

CHOICE

Ghost stores

Online buys that haunt

211 *products* TESTED

Rice cookers
Microwaves
Dishwashers
Thermomix TM7
Washing machines
Televisions
Laptops
& more

TOP BLOCK

Milk chocolate
taste test

Super bad idea

The dodgy advice destroying dreams

THRIFT SHOPPING

Dress for less

Night of the Ninja Pants

The retail fails that come back to haunt us

I'll never forget the time Instagram convinced me to buy a pair of Ninja Pants.

The year was 2020, the world was knee deep in COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. A challenging time for all involved. It was a time of panic, of stress, of trying to figure out how to homeschool two rowdy children while working a demanding full-time job.

It was a time of Ninja Pants.

If you're a man aged 25–45, you might remember Ninja Pants. Baggy at the thighs, tight at the ankle. All the rage in Japan apparently. They looked comfortable yet cutting edge. Cool but casual. They were sometimes described as Japanese pants, or more alarmingly, “casual harem pants”. Still trying to figure out what “formal harem pants” look like, but I digress...

The Ninja Pants appeared on my Instagram ads at a moment of great vulnerability, when I felt like I needed something to cheer me up. So I ordered a pair and immediately got excited. I'd ordered clothes online before and usually they appeared within a week. By next Monday, I thought, I'll be the talk of the town, strutting into the nearby Woolies, dazzling checkout staff with my [checks notes] “casual harem pants”.

But my Ninja Pants didn't appear that week. And they didn't arrive the week after, either.

It took a ludicrous six weeks for my Ninja Pants to arrive on my doorstep and when I opened them? Oh dear...

They were horrific. An abomination. Not only did they look nothing like the Ninja Pants on the ad, they were made of the cheapest material known to man – like the pants you find in a \$2 dollar store costume. They were already falling apart at the seams.

I had been conned.

I was reminded of my cursed Ninja Pants when reading Liam Kennedy's wonderful investigation into ‘ghost stores’. Online fashion retailers posing as local Australian retailers, ghost stores are ripping off Aussies in much the same way – promising high quality clothing and then conveniently disappearing when confused consumers unwrap the packaging and start demanding their money back.

The ACCC has sounded the alarm about these so-called ghost stores, but the sad reality is that once you've been snagged, there's not much you can do in retaliation. Some retailers will tell you to send the goods back to their country of origin before they'll consider a refund – but that's often at



the consumer's expense. And when you've paid, say, \$100 dollars for a pair of boots or, in my case, \$50 for a pair of “casual harem pants”, every cell in your body tells you to simply cut your losses and walk away.

It's a tough situation. I should know. My Ninja Pants hang in my closet to this day, a grim reminder to never, ever buy clothing via Instagram ads.

For more advice on these ghost stores and what to do when you've been duped, head to page 18. Or, if you'd prefer to buy your Ninja Pants second-hand, we have a plethora of thrift shopping tips on page 31. We've got something for everyone in this month's issue.

Mark Serrels

CHOICE Editorial Director

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CHOICE

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Wherever possible, we pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising or freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by membership. Membership includes access to services such as CHOICE Help and the Voice Your Choice research program. Our product ratings are

based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. We also research a wide range of consumer services, reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate their quality and claims.

BECOME A MEMBER To review the full range of membership options and benefits go to choice.com.au/signup.

MEMBERSHIPS/RENEWALS Call 1800 069 552 or email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au.





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BAKER'S
DELIGHT
P52



CHOICE magazine provides a selection of our top product reviews. We can't always include all the models we've tested, but you'll always find the products that scored the best. To view complete results for all our tests, go to choice.com.au, or call Customer Service on 1800 069 552 to add full online access to your membership package.

The latest consumer news in brief

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Surcharge ban within reach



After a long campaign from CHOICE and other consumer groups, the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has released a draft proposal to ban surcharges on debit and credit cards.

The RBA predicts that its proposal would save consumers an estimated \$1.2 billion per year, while businesses would save a similar amount through steps to reduce the interchange fees they pay to card providers.

Back in 2016, advocacy by CHOICE pushed the federal government to ban excessive surcharges. Now, after another consumer-led push, the government is finally proposing to ban them altogether.

Every day, millions of Australians face these sneaky extra charges. Last year, a CHOICE survey found that two in three people (66%) have often experienced businesses adding on a debit card surcharge without telling them. The RBA's review found that surcharging is no longer achieving its intended purpose of steering consumers towards cheaper payment methods.

