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FTC Policy Statement on Unfairness

FTC POLICY STATEMENT ON UNFAIRNESS

Appended to International Harvester Co., 104 F.T.C. 949, 1070 (1984). See 15 U.S.C. § 45(n).

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20580

December 17, 1980

The Honorable Wendell H. Ford
Chairman, Consumer Subcommittee
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Room 130 Russell Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John C. Danforth
Ranking Minority Member, Consumer Subcommittee
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Room 130 Russell Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Ford and Danforth:

This is in response to your letter of June 13, 1980, concerning one aspect of this agency's jurisdiction over "unfair or deceptive acts or practices." You informed us that the Subcommittee was planning to hold oversight hearings on the concept of "unfairness" as it has been applied to consumer transactions. You further informed us that the views of other interested parties were solicited and compiled in a Committee Print earlier this year.¹ Your letter specifically requested the Commission's views on cases under Section 5 "not involving the content of advertising," and its views as to "whether the Commission's authority should be limited to regulating false or deceptive commercial advertising." Our response addresses these and other questions related to the concept of consumer unfairness.

We are pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the future work of the agency. The subject that you have selected appears to be particularly timely. We recognize that the concept of consumer unfairness is one whose precise meaning is not immediately obvious, and also recognize that this uncertainty has been honestly troublesome for some businesses and some members of the legal profession. This result is understandable in light of the general nature of the statutory standard. At the same time, though, we believe we can respond to legitimate

this agency and the federal courts, which, in our opinion, have brought added clarity to the law. Although the administrative and judicial evolution of the consumer unfairness concept has still left some necessary flexibility in the statute, it is possible to provide a reasonable working sense of the conduct that is covered.

In response to your inquiry we have therefore undertaken a review of the decided cases and rules and have synthesized from them the most important principles of general applicability. Rather than merely reciting the law, we have attempted to provide the Committee with a concrete indication of the manner in which the Commission has enforced, and will continue to enforce, its unfairness mandate. In so doing we intend to address the concerns that have been raised about the meaning of consumer unfairness, and thereby attempt to provide a greater sense of certainty about what the Commission would regard as an unfair act or practice under Section 5.

This letter thus delineates the Commission's views of the boundaries of its consumer unfairness jurisdiction and is subscribed to by each Commissioner. In addition, we are enclosing a companion Commission statement that discusses the ways in which this body of law differs from, and supplements, the prohibition against consumer deception, and then considers and evaluates some specific criticisms that have been made of our enforcement of the law.² Since you have indicated a particular interest in the possible application of First Amendment principles to commercial advertising, the companion statement will include discussions relevant to that question. The companion statement is designed to respond to the key questions raised about the unfairness doctrine. However, individual Commissioners may not necessarily endorse particular arguments or particular examples of the Commission's exercise of its unfairness authority contained in the companion statement.

Commission Statement of Policy on the Scope of the Consumer Unfairness Jurisdiction

Section 5 of the FTC Act prohibits, in part, "unfair ... acts or practices in or affecting commerce."³ This is commonly referred to as the Commission's consumer unfairness jurisdiction. The Commission's jurisdiction over "unfair methods of competition" is not discussed in this letter.⁴ Although we cannot give an exhaustive treatment of the law of consumer unfairness in this short statement, some relatively concrete conclusions can nonetheless be drawn.

The present understanding of the unfairness standard is the result of an evolutionary process. The statute was deliberately framed in general terms since Congress recognized the impossibility of drafting a complete list of unfair trade practices that would not quickly become outdated or leave loopholes for easy evasion.⁵ The task of identifying unfair trade practices was therefore assigned to the Commission, subject to judicial review,⁶ in the expectation that the underlying criteria would evolve and develop over time. As the Supreme Court observed as early as 1931, the ban on unfairness "belongs to that class of phrases which do not admit of precise definition, but the meaning and application of which must be arrived at by what this court elsewhere has called 'the gradual process of judicial inclusion and exclusion.'"⁷

By 1964 enough cases had been decided to enable the Commission to identify three factors that it considered when applying the prohibition against consumer unfairness. These were: (1) whether the practice injures consumers; (2) whether it violates established public policy; (3) whether it is unethical or unscrupulous.⁸ These factors were later quoted with apparent approval by the Supreme Court in the 1972 case of *Sperry & Hutchinson*.⁹ Since then the Commission has continued to refine the standard of unfairness in its cases and rules, and it has now reached a more detailed sense of both the definition and the limits of these criteria.¹⁰

Consumer injury

Unjustified consumer injury is the primary focus of the FTC Act, and the most important of the three *S&H* criteria. By itself it can be sufficient to warrant a finding of unfairness. The Commission's ability to rely on an independent criterion of consumer injury is consistent with the intent of the statute, which was to "[make] the consumer who

methods of a dishonest competitor."¹¹

The independent nature of the consumer injury criterion does not mean that every consumer injury is legally "unfair," however. To justify a finding of unfairness the injury must satisfy three tests. It must be substantial; it must not be outweighed by any countervailing benefits to consumers or competition that the practice produces; and it must be an injury that consumers themselves could not reasonably have avoided.

