Home Repairs and Improvements

Toolkit

March 2012
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 In the 18 months from January 2009 to September 2010, advice service Consumer Direct received over 146,000 complaints from consumers about problems they had experienced with home repairs and home improvement projects.

1.2 As a result of the high complaint levels, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) commissioned TNS-BMRB to research the sector in more detail. The results of the research were published in June 2011.

1.3 Following that research report, a steering group comprising OFT, Citizens Advice, Trading Standards Services (TSS) and TrustMark was set up to implement the report’s recommendations, in order to seek to make this market work better for consumers.

1.4 The national campaign

1.5 The campaign aims to raise awareness amongst consumers around how to manage successful home repairs and home improvement projects.

1.6 The campaign is timed to run between the spring and autumn, when most home improvement projects are carried out.

Campaign objectives

1.7 To make the home repairs and improvements market work better for consumers, we have identified the following four campaign objectives:

- To identify common projects and customers affected.
- To identify initiatives that might help to improve the market.
- To facilitate those initiatives.
- To communicate with businesses and consumers to improve projects on home repairs and improvements.
About this toolkit

1.8 The toolkit has been designed to help you generate local PR activity to raise awareness among consumers and businesses of some of the common pitfalls to avoid when taking on home improvement and repair projects.

1.9 The toolkit is intended to help you generate ideas and contains material that you can use and adapt for your local area.

1.10 You can pick and mix which elements you would like to use from the material and ideas provided. You may wish to use top tips from the consumer and business guidance to help illustrate key messages.

1.11 This toolkit can be downloaded from the OFT website www.oft.gov.uk/publications and also from our partners’ sites, such as Trustmark and your local Trading Standards.

Working with partners

1.12 In order to maximise your campaign try to involve local partners to support it, such as:

- Citizens Advice.
- Trading Standards.
- Local Authority Building Controls and Planning Departments and their press office.

Target audience

1.13 There are two target audiences for this campaign - consumers and businesses.

Consumers

1.14 The target audience for this campaign are consumers who are most likely to suffer detriment. These are people who:
• Have recently moved to a new area.
• Have not undertaken a similar type of project before.
• Are undertaking large projects.

1.15 The most vulnerable are those who fit into all three groups.

1.16 Any activity that you are planning needs to reach the above target audiences, so make sure you choose the appropriate channels.

**Businesses**

1.17 The sector is dominated by small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), mostly at the smaller end of the scale. The majority are not members of trade associations.

1.18 The following three trades are our key target audiences, given their propensity to appear in the top ten most complained about products and services on Consumer Direct.

• Builders.
• Glaziers.
• Plumbers / heating engineers.

**Key messages**

1.19 Key campaign messages have been established so you can refer back to them for every activity you carry out.

**For consumers**

• Spend time researching a trader who will deliver the project to your standards.
• Speak with your trader if you are not happy with an element of work. If you need further advice contact [insert name of organisation issuing message].
For businesses

1.20 Before you start work, spend time making sure that your customer understands exactly what you’ll be doing and when and what the costs are, and agree the ground rules.

1.21 Both customers and businesses have rights and responsibilities. Talk to your local Trading Standards or your trade association to avoid falling foul of the law.

Call to action

1.22 The call to action for the campaign is:

You can find helpful advice and step-by-step guides at [insert name of organisation issuing message].

Target media

1.23 There is a range of media that you can utilise at a local level.

- Local newspapers.
- Local radio stations.
- Local television news.
- Local authority resident magazines.
- Local community websites.
- Regional property press.
- Local lifestyle magazines
- Social media including Twitter.
2 PR/MEDIA ACTIVITY

2.1 Media is a great way to connect with your local target audience to convey your messages.

2.2 The first port of call should be to speak with your press team to pull together a plan to generate media coverage. You will need to:

- Agree which media to contact and when.

- Decide who the campaign spokesperson will be – you will need to select a spokesperson who is a confident and authoritative public speaker, such as a local councillor or senior police officer.

- Ensure that the campaign key messages are always included in the content.

- Include the call to action in content, so that it is clear how consumers and businesses can get further advice.

