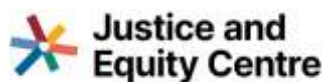


Submission

# Make unfair illegal

Submission from consumer advocates to the  
Senate Inquiry on Competition and Consumer  
Amendment (Unfair Trading Practices) Bill 2026

27 May 2026



## About the submission

The development of the submission was led by the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) in consultation with various experts and consumer groups.

This submission is being jointly made by the Consumer Policy Research Centre and the following organisations:

- ACCAN [Australian Communications Consumer Action Network]
- AMES Australia
- CHOICE
- Consumer Action Law Centre
- Consumer Credit Legal Service Western Australia
- Consumers' Federation of Australia
- Energy Consumers Australia
- Financial Counselling Australia
- Financial Counselling Victoria
- Financial Rights Legal Centre
- Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network
- Justice and Equity Centre
- Queensland Consumers Association
- Mob Strong Debt Help
- National Seniors Australia
- Super Consumers Australia
- Way Forward
- Western Australia Consumer Advocacy Network
- Westjustice

**In total, this submission represents the views and recommendations of 20 consumer sector organisations across Australia.**

### Contact for submission

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[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/UnfairTradingBill2026](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/UnfairTradingBill2026)

### Statement of Recognition

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia.

# Australians have waited long enough

The Federal Government has made an important commitment to legislate unfair trading. We see this as one of the most powerful consumer protections that will greatly benefit Australians.

**Our strong recommendation is that the *Competition and Consumer Amendment (Unfair Trading Practices) Bill 2026* is passed by the Senate as soon as possible.**

In addition, the Economics Legislation Committee should recommend that:

1. Section 28B of the Bill should be amended to include lead generation as an example of unfair conduct that may contravene the general prohibition. Lead generation should be defined as securing consumer contact information for sales purposes using obscure, complex or misleading mechanisms **and/or failing to clearly disclose the main purpose for collecting, using or sharing a consumer's personal information.**
2. the Federal Government also amend the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act 2001* with a mirror provision to ensure that unfair business practices cannot occur in financial services.

Australians have waited for over a decade for this reform that consumers in other jurisdictions have taken for granted for years. Similar jurisdictions, such as the UK, US and EU have had similar protections for their citizens for decades, in some cases, for over a century. This reform is not ground-breaking, but it will shift how Australians are treated by businesses.

The unfair trading prohibition will stop harmful practices that cost Australians time, money and their wellbeing.

## Australians are losing money and time to unfair business practices

We note that the Decision Regulatory Impact Statement for this Bill identified costs to businesses, as a result of this reform. These costs were far outweighed by the benefits to consumers.<sup>1</sup>

Still, we suggest caution when looking at costs to businesses, including small businesses, from this Bill – much of the “costs” to businesses from this Bill result from businesses stopping practices that make them significant money at the expense of consumers. As an example, some businesses using subscription traps will lose money as more of their customers are able to unsubscribe easily and when they choose to do so. This is a net benefit – it is a benefit for consumers and for businesses already doing the right thing and treating customers fairly.

International research shows that unfair business practices are costing consumers significant amounts of time and money. In 2024, the European Commission reported that unfair business practices in just the online environment, such as through online deceptive choice architecture

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<sup>1</sup> The Treasury, 2025, *Decision Regulation Impact Statement – Protecting consumers from unfair trading practices*, <https://oia.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/posts/2025/12/Protecting%20consumers%20from%20unfair%20trading%20practices.pdf>.

(dark patterns) and drip pricing were costing EU consumers at least 7.9 Billion EUR every year (12.85 Billion AUD), while the cost for businesses to comply was no more than 737 Million EUR per year (1.2 Billion AUD).<sup>2</sup> Considering these figures proportionally for Australia, this would mean that Australians are likely losing over 1 Billion AUD every year while the cost for businesses to comply with an unfair trading prohibition would likely be no more than 110 Million AUD.<sup>3</sup>

The scales are currently tipped against consumers who are trying to find a fair deal and against businesses who are doing the right thing.

Previous submissions from the consumer movement have provided ample examples and key evidence for why an unfair trading prohibition is long overdue in Australia (see Attachments 1 and 2).