Consumer voices have been heard, and a huge win is within our grasp. Now what we need is one last push. CHOICE will be making a submission to the RBA's consultation, and we are continuing to gather signatures for our petition in support of a ban.

Sign the petition at choice.com.au/AFairWayToPay.

MORGAN CAMPBELL

Correction

In our sunscreen test in the Aug 25 issue, we revealed that **Cancer Council Kids Sunscreen SPF 50+** was one of the four products tested that met its advertised SPF (from the 20 products tested). Unfortunately, we used an image of a different Cancer Council kids' sunscreen, one that returned an SPF of 33. For the highest protection, we recommend the product pictured top right. However, a sunscreen with an SPF of 33 will still provide you with good protection. If you have this product at bottom right, please continue to use it.



Number of financial complaints unacceptably high

For the second year in a row, the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA) has received more than 100,000 complaints, a number that Chief Ombudsman David Locke says is far too high.

“Firms have more work to do to ensure fair responses to complaints are delivered earlier, without people having to take the extra step of coming to us,” says Locke.

There was a slight decline in the overall number of complaints (4%) compared to last year’s record high, but complaints about investment and advice in general insurance were up 17%, and the number of complaints about life insurance also grew. A 45% decrease in the number of scam-related complaints explains the overall fall for the banking and finance sectors, says Locke.

“AFCA currently only sees a small proportion of scam complaints, and towards the end of the financial year we saw an uptick in some scam types that cause great harm. The number of scam cases are far too high and behind every case is a consumer who has been traumatised and often suffered life changing impacts.”

JARNI BLAKKARLY



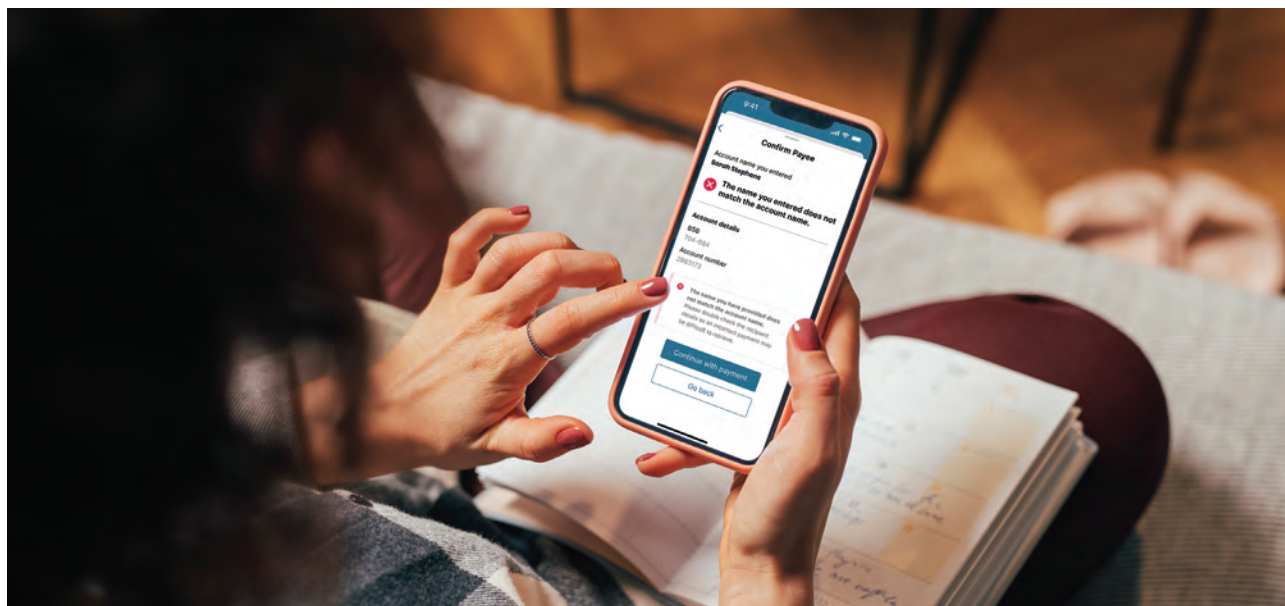
Banks introduce new scam detection technology

Australian banks have started rolling out Confirmation of Payee (CoP) to their apps and websites to allow customers to make sure they’re sending money to the right person or business. CoP has long been called for as a way to protect more Australians from scams. The function will activate when a customer tries to send money to a BSB and account number for the first time. When the customer enters the name they believe is associated with the account, CoP will check the receiving bank’s data to make sure this is correct. Until now, most Australian banks haven’t been performing such checks, leading to instances of

scammers posing as a trusted individual or organisation and diverting payments into their own accounts.