- Consider photography or photo-call opportunities, making sure the picture will be visually interesting and that it tells a story.

2.3 Generally remember to plan your campaign and look at what activity your partners are doing so that you can either tie your activity in at the same time as theirs or spread out your activity so that constant coverage is achieved.

2.4 Also look at what else is taking place in the local and national media environment as this will determine whether your story will get picked up. If there are other big announcements taking place, you might want to consider whether you go ahead of that announcement or after, once that news story has reached its peak.

**Third party spokespeople**

2.5 Securing local support will help add weight to your campaign, so you may want to explore whether any local councillors, local celebrities or business leaders and other organisations such as your local planning
department, Federation of Small Businesses are prepared to endorse your campaign.

**Media story ideas**

**Media story 1 – A bespoke kitchen not fit for purpose**

2.6 It’s only been two weeks since Sharon’s new kitchen was fitted and it’s already falling apart. You wouldn’t expect to pay a specialist kitchen manufacturer £10000 for a handmade bespoke kitchen to be missing essential parts. The local builder who was hired for the job provided Sharon with a specification of exactly what the kitchen would include. When he started fitting the kitchen Sharon realised that the kitchen was missing essential parts like a pull out larder and some units appeared to be crookedly fitted. When Sharon approached the builder he said he would put it right, but never did. Sharon paid the builder for the kitchen up front and is now left with a kitchen she can’t use. When we contacted the OFT a spokesperson said, ‘We always recommend people to use the guidance published on our website and never pay a builder for the work in advance.’ The OFT has launched a national campaign and is working with your local Citizens Advice and Trading Standards to ensure citizens are aware of what they should do when taking on home repair projects.

**Media story 2 – Bad Builders**

2.7 Would you part with your hard earned cash and give it to someone without getting any receipt? Marge, a 70 year old pensioner trusted a local builder who came highly recommended by a neighbour. She parted with £6700 from her pension savings to convert her existing garage into a bedroom with an en-suite.

2.8 The builder left after two weeks. Marge has an incomplete room. There is no new roof and the bathroom has not been fitted with any of the bathroom fittings. Marge has no further savings or any other money to pay to get another builder in to finish it.
2.9 The builder gave Marge no paperwork detailing what he would do and each time he took cash payments he did not give any receipt for what the payment would cover.

2.10 The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is warning consumers to be more vigilant, as using poor quality traders can leave you with major financial problems. Even if a trader comes recommended, the OFT is still urging people to do all the necessary checks and has issued guidance on home repairs and home improvement projects and how best to make the process as smooth as possible.

2.11 Marge has contacted the local Citizens’ Advice Bureau to see if they can help and the local Trading Standards Officer.

2.12 The local trading Standards Officer, Terry Pritchard said, ‘We would recommend that you get everything in writing. Check the trader’s registered company address if they have one, where their office is based and that they have a landline number as well as a mobile.’ He then said, ‘We will be doing everything we can to track down this trader so he can at least complete the job for Marge and put it right. We are working closely with West Midlands Police to track him down.’

Media story 3 – Unfairly refused refund for poorly completed work

2.13 A 75 year old retired pensioner and his wife live in Newark and bought their home in 1960. The pensioner ordered a bathroom to be fitted and a new kitchen. He used a company that was carrying a logo of Age UK on their company publicity materials. Age UK usually works with suppliers who have a good reputation and history of working with them directly and extend this offering and experience to its members.

2.14 The pensioner signed a contract that was given to him and handed over £3000 as a deposit towards the overall costs for fitting the bathroom and kitchen of £5000. The contractor started work on fitting the bathroom, but there were evident issues regarding the quality of the workmanship, plus the contractor was not working to the agreed specification that was provided and signed by both parties. Due to these
problems the pensioner decided to cancel the order for the kitchen to be fitted.

2.15 The pensioner had to pay another trader to put right the work that the contractor had done wrong. For example the contractor fitted a shower enclosure unit that was leaking and the cost of putting this right was £1331.

2.16 The pensioner contacted the firm to obtain a refund for £1331 for the work they had done badly. But the firm put in a counterclaim for their costs to date and is asking for an extra £938.