First of all, the injury must be substantial. The Commission is not concerned with trivial or merely speculative harms.¹² In most cases a substantial injury involves monetary harm, as when sellers coerce consumers into purchasing unwanted goods or services¹³ or when consumers buy defective goods or services on credit but are unable to assert against the creditor claims or defenses arising from the transaction.¹⁴ Unwarranted health and safety risks may also support a finding of unfairness.¹⁵ Emotional impact and other more subjective types of harm, on the other hand, will not ordinarily make a practice unfair. Thus, for example, the Commission will not seek to ban an advertisement merely because it offends the tastes or social beliefs of some viewers, as has been suggested in some of the comments.¹⁶

Second, the injury must not be outweighed by any offsetting consumer or competitive benefits that the sales practice also produces. Most business practices entail a mixture of economic and other costs and benefits for purchasers. A seller's failure to present complex technical data on his product may lessen a consumer's ability to choose, for example, but may also reduce the initial price he must pay for the article. The Commission is aware of these tradeoffs and will not find that a practice unfairly injures consumers unless it is injurious in its net effects.¹⁷ The Commission also takes account of the various costs that a remedy would entail. These include not only the costs to the parties directly before the agency, but also the burdens on society in general in the form of increased paperwork, increased regulatory burdens on the flow of information, reduced incentives to innovation and capital formation, and similar matters.¹⁸ Finally, the injury must be one which consumers could not reasonably have avoided.¹⁹ Normally we expect the marketplace to be self-correcting, and we rely on consumer choice--the ability of individual consumers to make their own private purchasing decisions without regulatory intervention--to govern the market. We anticipate that consumers will survey the available alternatives, choose those that are most desirable, and avoid those that are inadequate or unsatisfactory. However, it has long been recognized that certain types of sales techniques may prevent consumers from effectively making their own decisions, and that corrective action may then become necessary. Most of the Commission's unfairness matters are brought under these circumstances. They are brought, not to second-guess the wisdom of particular consumer decisions, but rather to halt some form of seller behavior that unreasonably creates or takes advantage of an obstacle to the free exercise of consumer decisionmaking.²⁰

Sellers may adopt a number of practices that unjustifiably hinder such free market decisions. Some may withhold or fail to generate critical price or performance data, for example, leaving buyers with insufficient information for informed comparisons.²¹ Some may engage in overt coercion, as by dismantling a home appliance for "inspection" and refusing to reassemble it until a service contract is signed.²² And some may exercise undue influence over highly susceptible classes of purchasers, as by promoting fraudulent "cures" to seriously ill cancer patients.²³ Each of these practices undermines an essential precondition to a free and informed consumer transaction, and, in turn, to a well-functioning market. Each of them is therefore properly banned as an unfair practice under the FTC Act.²⁴

Violation of public policy

The second *S&H* standard asks whether the conduct violates public policy as it has been established by statute, common law, industry practice, or otherwise. This criterion may be applied in two different ways. It may be used to test the validity and strength of the evidence of consumer injury, or, less often, it may be cited for a dispositive legislative or judicial determination that such injury is present.

Commission as a means of providing additional evidence on the degree of consumer injury caused by specific practices. To be sure, most Commission actions are brought to redress relatively clear-cut injuries, and those determinations are based, in large part, on objective economic analysis. As we have indicated before, the Commission believes that considerable attention should be devoted to the analysis of whether substantial net harm has occurred, not only because that is part of the unfairness test, but also because the focus on injury is the best way to ensure that the Commission acts responsibly and uses its resources wisely. Nonetheless, the Commission wishes to emphasize the importance of examining outside statutory policies and established judicial principles for assistance in helping the agency ascertain whether a particular form of conduct does in fact tend to harm consumers. Thus the agency has referred to First Amendment decisions upholding consumers' rights to receive information, for example, to confirm that restrictions on advertising tend unfairly to hinder the informed exercise of consumer choice.²⁵

Conversely, statutes or other sources of public policy may affirmatively allow for a practice that the Commission tentatively views as unfair. The existence of such policies will then give the agency reason to reconsider its assessment of whether the practice is actually injurious in its net effects.²⁶ In other situations there may be no clearly established public policies, or the policies may even be in conflict. While that does not necessarily preclude the Commission from taking action if there is strong evidence of net consumer injury, it does underscore the desirability of carefully examining public policies in all instances.²⁷ In any event, whenever objective evidence of consumer injury is difficult to obtain, the need to identify and assess all relevant public policies assumes increased importance.