Under the new CoP scheme, if details don’t match, a warning will be displayed to the customer. Launched in July, the technology is first being rolled out on the platforms of major banks, including the big four. The Australian Banking Association says other Australian institutions will begin offering the service in the coming months and says it hopes to see “near-universal coverage” (over 95% of personal accounts) by the end of the year.

LIAM KENNEDY



Warning over growing power bank recalls

Consumers are being urged to make sure any power banks they're using are safe, as a growing number of the popular portable battery chargers are recalled by the ACCC. Dangerous power banks can catch fire, explode or vent toxic gas. Of the 17 different power banks the ACCC has recalled since 2020, nine were flagged as dangerous in the last 16 months alone. "Some consumers have suffered serious burn injuries, and some have had their property damaged because of power banks overheating and catching fire," says ACCC deputy chair Catriona Lowe.

The ACCC is concerned more incidents could follow, revealing that around 34,000 recalled power banks are still with consumers and could be being used to charge phones and other devices. You can check if your power bank is subject to a recall by visiting the ACCC Product Safety website (productsafety.gov.au). Recently recalled power banks include products from brands such as Anker and Baseus. "Consumers who own a recalled power bank shouldn't be concerned about being left out of pocket," adds Lowe. "Suppliers are offering a full refund or free replacement under these recalls."

LIAM KENNEDY



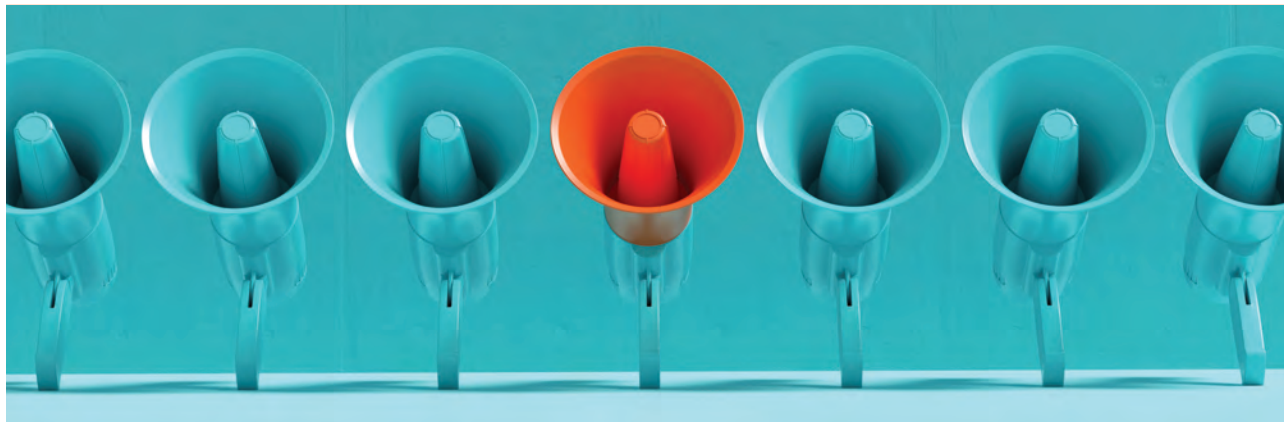
Webjet fined \$9 million for hidden fees

The Federal Court has ordered online travel agency Webjet to pay \$9 million in penalties for misleading advertising and for sending fake booking confirmations to customers. Webjet admitted it had promoted flight prices without including compulsory fees and asked for additional payments from customers despite already providing booking confirmations. The ACCC brought the case against Webjet following an investigation.

"We took this case because we considered that Webjet used misleading pricing by excluding or not adequately disclosing compulsory fees in its ads," says ACCC chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb. "Seeking to lure in customers with prices that don't tell the whole story is a serious breach of the Australian Consumer Law."

In its advertised prices, Webjet excluded servicing and booking guarantee charges, which ranged from \$34.90 to \$54.90. Such fees provided Webjet with 36% of its total revenue during the time it was distributing the misleading advertisements from 2018 to 2023. The fake confirmations for flight bookings were sent between 2019 and 2024 and were followed by requests for customers to pay up to \$2120 to complete their bookings. Webjet has now refunded these customers.

