

# Imposter sites take 'free' out of free credit report

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Sound-alike imposter Web sites have been a problem for many consumers seeking to order their free annual credit reports.

Some of the sites were set up to "phish," or steal consumers' personal information. Others — some operated by the three major credit-reporting agencies — simply try to get people to pay for a service that should be free.

Barbara Gordon of La Habra apparently stumbled onto one of those sites when she applied for what she thought was her free credit report. She never got a report but was charged \$149 for an "identity protection service." After she figured out what happened, she got the company to cancel the charge.

The Federal Trade Commission has begun cracking down on these imposter sites, including [www.freecreditreport.com](http://www.freecreditreport.com) and [www.consumerinfo.com](http://www.consumerinfo.com),

both operated by Experian of North America, based in Costa Mesa.

In August, Consumerinfo.com, doing business as Experian Consumer Direct, Qspace Inc. and iPlace Inc., settled FTC charges that it deceptively marketed "free credit reports" by failing to disclose adequately that consumers automatically would be signed up for a credit-monitoring service for \$79.95 if they did not cancel

within 30 days. Consumerinfo.com agreed to pay redress to consumers who enrolled in the

## IMPOSTER: sites require a cancellation

credit-monitoring program from 2000 to 2003, to clearly disclose the terms and conditions of any "free" offers and to state that it is not the official site for free credit reports. The settlement also required Consumerinfo.com to pay the FTC \$950,000 in ill-gotten gains to be used for consumer restitution and consumer information.

Heather Greer, an Experian spokeswoman, says [www.freecreditreport.com](http://www.freecreditreport.com) has been around since 1996 and was acquired by Experian in 2002.

The Web site does not require people to buy anything, she said. But to use it to get a free credit report, consumers must sign up for and then opt out of a trial credit-monitoring service. If they wait more than 30 days to do that, they're charged the current price of

\$12.95 a month.

"Fourteen million consumers have gotten free credit reports off that site," Greer said. "We believe we are offering a valuable product."

The FTC said it has sent letters to more than 130 other operators of imposter Web sites, advising them that attempts to mislead consumers are illegal.

Sandra Farrington, an attorney in the FTC's financial practices division, which oversees the program, said the FTC's action against Consumerinfo.com appears to have gotten the attention of other imposter Web sites. Many of them, she says, are now disclosing that they are not the official site for free credit reports and are explaining any terms and conditions relating to charges for other services

that consumers may sign up for when they request the free report.

The correct, official site is [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). Joe Ridout, spokesman for the San Francisco-based advocacy group Consumer Action, advised people who are worried about being on the wrong Web site to call and order the credit report by phone instead.

If you want to make a complaint, contact the FTC at [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) and click on the "File a Complaint" button on the top tool bar or call the agency's toll-free number (877) 382-4357. Information is available in English and Spanish.

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