Sometimes public policy will independently support a Commission action. This occurs when the policy is so clear that it will entirely determine the question of consumer injury, so there is little need for separate analysis by the Commission. In these cases the legislature or court, in announcing the policy, has already determined that such injury does exist and thus it need not be expressly proved in each instance. An example of this approach arose in a case involving a mail-order firm.²⁸ There the Commission was persuaded by an analogy to the due-process clause that it was unfair for the firm to bring collection suits in a forum that was unreasonably difficult for the defendants to reach. In a similar case the Commission applied the statutory policies of the Uniform Commercial Code to require that various automobile manufacturers and their distributors refund to their customers any surplus money that was realized after they repossessed and resold their customer's cars.²⁹ The Commission acts on such a basis only where the public policy is suitable for administrative enforcement by this agency, however. Thus it turned down a petition for a rule to require fuller disclosure of aerosol propellants, reasoning that the subject of fluorocarbon safety was currently under study by other scientific and legislative bodies with more appropriate expertise or jurisdiction over the subject.³⁰

To the extent that the Commission relies heavily on public policy to support a finding of unfairness, the policy should be clear and well-established. In other words, the policy should be declared or embodied in formal sources such as statutes, judicial decisions, or the Constitution as interpreted by the courts, rather than being ascertained from the general sense of the national values. The policy should likewise be one that is widely shared, and not the isolated decision of a single state or a single court. If these two tests are not met the policy cannot be considered as an "established" public policy for purposes of the S&H criterion. The Commission would then act only on the basis of convincing independent evidence that the practice was distorting the operation of the market and thereby causing unjustified consumer injury.

Unethical or unscrupulous conduct

Finally, the third S&H standard asks whether the conduct was immoral, unethical, oppressive, or unscrupulous. This test was presumably included in order to be sure of reaching all the purposes of the underlying statute, which forbids "unfair" acts or practices. It would therefore allow the Commission to reach conduct that violates generally

truly unethical or unscrupulous will almost always injure consumers or violate public policy as well. The Commission has therefore never relied on the third element of *S&H* as an independent basis for a finding of unfairness, and it will act in the future only on the basis of the first two.

We hope this letter has given you the information that you require. Please do not hesitate to call if we can be of any further assistance. With best regards,

/s/Michael Pertschuk Chairman

/s/Paul Rand Dixon Commissioner

/s/David A. Clanton Commissioner

/s/Robert Pitofsky Commissioner

/s/Patricia P. Bailey Commissioner

¹Unfairness: Views on Unfair Acts and Practices in Violation of the Federal Trade Commission Act (1980) (hereinafter referred to as "Committee Print").

²Neither this letter nor the companion statement addresses ongoing proceedings, but the Commission is prepared to discuss those matters separately at an appropriate time.

³The operative sentence of Section 5 reads in full as follows: "Unfair methods of competition in or affecting commerce, and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce, are declared unlawful." 15 U.S.C. 45(a)(1).

⁴In fulfilling its competition or antitrust mission the Commission looks to the purposes, policies, and spirit of the other antitrust laws and the FTC Act to determine whether a practice affecting competition or competitors is unfair. See, e.g., *FTC v. Brown Shoe Co.*, 384 U.S. 316 (1966). In making this determination the Commission is guided by the extensive legislative histories of those statutes and a considerable body of antitrust case law. The agency's jurisdiction over "deceptive acts or practices" is likewise not discussed in this letter.

⁵See H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 1142, 63d Cong., 2d Sess., at 19 (1914) (If Congress "were to adopt the method of definition, it would undertake an endless task"). In 1914 the statute was phrased only in terms of "unfair methods of competition," and the reference to "unfair acts or practices" was not added until the Wheeler-Lee Amendment in 1938. The initial language was still understood as reaching most of the conduct now characterized as consumer unfairness, however, and so the original legislative history remains relevant to the construction of that part of the statute.

