that certain services can be provided only by licensed personnel. Here’s a list of the licensing requirements for some of the most common services at a day spa or med spa:

• Hair cutting, coloring, styling—barber or cosmetologist.

• Manicures or pedicures—manicurist or cosmetologist.

• Facials—esthetician or cosmetologist.

• Removing unwanted hair by waxing or tweezing—esthetician or cosmetologist.

• Botox injections—physician (or registered nurse, licensed vocational nurse, or physician assistant under a physician’s supervision).

• Hair removal or spider vein removal using laser or intense pulse light devices—physician (or registered nurse under a physician’s supervision).
What do you know about the spa?
For more information, to verify a license, or file a complaint about a licensed person, contact one of the following:

Barbers, cosmetologists, manicurists, estheticians
Board of Barbering and Cosmetology, (800) 952-5210
www.barbercosmo.ca.gov

Physicians
Medical Board of California, (800) 633-2322
www.mbc.ca.gov

Physician assistants
Physician Assistant Committee
(800) 555-8038 or (916) 263-8780
www.pac.ca.gov

Registered nurses
Board of Registered Nursing
(916) 322-3350
www.rn.ca.gov

Vocational nurses
Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians
(916) 263-7800
www.bvnpt.ca.gov

Is it legal?
Consumers should also be aware that some services are not regulated by the State, although local government agencies, such as county health departments, may have oversight. Before you agree to any of these unregulated services, find out about the type of training the person has received. You may want to ask for references, too. Unregulated services include:

• Permanent makeup or tattooing
• Ear or body piercing
• Tanning
• Massage therapy

What the Medical Board says
The Medical Board of California is concerned that consumers may be led to believe that being injected, lasered, and resurfaced requires no more thought than changing their hair color. There is risk to any medical procedure, and consumers need to be aware of those risks, Board officials say. Here are some tips from the Medical Board to keep in mind when you’re visiting a med spa.

Consumers seeking cosmetic procedures should know that the person performing them is medically qualified and experienced. Specifically, patients should:

Know who will perform the procedure and his or her credentials. Is the doctor a specialist in these procedures? Is he or she Board-certified in the appropriate specialty? Board certification is not required, but it does indicate the doctor has met certain standards. If a registered nurse or physician assistant will be doing the procedure, what are his or her qualifications? Where is the doctor who is supervising them? (Although the physician does not have to be onsite, he or she must be immediately reachable.)

Be fully informed of the risks. Medical professionals have an ethical responsibility to be realistic with their patients and to tell them what they need to know. Beware of high-pressure sales pitches promising unrealistic results.

Examine the facility and its personnel. Does the establishment look clean and do personnel wash their hands, use gloves, and use sound hygienic practices?

Ask about possible complications, and who is available to handle them. Qualified physicians have privileges at a hospital where they can handle emergencies.

Don’t be swayed by advertisements and promises of low prices. Brand-name wrinkle-reducing injections are expensive. If someone is offering an injection for $50, when the going rate at a physician’s office is $400,
then you may not be getting the real thing. There have been tragic cases of unscrupulous practitioners injecting industrial silicone and toxic counterfeit drugs that have made patients critically ill, caused disfigurement, or resulted in death.

**What about cost?**

Be aware that you will most likely be paying out-of-pocket for med spa services. Ask about costs and payment plans before you agree to any procedures. Fees vary by region and patient needs, but the American Society of Plastic Surgeons lists the following surgeon/physician national average fees, as of 2008. (Anesthesia or related expenses are not included in these totals.)

- Botox injection $391
- Chemical peel $815
- Microdermabrasion $200
- Collagen injection, bovine $452
- Laser hair removal $456

**Other resources**

*Medical Spas: What You Need to Know*—a publication from the Medical Board of California

[www.mbc.ca.gov/consumer/medical_spas.html](http://www.mbc.ca.gov/consumer/medical_spas.html)

*Consumer Guide to Barbering and Cosmetology Services*—a publication from the Board of Barbering and Cosmetology.

[www.barbercosmo.ca.gov/forms_pubs/barbcosm.pdf](http://www.barbercosmo.ca.gov/forms_pubs/barbcosm.pdf)

Information for patients on wrinkle fillers from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

[www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/CosmeticDevices/WrinkleFillers/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/CosmeticDevices/WrinkleFillers/default.htm)

Information on cosmetics, including labeling and label claims from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

[www.fda.gov/Cosmetics/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Cosmetics/default.htm)

Advice from the American Academy of Dermatologists on laser hair removal.