LIAM KENNEDY



Temu doubling down on advertising in Australia

With recent reports that Temu has increased how much it spends on advertising to Australians, should we be worried about becoming even more of a dumping ground for unsafe products?

While Temu's reach and poor track record are certainly concerning, it's not the only online marketplace of concern – we've identified non-compliant and unsafe products being sold across a number of online marketplaces. This is not just a Temu problem, it's an online marketplace problem.

Right now, online marketplaces are able to exploit a gap in the law by acting as an intermediary to avoid responsibility when it comes to product safety. This can leave consumers and regulators having to pursue third party sellers that may be based overseas, difficult to contact, and near impossible to hold accountable for selling dangerous goods.

It's crucial that product safety obligations are imposed on online marketplaces, not just on retailers

and manufacturers. To do that, the government must introduce a general safety duty to make

it illegal to sell unsafe products in Australia. Until then, Australia's lax product safety laws will continue to be seen as a business opportunity – and that comes at a terrible cost to us all.

Sign the petition for stronger product safety laws now at choice.com.au/productsafety.

ANDY KELLY



CHOICE submission on unsolicited selling practices

Over the years we've seen shonky businesses use unsolicited selling tactics, such as door knocking and cold calling, to spruik everything from solar panels to adjustable beds. These businesses often target people in vulnerable circumstances, using pressure selling and coercion tactics. But misconduct is difficult to prove, as there is little to no record kept of verbal conversations and representations.

Now, these tactics are under the spotlight. In response to a designated 'super' complaint on the issue lodged by Consumer Action Law Centre earlier this year, the ACCC is conducting a review into unsolicited selling and lead generation.

This review is a crucial opportunity to put an end to these predatory practices and finally close a glaring gap in our consumer protections. CHOICE has lodged a submission calling for a comprehensive ban on unsolicited



selling practices and for stronger regulation of lead generation practices to ensure businesses aren't able to target vulnerable consumers with high-pressure and predatory sales tactics.

JORDAN CORNELIUS

Glass action

The Hobot-R3 is a robotic device that uses 5kg of suction force to grip onto your windows and glass surfaces, while a 90W brushless motor works to mimic human scrubbing and get surfaces clean. It is slim and rectangular in design and can be used within a framed location on surfaces including glass, porcelain, marble, mirrors, tiles, splashbacks and walls.

It'll set you back \$799, which includes the cleaner with a safety tether, two sets of cleaning wheels, seven sets of mop pads, 220mL of cleaning fluid, two extra nozzles, a remote to manually control the robot, user manual and quick start guide. In terms of ongoing costs, you'll be paying \$27 for a pack of 12 (six sets) mop pads and \$12 for 220mL of cleaning fluid.

You can also download an associated app that lets you control the Hobot and receive alerts and prompts during the cleaning cycle. Our expert tester, James Thomson, found the Hobot was easy to connect and run through the app.

It has a dual spray tank for the cleaning solution and on its base are two removable mop pads. Unlike robot vacuum cleaners, which are cordless, the Hobot-R3 is mains-powered, but it does have a back-up battery for safety reasons.

There is also a safety tether that helps to 'catch' the robot if it detaches from the window.

We were lucky we'd attached it, as it fell once during testing but was caught by the tether.

HOBOT-R3 ROBOT WINDOW CLEANER

PRICE \$799

CONTACT robotmylife.com.au



For the best results, the manufacturer recommends doing a "dry clean" first (with the spray system turned off) to gather all the dust. The dry run took around six minutes in our test. Thomson then swapped to a fresh set of cleaning pads before doing two runs of the "wet clean" with the spray function turned on to wash and clean the window. At the end of these processes the window was very clean.

In our test, the Hobot was unable to clean the 2mm strip around the edge of the window, and its design also didn't allow its cleaning heads to extend all the way into the corners, leaving them dirty. There were also some small areas of dirt remaining across the window, but these little deposits were easily removed by simply rubbing with a cloth.

CHOICE verdict: A robot window cleaner should be considered a device for maintaining clean windows. If you're not expecting any more than maintenance from your Hobot, you'll be satisfied with the results. Thomson rates his experience with the Hobot-R3 as OK. While it's easy to use and control with the remote and it cleans well, it struggles with corners, and it fell once for unexplained reasons during our testing, which brought down the rating. You can expect additional costs for replacement cleaning fluid and mopping pads, but if you use it regularly for maintenance cleaning then you may find plain water can get the job done.