⁶The Supreme Court has stated on many occasions that the definition of "unfairness" is ultimately one for judicial determination. See, e.g., *FTC v. Sperry & Hutchinson Co.*, 405 U.S. 233, 249 (1972); *FTC v. R.F. Keppel & Bro.*, 291 U.S. 304, 314 (1934).

⁷*FTC v. Raladam Co.*, 283 U.S. 643, 648 (1931). See also *FTC v. R.F. Keppel & Bro.*, 291 U.S. 304, 310 (1934) ("Neither the language nor the history of the Act suggests that Congress intended to confine the forbidden methods to fixed and unyielding categories").

⁸The Commission's actual statement of the criteria was as follows:

(1) whether the practice, without necessarily having been previously considered unlawful, offends

words, it is within at least the penumbra of some common-law, statutory, or other established concept of unfairness; (2) whether it is immoral, unethical, oppressive, or unscrupulous; (3) whether it causes substantial injury to consumers (or competitors or other businessmen).

Statement of Basis and Purpose, Unfair or Deceptive Advertising and Labeling of Cigarettes in Relation to the Health Hazards of Smoking, 29 Fed. Reg. 8324, 8355 (1964).

⁹*FTC v. Sperry & Hutchinson C.*, 405 U.S. 223, 244-45 n.5 (1972). The Circuit Courts have concluded that this quotation reflected the Supreme Court's own views. See *Spiegel, Inc. v. FTC*, 540 F.2d 287, 293 n.8 (7th Cir. 1976); *Heater v. FTC*, 503 F.2d 321, 323 (9th Cir. 1974). The application of these factors to antitrust matters is beyond the scope of this letter.

¹⁰These standards for unfairness are generally applicable to both advertising and non-advertising cases.

¹¹83 Cong. Rec. 3255 (1938) (remarks of Senator Wheeler).

¹²An injury may be sufficiently substantial, however, if it does a small harm to a large number of people, or if it raises a significant risk of concrete harm.

¹³See, e.g., *Holland Furnace Co. v. FTC*, 295 F.2d 302 (7th Cir. 1961) (seller's servicemen dismantled home furnaces and then refused to reassemble them until the consumers had agreed to buy services or replacement parts).

¹⁴Statement of Basis and Purpose, Preservation of Consumers' Claims and Defenses, 40 Fed. Reg. 53,506, 53522-23 (1975).

¹⁵For an example see *Philip Morris, Inc.*, 82 F.T.C. 16 (1973) (respondent had distributed free-sample razor blades in such a way that they could come into the hands of small children) (consent agreement). Of course, if matters involving health and safety are within the primary jurisdiction of some other agency, Commission action might not be appropriate.

¹⁶See, e.g., comments of Association of National Advertisers, Committee Print at 120. In an extreme case, however, where tangible injury could be clearly demonstrated, emotional effects might possibly be considered as the basis for a finding of unfairness. Cf. 15 U.S.C. 1692 *et seq.* (Fair Debt Collection Practices Act) (banning, e.g., harassing late-night telephone calls).

¹⁷See *Pfizer, Inc.*, 81 F.T.C. 23, 62-63 n. 13 (1972); Statement of Basis and Purpose, Disclosure Requirements and Prohibitions Concerning Franchising and Business Opportunity Ventures, 43 Fed. Reg. 59614, 59636 n.95 (1978).

When making this determination the Commission may refer to existing public policies for help in ascertaining the existence of consumer injury and the relative weights that should be assigned to various costs and benefits. The role of public policy in unfairness determinations will be discussed more generally below.

¹⁸For example, when the Commission promulgated the Holder Rule it anticipated an overall lowering of economic costs to society because the rule gave creditors the incentive to police sellers, thus increasing the likelihood that those selling defective goods or services would either improve their practices or leave the marketplace when they could not obtain financing. These benefits, in the Commission's judgment, outweighed any costs to creditors and sellers occasioned by the rule. See Statement of Basis and Purpose, Preservation of Consumers' Claims and Defenses, 40 Fed. Reg. 53506, 53522-23 (1975).

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individual consumers to pursue.

²⁰This emphasis on informed consumer choice has commonly been adopted in other statutes as well. See, e.g., Declaration of Policy, Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, 15 U.S.C. 1451 ("Informed consumers are essential to the fair and efficient functioning of a free market economy".)