[www.aad.org/media/press/_doc/LaserHairRemoval.html](http://www.aad.org/media/press/_doc/LaserHairRemoval.html)

Educational brochures from the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery on topics such as skin resurfacing and wrinkle treatment.

[www.aafprs.org/patient/procedures/proctypes.html](http://www.aafprs.org/patient/procedures/proctypes.html)

An overview of cosmetic plastic surgery procedures from the American Society of Plastic Surgery.

[www.plasticsurgery.org/Patients_and_Consumers/Procedures/Cosmetic_Procedures.html](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/Patients_and_Consumers/Procedures/Cosmetic_Procedures.html)

**Reminder**

Remember, under California law, a med spa cannot contract with a physician to be a medical director. That would be considered the unlicensed practice of medicine. The physician/medical director must either own the business or work for physicians who do. Ask about the arrangement when you visit the med spa.
Statewide Scam Roundup

Rebate check with a surprise

“What a nice surprise,” thought a consumer who found a $9 check along with the Snuggie (blanket with sleeves) he had ordered. The nice surprise turned nasty a month later when he found a $149 charge on his credit card for something called TLG Great Fun, reported on the Web site TheStreet.com. Apparently, the back of the check contained fine print saying that by cashing it the consumer authorized transfer of his personal information to another company and agreed to enroll as a member of TLG Great Fun for a monthly fee. Consumers can file a complaint about the matter by contacting the California Attorney General’s Office online at http://ag.ca.gov/contact. Meanwhile, the Better Business Bureau warns consumers not to cash checks from unknown parties.

Phony reverse mortgage counselors

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is warning older Americans to beware of scam artists who charge thousands of dollars for reverse mortgage information that is available for free. A reverse mortgage is a type of loan that enables homeowners age 62 and older to turn the equity in their home into cash. If you are interested in a reverse mortgage, you can get free information from HUD. Call (800) 569-4287 or visit www.hud.gov/buying/rvrsmort.cfm. You can also get free information about reverse mortgages from AARP online at www.aarp.org/money/personal/reverse_mortgages.

“Cash Back” quick change artists

A new variation on an old scam, this involves credit card or ATM transactions at retailers. Consumers report discovering $40 or more in “Cash Back” charges on their credit card statements. In some cases, the consumer was not aware of the charges.

Talk back

Snuggie maker responds to complaints

Allstar Products Group, maker of the Snuggie blanket with sleeves, has issued a statement in response to what it calls inaccurate reports regarding an offer recently sent to consumers who purchased a Snuggie blanket via television.

The offer included a check for $8.25, that, when cashed, enrolled the consumer in the Great Fun entertainment discount program for $149 a year. The annual fee was charged to the same credit card that consumers used to purchase the Snuggie. Some consumers thought the check was a rebate and cashed it without realizing what they were agreeing to further charges.

An article about the consumer complaints appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of Consumer Connection.

According to the Allstar Products’ statement, the terms of the Great Fun program, including the $149 annual fee, are clearly explained and included in multiple places—on the check and in the accompanying letter. The $8.25 check which accompanies the offer is not a rebate, nor was it ever represented as a rebate. It is an incentive for consumers who may be interested in enrolling in Great Fun.

“We respect our customers and want to alleviate their concerns for any confusion this offer may have caused,” said Ronald Steblea, Executive Vice President Allstar Products Group. “We also want to assure consumers that this was a test program and that the Great Fun mailing was distributed to a very small sample of Snuggie customers who ordered a Snuggie blanket via the direct response television campaign. If anyone has any questions about the program, please contact customer service at 866-770-7622.”
Money Smarts

Everyday financial facts to educate, empower, and amuse

Taxes
Test your knowledge of some basic tax terms.

1. What's a marginal tax bracket?
   a. One that's not very profitable.
   b. One you write in the margin of your IRS Form 1040.
   c. A formula the government uses to calculate how much you owe in taxes.

2. What's an adjusted gross income (AGI)?
   a. One that's been treated by a chiropractor.
   b. A portion of a taxpayer's money. (Tip: AGI is not the same as AIG, although both involve taxpayer money.)
   c. The money a taxpayer made during the year, minus certain items such as contributions to retirement plans, alimony payments, and others.

3. What is an innocent spouse?
   a. The spouse who wasn’t driving when the car ran a red light.
   b. The spouse who signed a joint return but may not be responsible for the tax liability.
   c. The spouse who didn’t max out the credit card.

4. What are deductions?
   a. Expenses you can subtract from the amount of taxes you owe.
   b. Strokes off your golf score for picking up the lunch tab.
   c. Points off your credit card interest rate for making payments on time.