2.17 It transpired later, when the pensioner contacted Age UK that the firm has been using Age UK’s logo without their consent. The firm has never worked with Age UK. They are deceiving vulnerable old pensioners and providing a bad service.

2.18 Age UK and Trading Standards are helping the pensioner to resolve this issue.

2.19 A spokesperson at Age UK has said, ‘We recommend that you use our website or phone your local office to check the local suppliers in your area that have been Age UK accredited.’

**Photo call ideas**

2.20 The following photo call ideas have been developed to help you create simple, and eye-catching photo opportunities that will appeal to the media. You can use the ideas below as they are or as a guide. Bear in mind that the photos need to be in line with what the media locally prefers and tied in to your key messages

**Table: 2.21: Photo call idea 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of activity</th>
<th>A kitchen falling apart. Include image of owner not able to use the existing kitchen. Highlighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Props</td>
<td>Kettle and toaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core audience</td>
<td>People who have just moved home and likely to get a new kitchen fitted. People who have not undertaken a similar type of project before. Main audience is women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible partners</td>
<td>Local Citizens Advice and Trading Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target media</td>
<td>Local broadcast and print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional information</td>
<td>Would benefit from local statistics on how many people have faced problems with purchasing kitchens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.22: Photo call idea 2**

### 2.22 Poor quality builder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of activity</th>
<th>Show garage not converted into a bedroom with an en-suite. Include old age pensioner in her wheelchair with a blanket to keep her warm. Show roof with no insulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Props</th>
<th>Blanket</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core audience</td>
<td>Old age pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible partners</td>
<td>Age UK, other Charities, Citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advice and Trading Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target media</td>
<td>Local broadcast and print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional information</td>
<td>Local statistics on average detriment figure to pensioners from poor quality traders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.23: Photo call idea 3**

2.23 **Unfairly refused refund for poorly completed work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of activity</th>
<th>Picture of publicity materials using Age UK.  Show old age pensioner and his wife and their pet dog inside their home with the contract and publicity materials the firm was using.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Props</td>
<td>Picture of publicity materials using Age UK's logo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core audience</td>
<td>Old age pensioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible partners</td>
<td>Trading Standards and Age UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target media</td>
<td>Local broadcast and print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional information</td>
<td>Local detriment figure for old age pensioners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3 ADVICE FOR CONSUMERS AND TRADERS

3.1 We have developed some materials to help you distribute these locally to extend the reach to your consumers and businesses.

3.2 We have developed guidance for consumers and businesses. The guidance documents can be found on our local partner websites, TrustMark and your local Trading Standards office.
4 ANNEXE 1 – MEDIA MATERIALS

Sample press release

4.1 [DATE]

4.2 [enter in your local statistic] complaints received on home repairs and improvement projects

4.3 Office of Fair Trading warns consumers to be vigilant.

4.4 The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has received 146,000 complaints in 2011 to its consumer helpline, Consumer Direct about home repairs and home improvement projects.

4.5 Home repairs and improvements have come into the top ten matters that people complain about.

4.6 The OFT carried out a research project to further investigate the market. The research showed that complaints were around delays, poor quality of work and substandard materials.

4.7 16-34 year olds are more likely to report complaints than those aged over 55.

4.8 The main concerns were that consumers felt that when a problem occurred they did not have the confidence or knowledge to raise issues effectively and that there were problems with the additional work requested which added to the main contract price.

4.9 The main target audience that seems to be in need of assistance is younger people, who have less experience in this field.

4.10 We are asking for people in [insert town/city] to use trade associations to find a reputable trader and obtain at least 3 itemised quotes.

4.11 Michele Shambrook of the OFT is also urging people to raise issues with their trader as soon as they occur and not at invoicing stage or when the job is completed.
4.12 When asking for additional work to be done, do bear in mind that the overall costs of the project will in turn increase.

4.13 Please visit the TrustMark website to download your guide to making your home improvement projects run smoothly and how to manage your trader. You can also use this site to find a certified trader at www.trustmark.org.uk

Notes to editors

4.14 The following notes to editors are based on the format used by the OFT and are provided as a guide only. You may wish to adapt them to include background information which is specifically relevant to your organisation, region or local media.