## The ban on unfair trading must apply to all businesses

The aim of the unfair trading provisions should be to ensure that instances of any businesses treating Australians unfairly are prohibited. In our research with experts, advocates and regulators overseas in jurisdictions where unfair trading prohibitions already exist, there is one factor that is clear. An unfair trading prohibition operates at its best when it applies economy wide. There should be no exceptions, no carve outs.

No matter how small or large a business is, it should be accountable for how it treats its customers. We recommend that the unfair trading prohibition remains broad and ensures that responsibility for fair treatment sits on the shoulders of every business. Small business does not necessarily mean small transactions or small impact. Financial counsellors on the National Debt Helpline regularly see the impact of unfair business practices from small businesses. In their experience, some of the most egregious conduct can be from smaller businesses who appear to feel they can fly under the regulatory radar and often they do.

Cases of unfair practices relating to car hire, car napping, storage and pawnbroking often involve smaller businesses. For example, in 2025, Consumer Action won a class action against an unregistered pawnbroker who closed their store without prior notice and without the ability for anyone to retrieve their goods, while also charging customers exorbitantly high interest rates.<sup>4</sup> Below are case studies shared via Consumer Action and the Indigenous Consumer Action Network (ICAN) where small businesses have exploited the vulnerability of consumers, some who were already experiencing hardship.

### *Example case study:*

*Zhang's\* uninsured vehicle was parked in a parking lot when it was struck by another driver insured with RACV. Zhang was not at-fault. Shortly after the collision, a tow truck from a car repair business attended the scene. Zhang did not arrange or contact the towing company. The repairer advised Zhang that they would recover repair costs directly from the at-fault driver's insurer (RACV). A hire vehicle was provided to Zhang, which was returned after one week.*

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, 2024, *Commission evaluation shows the benefits and limitation of online consumer protection laws*, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/ip\\_24\\_4901](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/ip_24_4901).

<sup>3</sup> Proportionate comparative figures for Australia have been calculated using GDP figures across both jurisdictions based on data from World Bank Open Data source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Consumer Action Law Centre, 2025, *Consumer Action wins landmark Federal Court case against pawnbroker Taylors Business*, <https://consumeraction.org.au/consumer-action-wins-landmark-federal-court-case-against-pawnbroker-taylors-business/>.

Zhang signed a document at the time. However, he did not have a copy of the signed form at the time of his call to Consumer Action. Zhang's vehicle has now been repaired. However, the repairer's lawyer has informed Zhang that RACV has not paid the requested repair costs of approximately \$11,000, and negotiations are ongoing. As a result, the repairer is refusing to release Zhang's vehicle until payment is received. Zhang's vehicle has an estimated market value of approximately \$7,000.

The repairer's lawyer advised Zhang to pay the outstanding amount himself to secure release of the vehicle. This contradicts the original representation made to Zhang at the time of towing, when he was informed that the repairer would pursue recovery directly from the insurer.

The lawyer has further advised Zhang not to contact RACV directly, stating that doing so may interfere with their representation. Zhang has since received an invoice for approximately \$11,000 from the repairer but did not hold a copy of the signed agreement or authority provided to the repairer at the time of his call to Consumer Action.

**Example case study:**

Muna\* is a migrant single parent. Her sole income is Centrelink. Her first language is not English. She entered a hire-purchase arrangement for a car through a small hire car business. The business was not licensed to sell cars or provide loans. She first agreed to buy a car for \$22,000, with repayments of \$1,000 per month. She was then persuaded to buy a different car for \$43,500, with repayments of \$1,500 per month, despite saying that she could not afford it. She says the second contract was entered into at a parking lot in Melbourne. She was rushed through the contract and was told there was no need to read it. She was also told that ownership would transfer to her once she completed the payments. The following year, she experienced financial hardship and reduced her payments. She was told to pay what she could afford. The year after that, the car was repossessed when she brought it to the dealership for inspection. The car has not been returned, and none of her payments have been refunded. Consumer Action calculates that she has paid about \$30,000 in total.