5. What is a rollover?
   a. Something your dog will do for a treat.
   b. Moving money from one qualified retirement account to another.
   c. A big, fat check from your late uncle Ira.

6. What is a cafeteria plan?
   a. A flexible spending account that allows you to buy either shoes or purses.
   b. One price for an appetizer, entrée, and dessert at a restaurant.
   c. An employer-based plan that allows workers to pay certain qualified expenses before taxes are deducted from their paychecks.

Answers: 1. c; 2. c; 3. b; 4. a; 5. b; 6. c.

Smart Tip
Consult one of the resources below to find a tax professional.

Enrolled agents prepare State and Federal taxes and are licensed by the Internal Revenue Service. You can locate an enrolled agent near you through the National Association of Enrolled Agents. For more information, go online to www.naea.org or call (800) 424-4339.

The California Board of Accountancy licenses and regulates certified public accountants. For more information or to check an accountant’s license, go online to www.dca.ca.gov/cba or call (916) 263-3680.

The California Tax Education Council registers individuals who prepare Federal or State tax returns in California. For more information, go online to www.ctec.org or call (877) 850-2832.
The acai berry blues

Offers are all over the Internet and social networking sites these days for acai (pronounced ah-sigh-ee) berry pulp, capsules, and juices. Some acai berry marketers are even claiming the antioxidant-rich berry native to Brazil is a superfood that can take off pounds, boost your energy level, and fight cancer. But nutritionists with the Center for Science in the Public Interest say there is no scientific evidence to support many of the nutritional claims of the acai berry. In fact, WebMD, the medical information Web site, states that although studies support the benefits of a diet rich in antioxidants, acai berries have no known benefit over similar fruit such as cranberries, raspberries, strawberries, or blueberries.

Health benefits aside, some consumers have encountered problems when they've purchased acai berry products online. Some acai marketers offer a free trial supply of the acai berry products if you pay for shipping and handling by credit card. However, if you do not cancel within a very short trial period, you are sent additional monthly supplies of the products and your credit card is charged up to $85 per month. Some consumers who tried to cancel the monthly orders have reported encountering busy or disconnected phone lines and unanswered e-mail. In some cases, buyers said the free trial period was already over by the time they received their free samples, leaving them unable to stop the first monthly payment. If something like this has happened to you, you can file a complaint with the California Attorney General's Office by calling (800) 952-5225, or going online to www.ag.ca.gov/consumers/general.php.

Consumers interested in trying acai berries may be able to find the pulp and other products at health food stores. The berries, which grow on trees in the Amazon rainforest, are said to be too fragile to be shipped to the United States in fresh form.
Don’t pay up front for foreclosure relief services

The California Attorney General’s Office has issued a statement warning California homeowners to avoid individuals and businesses that charge up upfront fees for foreclosure relief services. A just-enacted State law makes this “abusive practice” subject to prosecution.

The new law, Senate Bill 94, makes it unlawful for any licensed attorney or real estate agent “who negotiates, attempts to negotiate, arranges, attempts to arrange, or otherwise offers to perform a mortgage loan modification or other form of mortgage loan forbearance for a fee or other compensation paid by the borrower ... to claim, demand, charge, collect, or receive any compensation until after the [attorney or agent] has fully performed each and every service the licensee contracted to perform or represented that he, she, or it would perform,” according to the statement.

Previously, licensed attorneys and real estate brokers could charge advance fees under certain limited circumstances. Foreclosure scam artists often sought to exploit this exception, according to the Attorney General’s Office. The new law closes this loophole.

If someone demands an up front fee for foreclosure assistance services, consumers can report the person to the Attorney General’s Office by calling (800) 952-5225, or going online to www.ag.ca.gov/consumers/general.php. For more information on loan modification fraud, visit http://ag.ca.gov/loanmod or www.yourhome.ca.gov.

Calling overseas—by mistake

Have you ever gotten a received call on your cell phone from a number you didn’t recognize? For some people, the first inclination is to call the number back. But beware. Overseas scammers may be trying to trick you into calling them and racking up huge phone charges. Many people don’t know that certain international area codes look just like domestic area codes, warns the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Be especially wary of calls from 809, 649, 284, and 876 area codes, all of which are located in the Caribbean. You won’t find out about the expensive phone charges until you see your monthly bill. If you are a victim of this kind of scam, talk to your wireless carrier about the matter. You may be able to block all outgoing international calls on your phone. You can also file a complaint with the FCC online at www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumers.html.
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2009 Silver Award, Magazine
2008 Silver Award, Feature
2007 Gold Award, Magazine
2007 Silver Award, Writing