REBECCA CIARAMIDARO

Youpla fined another \$3.5 million, but unlikely to be recouped

The disgraced funeral expenses insurance provider Aboriginal Community Benefits Fund (ACBF) has been fined \$3.5 million by the Federal Court for representing itself as Aboriginal-owned or managed, when in fact it was not. Also known as Youpla, ACBF targeted thousands of mostly low-income First Nations consumers with dodgy funeral plans over decades.

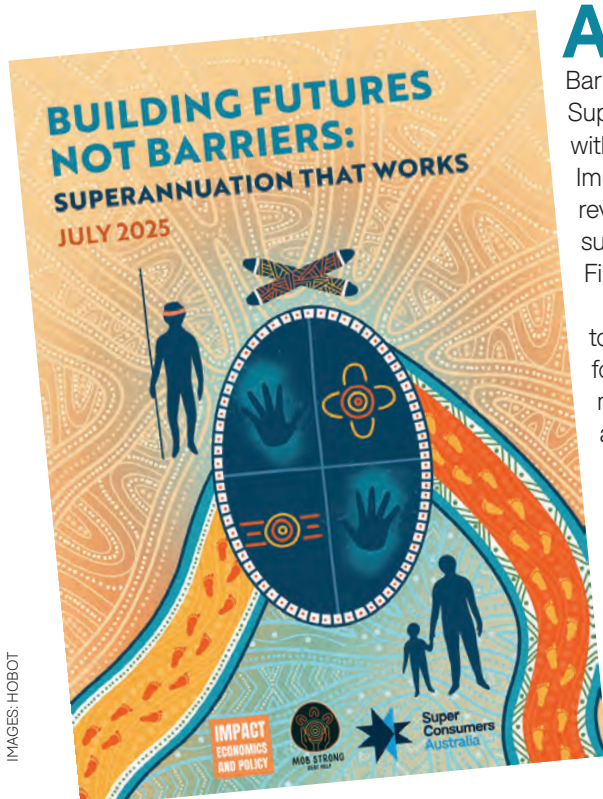
The \$3.5 million penalty comes in addition to a \$1.2 million penalty ordered in September, bringing the combined legal penalties against the fund to a total of \$4.7 million. However, ACBF has gone into liquidation and the money, much of which has disappeared into offshore bank accounts, will likely never be paid.

“Today’s penalty is a strong deterrent to anyone who tries to mislead Aboriginal consumers by falsely claiming Aboriginal ownership or management. It is one of ASIC’s enduring priorities to tackle misconduct targeting First Nations people and our work in this case shows exactly why,” says ASIC chair Joe Longo.

JARNI BLAKKARLY



First Nations Australians locked out of their superannuation



An independent report, ‘Building Futures, Not Barriers’, commissioned by Super Consumers Australia with Mob Strong Debt Help and Impact Economics and Policy, reveals Australia’s \$4 trillion superannuation system is failing First Nations people.

“Superannuation is meant to be a retirement safety net for all Australians. But too many First Nations peoples are shut out of a system that is meant to serve us,” says Mark Holden, senior solicitor at Mob Strong Debt Help. “Rigid ID rules, culturally unsafe customer service and reliance on digital-only processes mean it can take our mob months or years to access their own money – if they’re still alive.”

The research found that:

- unreasonable ID barriers stop many from accessing their super, even in hardship
- culturally unsafe and inaccessible service drives people to give up their rights.

Financial counsellor Alex Price-Busch sees the harm daily. “Families fight for death benefits while grieving. Many just give up because it’s too hard,” he says.

First Nations Australians are also twice as likely to have lost or unclaimed super compared to the national average. The report calls for urgent reforms, including mandatory customer service standards, culturally safe support, and better resourcing for legal and financial counselling services – so First Nations Australians can access the super they’ve earned.

ANTOINETTE DYCE

SMS senders warned to prepare for anti-scam register

From 15 December, Australians will receive text messages labelled as being from “unverified” senders if the organisations sending them have not joined the national Sender ID Register. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) shared the information in a warning to businesses and other groups to prepare for the arrival of the register, which is designed to protect people from SMS impersonation scams. “This is a call to action for all organisations who use sender IDs including banks, retailers, utilities and not-for-profits,” says ACMA chair Nerida O’Loughlin. “You need to start preparing now to be able to continue to use this method to contact your customers.”