**Example case study:**

Sarah\*, a First Nations mother of 6 children came to the ICAN financial counselling service very distressed as she had received a QCAT order for over \$12,000 payable to a small business which claimed she owed them money under a contract for a business coaching course.

Sarah explained that in late 2024 she saw an ad for the coaching course on social media and as she was hoping to start her own small business, she thought it might be helpful. She called the course provider to get more information about the course and the cost. Instead, she got a very high-pressure sales pitch with the representative advising her they would have her business up and running within 3 months. They urged her to pay \$600 to access the first workshop which she did that day. She had not seen or signed the terms and conditions when this payment was made. However, the business had also signed her up to a regular direct debit of \$600 per month via EziPay. After making this initial payment and then receiving the contract which committed her to a monthly payment plan of just under \$1,000 per month for 12 months, Sarah realised she could not afford the course. The contract she received explicitly stated that cooling off provisions did not apply due to the nature of the program setup with course access upfront.

*She was then pressured to sign the agreement to access the first workshop. Because she had already paid the \$600, she felt she had no choice so signed. After the initial workshop Sarah tried to cancel the course and explained she could not afford it. She was already relying on pay day loans to cover clothes and food for her children. The business refused to release her from the course and immediately threatened legal action which they then pursued. Sarah is now facing the possibility of bankruptcy on a debt she never intended to incur. The actions of the business have also significantly impeded her ability to start her own community-based business.*

**Important note:** ICAN's case study has been included with the express consent of the knowledge holder. In accordance with ICAN's Indigenous Data governance practices, this knowledge is not owned or controlled beyond that consent and remains subject to the ongoing authority and governance of the knowledge holder and their community. Any access, use, interpretation, or re-use requires prior informed consent from the knowledge holder

*\*all names changed to protect the clients' privacy*

If the unfair trading prohibition fails to be applied economy-wide, consumers, especially who are facing hardship and vulnerabilities, will fall through the cracks. It may also give rise to rogue businesses utilising the option of independent contractors or creating smaller subsidiaries in a way that obfuscates the supply chain, making it further difficult for a consumer to identify the responsible business when things go wrong.

The burden will be on individuals to ascertain whether a business is required to meet obligations under the unfair trading prohibition, instead of on businesses to ensure they're treating consumers fairly. We can already see the impact of the small business carveout in the Privacy Act, which places little to no responsibility on small businesses such as real estate agencies who harvest copious amounts of personal information every day. Placing the cognitive load on Australians, especially who are struggling through current cost-of-living pressures, vulnerability and hardship is deeply unfair.

**Recommendation: Ensure there are no exemptions created for specific businesses based on size and scale of the business.**

## Capturing unfair lead generation

Lead generation is the process of identifying people as sales targets and harvesting and using their contact details for sales pitches. It has become a significant source of consumer harm in Australia. Lead generation often involves aggressive, high-pressure sales of unaffordable or poor-quality products and services. The process of gathering and on-selling leads also leaves people's personal data exposed to the risk of leaks and misuse.

The role of lead generators in the collapsed Shield and First Guardian Master Trusts highlights the immense financial and personal damage that can be caused by exploitative lead generation business practices.<sup>5</sup> As an example, below is a case study shared by Financial Counselling Australia which clearly articulates the harms of high-pressure sales combined with predatory lending and exploitation of vulnerability, which are currently left to individuals and Financial Counsellors to deal with through a whack-a-mole process.

**Example case study:**

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<sup>5</sup> ABC, February 2026, ASIC announces review into 'lead generators' pushing superannuation switching, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-02-18/asic-announces-review-into-lead-generators-superannuation/106353740>.

*A consumer receiving income support and experiencing family and domestic violence agreed to an in-home visit after being contacted through a business who had utilised lead generation. The consumer believed it was only a product demonstration but was pressured that evening into signing a contract to buy a high-cost vacuum cleaner. The salesperson stated they would find a lender willing to provide credit to a pension recipient, and finance was arranged for a purchase that was clearly unaffordable for their circumstances. The consumer suffered significant financial harm and distress and is now homeless. After advocacy, the remaining debt was waived, payments already made were refunded, and the product was collected.*

The Bill as it currently stands, clearly states that practices would be prohibited that seek to *manipulate consumers or distort the environment in which they make decisions*. In many circumstances, this would capture harmful lead generation practices. However, given the significant consumer harm linked to lead generation and subsequent high-pressure sales, we recommend that these practices be explicitly cited in the legislation and/or Explanatory Memorandum as examples of conduct that contravene the general prohibition.