²¹See, e.g., Statement of Basis and Purpose, Labeling and Advertising of Home Insulation, 44 Fed. Reg. 50218, 50222-23 (1979); Statement of Basis and Purpose, Posting of Minimum Octane Numbers on Gasoline Dispensing Pumps, 36 Fed. Reg. 23871, 23882 (1971). See also *Virginia State Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Council, Inc.*, 425 U.S. 748 (1976).

²²See *Holland Furnace Co. v. ETC*, 295 F.2d 302 (7th Cir. 1961); cf. *Arthur Murray Studio, Inc. v. EW*, 458 F.2d 622 (5th Cir. 1972) (emotional high-pressure sales tactics, using teams of salesmen who refused to let the customer leave the room until a contract was signed). See also Statement of Basis and Purpose, Cooling-Off Period for Door-to-Door Sales, 37 Fed. Reg. 22934, 22937-38 (1972).

²³See, e.g., *Travel King, Inc.*, 86 F.T.C. 715, 774 (1975). The practices in this case primarily involved deception, but the Commission noted the special susceptibilities of such patients as one reason for banning the ads entirely rather than relying on the remedy of fuller disclosure. The Commission recognizes that "undue influence" in advertising and promotion is difficult to define, and therefore exercises its authority here only with respect to substantial coercive-like practices and significant consumer injury.

²⁴These few examples are not exhaustive, but the general direction they illustrate is clear. As the Commission stated in promulgating its Eyeglasses Rule, the inquiry should begin, at least, by asking "whether the acts or practices at issue inhibit the functioning of the competitive market and whether consumers are harmed thereby." Statement of Basis and Purpose, Advertising of Ophthalmic Goods and Services, 43 Fed. Reg. 23992, 24001 (1978).

²⁵See Statement of Basis and Purpose, Advertising of ophthalmic Goods and Services, 43 Fed. Reg. 23992, 24001 (1978), citing *Virginia State Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Council*, 425 U.S. 748 (1976).

²⁶Cf. Statement of Basis and Purpose, Advertising of ophthalmic Goods and Services, *supra*; see also *n. 17 supra*.

²⁷The analysis of external public policies is extremely valuable but not always definitive. The legislative history of Section 5 recognizes that new forms of unfair business practices may arise which, at the time of the Commission's involvement, have not yet been generally proscribed. See page 4, *supra*. Thus a review of public policies established independently of Commission action may not be conclusive in determining whether the challenged practices should be prohibited or otherwise restricted. At the same time, however, we emphasize the importance of examining public policies, since a thorough analysis can serve as an important check on the overall reasonableness of the Commission's actions.

²⁸*Spiegel, Inc. v. FTC*, 540 F.2d 287 (7th Cir. 1976). In this case the Commission did inquire into the extent of the resulting consumer injury, but under the rationale involved it presumably need not have done so. See also *FTC v. R.F. Keppel & Bro.*, 291 U.S. 304 (1934) (firm had gained a marketing advantage by selling goods through a lottery technique that violated state gambling policies); cf. *Simeon Management Corp.*, 87 F.T.C. 1184, 1231 (1976), *aff'd*, 579 F.2d 1137 (9th Cir. 1978) (firm advertised weight-loss program that used a drug which could not itself be advertised under FDA regulations) (alternative ground). Since these public-policy cases are based on legislative determinations, rather than on a judgment within the Commission's area of special economic expertise, it is appropriate that they can reach a relatively wider range of consumer injuries than just those associated with impaired consumer choice.

expenses of repossession and resale. The law of 49 states requires that creditors refund surpluses when they occur, but if creditors systematically refuse to honor this obligation, consumers have no practical way to discover that they have been deprived of money to which they are entitled. *See Ford Motor Co.*, 94 F.T.C. 564, 618 (1979) *appeal pending*, Nos. 79-7649 and 79-7654 (9th Cir.); *Ford Motor Co.*, 93 F.T.C. 402 (1979) (consent decree); *General Motors Corp.*, D. 9074 (Feb., 1980) (consent decree). By these latter two consent agreements the Commission, because of its unfairness jurisdiction, has been able to secure more than \$2 million for consumers allegedly deprived of surpluses to which they were entitled.

³⁰See Letter from John F. Dugan, Acting Secretary, to Action on Smoking and Health (January 13, 1977). See also letter from Charles A. Tobin, Secretary, to Prof. Page and Mr. Young (September 17, 1973) (denying petition to exercise § 6(b) subpoena powers to obtain consumer complaint information from cosmetic firms and then to transmit the data to FDA for that agency's enforcement purposes).

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