ACMA has been conducting a second round of consultations on its plan for the register. Once the scheme is finalised, organisations wanting to distribute SMS messages under a particular name or alphanumeric tag will need to register this ID with telcos. The register is intended to ensure telcos can check whether text messages being sent under a particular ID are coming from the organisation associated with that name or tag and not a scammer trying to impersonate that entity.

LIAM KENNEDY



Aussies warned not to ‘rent’ their bank accounts to scammers

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) is warning Australians not to rent out their bank accounts to criminal scammers — which some people are doing for as little as \$200 — as it can lead to serious legal consequences.

Criminal networks are increasingly looking to money mules for assistance in laundering illicit money and moving stolen funds, says the AFP. The routing

of money through legitimate Australian bank accounts may get the mules paid between \$200 and \$500 but carries serious criminal penalties. The AFP warns that money launder charges carry a maximum penalty of life imprisonment in Australia.

“It is illegal to rent, buy or sell bank accounts, and doing so supports the criminal ecosystem. Your account

may be housing money derived from scams, extortion, drug trafficking and terrorism,” says AFP detective superintendent Marie Andersson. “If a criminal has access to your bank accounts and personal details, they may use this information to commit other crimes, potentially implicating you in their illegal activities.”

JARNI BLAKKARLY

Government exploring sustainable investment labelling

The federal government undertook a consultation period from 18 July to 29 August on the introduction of a sustainable investment product labelling scheme. The aim of the scheme would be to give investors more confidence to put capital into sustainable products. Treasurer Jim Chalmers says it is part of a 'road map' for Australia to become a renewable energy superpower and to harness economic opportunities from net zero emission targets.

The government sought feedback from investors, companies and the broader community on the labels to help refine its design principles for the framework. It is hoped the labelling will help investors and consumers compare, identify and make decisions about investments, understand what terms like 'sustainable' and 'green' mean in the realm of financial products, and tackle greenwashing.

JARNI BLAKKARLY



IMAGES: GETTY



Supermarkets meet soft plastic clean-up orders

New South Wales authorities have applauded Coles and Woolworths for clearing thousands of tonnes of soft plastic out of storage in the state and passing the material onto recyclers. The NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) says the move ensures the supermarkets are now compliant with clean-up notices issued to them in 2023, following the collapse of REDcycle. At the time, the EPA was sounding the alarm over 15 sites in NSW being used to store plastics collected under the scheme, saying they posed serious fire and pollution risks. In July this year, the EPA revealed that 4102 tonnes of the material had been removed and over 91% had been sent to recycling processors.

It comes as Coles and Woolworths have been working with Aldi to clear REDcycle stockpiles in other parts of Australia. As stockpiles have reduced, all three supermarkets have reintroduced schemes to collect soft plastics for recycling at some of their stores in Victoria and NSW. While the number of stores with collection points has recently increased, the supermarkets have previously told CHOICE there still isn't enough recycling capacity to support a nationwide collection scheme.

LIAM KENNEDY

Sunscreens in court over greenwashing allegations

The ACCC has launched Federal Court proceedings against the parent company of the Hawaiian Tropic and Banana Boat sunscreen brands over allegedly false and misleading claims that their products were 'reef friendly'. Parent company Edgewell had claimed the sunscreens were 'reef friendly' because they didn't contain oxybenzone or octinoxate, chemicals that have been banned in some jurisdictions due to the damage they can cause to reefs.

While the sunscreens did not include those specific ingredients, the ACCC alleges that they did contain other chemicals that cause harm to reefs, including coral and marine life. The case relates to the advertising of 90 sunscreen products sold between 2020 and 2024 that contained one or more of those ingredients. Edgewell removed the 'reef friendly' claim from its sunscreen products in 2020; however, the ACCC says products carrying the claim continued to be sold in Australia until December 2024.

"Many consumers consider environmental factors when purchasing products," says ACCC deputy chair Catriona Lowe. "By engaging in this alleged greenwashing, we say Edgewell deprived consumers of the ability to make an informed decision and may have prevented them from purchasing a different brand of sunscreen that did not contain chemicals which risked causing harm to reefs."

JARNI BLAKKARLY



Pet insurance for flat-faced dogs

Brachycephalic dogs like pugs, French and British bulldogs and Boston terriers are increasing in popularity due to their sweet nature and cute wide-eyed faces. However, selective breeding for such extreme flat faces, and in some cases short curly tails, has led to significant health problems and the potential for substantial vet bills.

The cost to insure these pets is high. In fact, premiums for a French bulldog are roughly three times higher than those for a cavoodle. So, you need to make sure you choose a policy that's going to give the best value for money.