4.15 In 18 months from January 2009 to September 2010, Consumer Direct received over 146,000 complaints from consumers about problems they experienced with home repairs and home improvement projects.

4.16 OFT commissioned TNS-BMRB to research the sector. The results of the research were published in June 2011.

Sample quotes from campaign spokespeople

4.17 Michele Shambrook, Operations Manager for the OFT-managed advice service Consumer Direct, said:

4.18 ‘Some poor quality traders can be opportunists who target vulnerable consumers. Consumers are usually left with an incomplete job, costing the consumer more money to get it fixed and causing a great deal of stress to the consumer to try to get things put right. We would encourage consumers to use the guidance produced and use TrustMark to find a reputable and local trader.’

4.19 [enter name of local partner and organisation]

4.20 ‘We have been contacted by consumers asking for advice on how to deal with poor quality traders. The number of enquiries we have received over the years has more than tripled. We have dedicated a section on
our new website to help consumers find reputable traders and to help
them to avoid the sort of problems that can arise.

4.21 You can find this information by visiting www.citizensadvice.co.uk

4.22 Michele Shambrook, Operations Manager for the OFT-managed advice
service Consumer Direct, said:

4.23 ‘People need to obtain 3 itemised quotes and discuss any problems with
their trader as they happen and not when the job has been completed.
They should also make sure they are obtaining a written contract with a
detailed specification of what the work entails and exactly what the cost
is.’

Sample notes to editors for press releases

4.24 The following notes to editors are based on the format used by the OFT
and are provided as a guide only. You may wish to adapt them to include
background information which is specifically relevant to your
organisation, region or local media.

4.25 In 18 months from January 2009 to September 2010, Consumer Direct
received over 146,000 complaints from consumers about problems they
experienced with home repairs and home improvement projects.

4.26 OFT commissioned TNS-BMRB to research the sector. The results of the
research were published in June 2011.

Table 4.27: Photocall sample notice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Poor quality builders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Photo showing an area of a home fitted badly, such as a bathroom, kitchen roof or guttering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>[Day] [Month] [Year]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>[insert timings]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>[insert full address]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Detail   | Every year the number of complaints the OFT is receiving regarding home repairs is increasing. Home repairs and home improvement projects come in the top 10 complained about subject areas.  

Poor quality traders can cause consumers a great deal of stress and financial loss.  

To illustrate the growing problem [insert name of director] of local Trading Standards will be surrounded by letters of complaints |
| Contact  | For more information please contact:  

[insert name]  

[insert organization]  

[insert phone number]  

[Insert mobile number]  

[insert email address] |
5 ANNEXE 2 – CASE STUDIES

5.1 Case studies offer personal experiences of people who have been through a bad experience when commissioning home repairs and home improvement projects and are of particular interest to local media.

5.2 The case study serves as a real life example to others of the risks and elements to watch out for and avoid. It also makes it easier for people to relate to, as it affects their local area and someone living very close to them.

5.3 If you have come across someone who is willing to take part in a case study, be sensitive and ask their permission to use their story and for any photography.

5.4 The following guides will help you capture all the essential information you need to create a case study.

Case study contact form
This may seem obvious but it’s important to record full contact information to capture details about the subject and participant.

Home repairs and improvements – authorisation form for media use
Full name......................................................................................................................

Age.................................................................................................................................

Marital status................................................................................................................

Address..........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

Date of incident............................................................................................................

Nature of problem........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
Interview questions

Below are example questions you could ask your case study participant, to tease out the information that you need. Do bear in mind that the participant may be upset and the information may be sensitive. Using tact and your own judgement is important.

- When did the event take place?
- What actually happened?
- How much money did you lose as a result of what happened?
- Can you run me through what happened?
- When did you realise that your builder/trader was not doing the work properly?
- How did this make you feel?
- What happened as a result of the traders actions?
- Have you warned friends and family not to use the same trader?
- What was your attitude to traders before your encounter?
- How has this experience changed your life?
- What measures have you taken for future home improvements projects?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
**Authorisation form**

This form is to give consent to use the information that you have provided and any photography for media and marketing purposes.

