

Consumer Education & Identify Theft

Identify theft is regarded as one of the UK's fastest growing crimes with Home Office figures suggesting it costs the UK consumer £1.2bn per annum (Home Office, 2010). One mechanism recognised as effective in combating a further rise in consumer identify theft is formal consumer education (FTC 2010; Milne et al, 2004; Office of Fair Trading, 2006). This research aimed to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of consumer organisations and other relevant stakeholder organisations concerned with employing consumer education to raise awareness of identity theft of the current provision.

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Although further consumer education in relation to identity theft should result in more assertive and confident consumers Milne (2003) highlights that consumer education may appear to be more sufficient for some identity theft prevention methods than others. Nevertheless, there is an identifiable need to educate consumers simply to remind them to protect their identity in everyday activities, for example when disposing of utility bills (Saunders & Zucker 1999; Allison et al 2005). On-line interactive activities may be one attempt by government agencies to increase coverage of this information to a wider consumer base, but their effectiveness can be questioned on the grounds of low consumer awareness of their existence (OFT, 2005). Therefore in order to be effective, consumer education should stretch beyond simply providing the information and encourage consumers to use it in their everyday lives (Sandlin, 2005; Sandlin, 2007; OFT 2006).

McGregor (2005) contends that a 'conventional' consumer education model is linked to consumer empowerment. Furthermore, if consumer policy and access to information is essentially a method of empowerment (Thogersen 2005) difficulties of access, including literacy and language, may restrict the potential benefits of this information to change individual behaviour. Coppack & Brennan (2005) concur suggesting that empowered consumers are the result of information being effectively received. Alternatively though, increased access to information does not necessarily lead to an increased awareness of risks, thus not increasing consumers' perceptions of risk (NCC, 2002).

However, increased individual awareness of identity theft can be a double edged sword. On one hand, consumer awareness can help to prevent the increase in identity theft with the individual now more aware of the potential risks (Home Office, 2010). Alternatively, increased awareness may have a negative effect on vulnerable consumers leading to an unnecessarily pessimistic view of online activities, for example, online banking (NCC, 2002). Therefore, the method of communication and content of any consumer education programme or device must be understandable and effectively targeted to achieve increased awareness of risk.

This research investigates the perceptions and attitudes of consumer organisations and other relevant stakeholder organisations concerned with employing consumer education to raise awareness of identity theft of the current provision. This exploratory inductive study utilised 9 key informant semi-structured interviews with UK based consumer organisations with a remit for providing consumer education on identity theft and a relevant stakeholder organisations with expertise in raising awareness of identity theft issues. Issues investigated during interviews included the organisations' current provision of consumer education in relation to identity theft; their perceptions of their remit with regard to consumer education; their role in raising awareness of identity theft; the method of delivery of consumer education; their long-term strategy for consumer education and any perceptions of the relevant feedback mechanism employed by the organisations between themselves and the target audience.

The results identified the absence of an effective feedback mechanism between the relevant organisations and their target consumer audience. This has implications for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the mechanisms being utilised by these bodies to raise awareness of identity theft. Furthermore, there is no formal channel through which to monitor consumers' skills to identify how they utilise the information they do receive and understand. There was also found to be a concern amongst consumer organisations and stakeholder groups that consumers are being targeted with too many differing messages from a variety of sources with regard to identity theft. This could in turn result in the mixed messages being misunderstood or differing perceptions of risk leading to further consumer

detriment. Therefore, this research suggests a need to ensure the message with regard to identity theft is effectively targeted and understood by consumers in order to raise awareness of the issue and develop consumer critical skills.

Endnote

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