We analysed policies from 16 pet insurers for both a three-month-old and a three-year-old French bulldog, with at least 80% coverage of vet bills and an annual limit over \$20,000. We found **Medibank Pet Max** to be the best value option for this brachycephalic breed. Pet Max includes cover for brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome, skin conditions, dental illness, eye conditions and spinal conditions, which this breed is susceptible to. As always, read the product disclosure statement before you purchase any policy to understand what's covered.

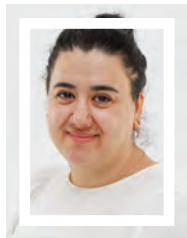
JANE BARDELL





RANTS AND RAVES

Concealed: The hidden influence of luxury packaging



Most mornings, as I reach for my concealer, I don't even think twice. Sometimes it's Dior, sometimes L'Oréal Paris —

both are part of my makeup routine, and I've grown to love them equally. I have oily skin, and in terms of finish and texture, both concealers do a pretty solid job. They glide on smoothly, blend easily, and don't slide off halfway through the day.

Of course, there are some tiny differences. As a high-end brand, Dior's \$75 concealer has that signature luxe scent, the brush feels a bit more refined and comfier in my hand, and the glass packaging makes me feel like I'm holding something expensive. L'Oréal's \$15 concealer, while simple in appearance, works just as well on my skin. The results from both products are practically identical.

But it wasn't until a small incident recently that I began thinking more critically about what I was really paying for. I had a near-empty bottle of Dior concealer and a tiny bit of Dior foundation left in another container. The frugal side of me kicked in — why not combine the two? So, I decided to pour the few drops of remaining foundation into my concealer bottle.

To my surprise, when I tried to reinsert the applicator, it wouldn't go in. The wand was too big for the (tiny) amount of product I'd poured. I had to remove a lot of it again just

to fit the brush back in. That's when it really struck me: the beautiful glass bottle, the elegant cap, the luxurious feel in my hand — it was all just giving an impression of abundance while actually just taking up space — so that there was less actual product in the bottle.

Once I made this realisation, I started to wonder — am I paying for the product, or just for the glass bottle? Is the oversized brush necessary, or simply part of the illusion of luxury? Is the brand trying to make me believe I'm getting more than I am?

The reality hit me that I was paying three times as much, essentially for a fancy bottle

So I turned the bottles over and checked how much actual product they each contained. The Dior bottle looked much larger than the L'Oréal and had a stated capacity of 11ml. The small L'Oréal tube contained less — 6.8ml. But some quick maths revealed that the L'Oréal cost about one third as much per millilitre as the Dior.

Suddenly, the reality hit me that I was paying three times as much, essentially for a fancy bottle.

Don't get me wrong — I love luxury products and I do use them quite often. There's something about pulling out a sleek bottle with a designer logo that makes your morning feel a little more glamorous. The sensory details — the scent, the texture, the packaging — do matter. I pay for them knowingly. But that little refill incident made me rethink it all. How much of what I'm paying for is the illusion of 'more', when, in reality, I might be getting less?



At the end of the day, quality matters most to me. And when both products perform almost identically on my skin, I wonder: what exactly is the extra money for? Maybe it's the scent. Maybe the 15% recycled glass. Or maybe — just maybe — it's really great branding.

Now, when I alternate between the two, I still enjoy both. But I look at that heavy glass bottle a little differently — I know how much it's costing me.

PARIS SOLTANI

ASK THE EXPERTS

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

ASK US

Email your question to asktheexperts@choice.com.au or write to Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204. You can also tap into the 'brains trust' at www.choice.community.

Q I have a 6.6kW solar system on my house for a four-person family with average usage – about 20kWh per day. I wonder if it's time to upgrade our system to include a storage battery, but I'm worried about the payback time as the batteries are so expensive. How do I know if it will be worth my while?

A CHOICE solar expert Chris Barnes: The new Cheaper Home Batteries scheme, together with some state-based incentives, have certainly made a home storage battery a viable option for many more homes. But there's a lot to consider, and a battery still won't make financial sense for all.

You may need to add more panels



to your set-up to ensure enough solar generation to charge the battery on most days, and you may also need to upgrade the inverter to allow

for the battery installation.