**Recommendation: Update Section 28B of the Bill to include lead generation as an example of unfair conduct that may contravene the general prohibition. Lead generation should be defined as securing consumer contact information for sales purposes using obscure, complex or misleading mechanisms and/or failing to clearly disclose the main purpose for collecting, using or sharing a consumer’s personal information. It should also be added to Paragraph 1.38 in the Explanatory Memorandum with clear case study examples of unfair lead generation. We recommend that the Federal Government work with Consumer Action and other consumer groups to develop clear case studies for the Explanatory Memorandum.**

## Extending the prohibition to financial services

The consumer movement has continued to raise concerns about the unfair trading prohibition not applying to financial services. Exclusion of the ASIC Act in the prohibition may facilitate regulatory arbitrage and exploit gaps in financial services licensing. An unfair trading prohibition varies from the ‘efficient, honest and fair’ duty which is forward looking and does not give rise to any consumer right should there be non-compliance.

Current financial services laws do not replicate an unfair trading prohibition. They do not respond to the full range of consumer concerns. Frontline consumer organisations often observe that the purchase of consumer goods like cars or solar panels happen in the same transaction with the purchase of warranties, insurance, installation and linked credit. As shown with the example below from Financial Counselling Australia, vulnerability is being exploited through questionable referral arrangements.

### *Example case study:*

*A consumer who was recently bankrupt and experiencing financial abuse obtained a small personal loan from a lender promoting “second-chance” credit. She was then pressured to deal with a particular financial adviser and understood that the advice process and her loan approval were connected. The adviser recommended transferring most of her long-standing superannuation into a new platform, resulting in significant fees, a loss of more than \$3,500 from her super balance, and unnecessary duplication of super accounts and insurance. She later fell into hardship and stopped repayments.*

Another example of a gap that is currently not covered by ASIC Act is the rise of the gamification of investment apps that use a range of dark patterns to urge consumers to invest.

While dark patterns are clearly captured in the proposed unfair trading prohibition, the carveout means there is a sector that can still implement them without recourse.

**Recommendation: We urge the Federal Government to also amend the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act 2001* with a mirror provision to ensure that unfair business practices cannot occur in financial services.**

## **It's time for change, it's time for Australians to be treated fairly**

We know unfair practices exist. We know these practices are not fully captured by current consumer protections. We know that bans on unfair trading practices are used effectively in other countries. We are at the precipice of significant reform for Australians and if implemented with care and respect, it will lead to markets working better for all, instead for a privileged few. It's time to make unfair illegal.

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# Attachment 1

**Consumer movement's joint 2024 submission to Treasury's consultation on the design of proposed general and specific prohibitions**

Submission

# Unfair trading practices

Submission from consumer advocates on  
Treasury's Consultation on the design of  
proposed general and specific prohibitions

19 December 2024

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## About the submission

The development of the submission was led by the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) in consultation with various consumer groups.

This submission is being jointly made by Consumer Policy Research Centre and the following organisations:

- [AMES Australia](#)
- [Australian Communications Consumer Action Network \(ACCAN\)](#)
- [Care](#)
- [CHOICE](#)
- [Consumer Action Law Centre](#)
- [WA Consumer Advocacy Network / Consumer Credit Legal Service \(WA\)](#)
- [Consumers' Federation of Australia \(CFA\)](#)
- [Energy Consumers Australia \(ECA\)](#)
- [Financial Counselling Australia \(FCA\)](#)
- [Financial Rights Legal Centre \(FRLC\)](#)
- [Justice and Equity Centre](#)
- [Mob Strong Debt Help](#)
- [Mortgage Stress Victoria \(MSV\)](#)
- [Queensland Consumers Association \(QCA\)](#)
- [Redfern Legal Centre](#)
- [Super Consumers](#)
- [Westjustice](#)

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### Statement of Recognition

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia.