**Authorisation form for media use**

First name....................................................................................................................................................

Surname........................................................................................................................................................

Address..........................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

Postcode.........................................................................................................................................................

I confirm that the information I have given to [insert your name]................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

From [insert case study participant name].................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

..................................................................................................................................................................

Regarding my experience may be used for the purposes of promoting awareness of The Home Repairs and Improvements projects to the media.
Any photography / filming [delete as appropriate] carried out by [insert name of photographer or local TV station]…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………

On [insert date]…………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………

May be used to illustrate publicity generated.

Signed…………………………………………………………………………………
Print name……………………………………………………………………………
Date………………………………………………………………………………….
Case study photography brief

A strong photograph and a well-written press release will generate interest amongst regional media.

Work with a local photographer who specialises in portrait photography to develop an image that conveys the situation and shows the bad workmanship.

The participant may still be affected by what happened so the photographer should be sensitive to the victim.

Photography guidance

- Confirm the date, time and location for the photography session.
- Call the case study participant on the day to confirm arrangements and to remind them of your visit.
- Seek permission from the participant to use a particular image, to ensure they are comfortable with the selection.
- When issuing the story email out the selected photography in low resolution together with the case study press release.
- Ensure you have a saved copy of the image in high resolution for the media who wish to publish the story and image.
6 ANNEXE 3 – SUPPORTING INFORMATION

FAQs

What do we mean by a poor quality trader?

6.1 A poor quality trader is someone who will carry out work to a substandard level or charge people for work they are not then carrying out to the specification that was agreed or at all.

Which groups are most likely to be affected?

6.2 16-34 year olds seem more likely to report complaints than those over 55.

6.3 The older audience (55+) are less likely to report or have experienced problems.

What are trader schemes?

6.4 Trader schemes are set up by companies to monitor and evaluate the workmanship of traders before they can become accredited members. Traders must meet strict criteria to qualify.

What is complained about most?

- Delays.
- Poor quality of work and substandard materials.

What happens when a problem occurs?

6.5 Consumers felt that they did not have the confidence or knowledge to raise issues effectively.

6.6 The role of OFT and other bodies

6.7 The OFT’s role is as an author of information and to facilitate other organisations communicating to key audiences about home repairs and improvement projects.
6.8 Our partner organisations are Trading Standards and TrustMark. Both organisations will carry the business and consumer guidance and encourage use of the toolkit locally.

**Facts**

6.9 The campaign is based on the consumer complaints that are received by Consumer Direct and on the research study that was published in June 2011.
ANNEXE 4 – SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING

7.1 We have also developed content to help you generate coverage through online channels.

7.2 This is to make the detail around the home improvements and repairs content on your website visible within search engines to drive traffic to your website either by paying for search results or setting up your web pages to be compatible with search engines.

7.3 Use clear language used by your target market, builders and consumers, not your organisation.

Indexing

7.4 Create a sitemap index to ensure that all pages on your website are recognised by search engines.

7.5 You can ensure that indexing is as efficient as possible by ensuring that you maintain page addresses, create ‘301 re-directs’ if pages are moved and 404 ‘branded 404 error pages’ for deleted pages.

On-page optimisation

7.6 Improving on-page content and coding to include keywords and making them relevant to search terms to improve search ranking performance on search engines will help businesses and consumers find the information on your website.

Main areas:

- Title tags – ensure page titles include keywords as these label your content for search engines. Try to limit these to 10-15 keywords or 65 characters. Make them unique per page.

- META descriptions – these are the teasers you create for your web pages. Ensure these include grammatically correct sentences, are limited to 15-20 words with about 3 key phrases and that they end with a strong call to action, such as contact your local Trading Standards.
- Page coding – look at the way that you create your web pages and build your content.

**Link building**

7.7 Ensure that your website is linked to from other, well-regarded websites for the content that you will hold on home repairs and improvements.

7.8 This is as important so do consider how you can attract links from other websites.

This can be done by social media users linking to your website and bookmarking pages.