If your electricity consumption in the evening and nighttime is a major part of your usage then the battery should be a good investment and is more likely to pay for itself, especially if you have relatively high electricity rates and low feed-in tariffs. The goal should be for the battery to pay for itself within its warranty period (typically 10 years). Joining a Virtual Power Plant can also tip the payback equation in your favour. The best chance for battery payback in under 10 years is for homes in WA, SA, NSW



and Queensland. Our solar partner SolarQuotes has a calculator to help you estimate payback: solarquotes.com.au/battery-storage/calculator.

If you do decide to go ahead, make sure you avoid some of the dodgy installers that may be popping up in response to the new subsidies on offer. Read more about the issue on page 27.

Q I set the thermostat to 18°C on my new heater. It wasn't warm enough, so I increased it to 22°C to achieve the desired result. My other heater gives me the desired result when set to 18°C. The manufacturer told me the number shown on the thermostat is mainly a reference for the heater to work to, and that different heaters could be calibrated differently. Is this accurate? Or could there be an issue with

the heater and am I using excess energy when it's set to 22°C?

A CHOICE home heating expert Matthew Steen:

The manufacturer's explanation is probably correct – the setting on the thermostat can't always be relied upon to reflect the actual room temperature (ideally, of course, it should be reasonably close and the thermostat should behave consistently). So the heater you set to 22°C may not necessarily be using more energy than a different heater that achieved a similar level of heating when set to

18°C. (The only way to know how much energy is being used is to use a power meter on the power outlet.) The two heaters could simply have thermostats that are built or calibrated differently.

The best advice I can give is that if you're looking to reduce energy use (and therefore your bill), regardless of the heater being used, find a setting that works consistently, aim for as low a room temperature as is comfortable, and try not to run the heater any more than needed.





Q I received an Ember coffee mug as a gift last Christmas. Initially, the product worked flawlessly and I was very impressed. But about four months later the mug (which cost \$200) stopped functioning after an app update. I followed all the troubleshooting guides provided by Ember, but the issue persisted – the mug could no longer communicate with the app. On 28 June, I submitted a support ticket to Ember. I received two automated responses indicating high support volumes and requesting the device's serial number, which I promptly provided. Since then, I have not received any further communication, despite multiple follow-up attempts.

A CHOICE customer service: Under Consumer Law, a product must be of acceptable quality and fit for its normal purpose, acceptable in appearance and finish, free of defects, and safe and durable. If a product doesn't meet this standard, consumers are entitled to a remedy, and gift recipients have the same rights as the person who bought the item. The remedies available depend on whether the failure is major or minor and whether remedy is sought from the retailer where the product was bought, or from the manufacturer (if they're not one and the same).

If bought from a separate retailer, you are still entitled to seek redress directly from the manufacturer but

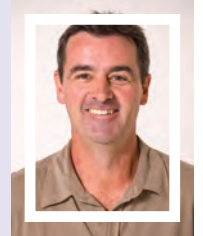
the remedy is limited to damages for the reduction in the product's value, capped at the purchase price or average retail price, whichever is lower. It's also worth noting that these rights are also separate to any express manufacturer warranty, and no damages can be claimed if a repair or replacement has been provided within a reasonable time under such warranty.

If bought from the manufacturer and the problem is considered major (the item can't be used, repairs can't be made quickly or at all, it's unsafe, or you wouldn't have bought the item if the problem was known) consumers are entitled to choose between a replacement or refund. If the issue is minor (it doesn't substantially affect the use of the product and can be fixed easily or quickly), the seller can choose to give you a refund, replace the item or repair it.

If the person who gifted you the mug bought it from a retailer and not direct from Ember, this may open an alternative avenue of redress for you. You could also consider contacting Ember again via a formal complaint letter or email and mention that the mug does not meet the consumer guarantee of acceptable quality under Australian Consumer Law. Include that you'd like a resolution within a few business days and that if they do not respond, you intend to lodge a complaint with the Fair Trading office in your state/territory.

Q I've noticed my dishwasher has been underperforming lately, so I had a look inside to see if there were any blockages. I noticed the little arms in the spray arms seem to be blocked with bits of food and gunk. I tried wiping down with a cloth but it didn't get into the holes – what's the best way to clean them?

A CHOICE household goods expert Denis Gallagher: To really get into those holes you'll need to remove the spray arms and poke a toothpick or



soft, pointy object into the jets (no sharp metal objects – they can damage the jets) to clear any obstructions, then reinstall the spray arms. That should fix the issue, but if your dishwasher has been underperforming and is a little dirty in general, there may be other things you need to do to get it back to top performance. For more information on cleaning your dishwasher (and some other commonly used appliances) read our spring cleaning advice on page 34.