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# A fairer deal – Reforming unfair business practices

Unfair business practices cost people time, money and wellbeing, and erode trust in markets. While the existing legislative framework addresses some extreme forms of exploitation, it remains insufficient to counter the nuanced and systemic nature of unfair practices, particularly in the digital age.

This submission represents combined efforts and consistent perspectives from the consumer sector. It builds on our past submissions to Treasury, which identified more than 50 examples of unfair business practices that harm consumers and should be captured by reforms.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential that any ban on unfair business practices captures financial services. Consumer organisations want to see an economy-wide ban on unfair trading, with legal provisions in both the Australian Consumer Law (ACL) and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) Act.<sup>2</sup> This approach would maintain consistency in consumer protection across sectors and address potential regulatory loopholes.

While industry is quick to voice compliance costs of these proposed prohibitions, there is current consumer detriment from not introducing such prohibitions. Our modelling shows that for the third of Australians experiencing financial detriment as a result of experiencing dark patterns online (34%), if each person lost just \$5 by a deceptive and manipulative design, the financial loss at a population level would amount to more than AUD \$46 million. Building on this, if each person lost \$50 per year to subscriptions traps, the amount lost at the population level would be close to half a billion Australian dollars.<sup>3,4</sup> Other research conducted by ING shows that Australians could save an average of \$1,261 a year by cutting back on subscriptions and other regular outgoings they have forgotten about or don't use.<sup>5</sup>

An unfair trading prohibition should be implemented as soon as possible, with strong penalties for non-compliance. Many businesses operating ethically and transparently will not need to make any changes to their operations to accommodate this legal change – they are already doing the right thing.

We know unfair practices exist. We know these practices are not fully captured by current consumer protections. We know that bans on unfair trading practices are used effectively in other countries. It is long past time that Australia introduced its own ban on unfair trading practices, and if adopted, our recommendations would enhance consumer protections in Australia, aligning the ACL with global best practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2023). *Make unfair illegal*. Submission from consumer advocates on Treasury's Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement, Protecting consumers from unfair trade practices. Available at:

<https://cprc.org.au/submission/make-unfair-illegal>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2022). *Duped by design – Manipulative online design: Dark patterns in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/duped-by-design-manipulative-online-design-dark-patterns-in-australia/>

<sup>4</sup> Based on ABS Estimated Resident Population figures as at March 2024. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/mar-2024>

<sup>5</sup> <https://blog.ing.com.au/money-matters/saving/unused-or-forgotten-subscriptions/#article-3685>

## Summary of recommendations

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<b><u>Recommendation 1</u></b>	<p>Australia should adopt the US legal approach to unfair trading which provides clear guidance and includes the reference to “unfair”.</p> <p>If Treasury chooses to adopt the EU model, it should simplify language and align definitions where possible.</p>
<b><u>Recommendation 2</u></b>	<p>Treasury should not include “legitimate business interests” in the definition of unfair practices, ensuring a stronger focus on protecting consumers and addressing harmful business conduct.</p>
<b><u>Recommendation 3</u></b>	<p>We propose that the grey list includes <b>prohibition of any business practices or design elements that unreasonably inhibit access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.</b></p>
<b><u>Recommendation 4</u></b>	<p>We propose that the grey list includes a <b>prohibition of any conduct or practice that causes or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.</b></p>
<b><u>Recommendation 5</u></b>	<p>To ensure fairness and consistency, the <b>unfair trading prohibition must apply to all sectors economy-wide, which includes financial services.</b> Australian, state and territory governments need to maintain the alignment between the ACL and the ASIC Act in relation to economy-wide consumer protections.</p> <p>A carve-out for financial services would lead to unequal protections for consumers, undermine the intent of an economy-wide prohibition, and fail to address systemic issues in financial services.</p>
<b><u>Recommendation 6</u></b>	<p>Implement a ban on dark patterns – including subscription traps, and data grab (both discussed below) – as a logical and urgent step to ensure consumer protection in the digital age.</p>
<b><u>Recommendation 7</u></b>	<p>We support penalties for unfair trading practices adopting the proportional approach currently used by the ACCC for breaches of the ACL.</p> <p>Treasury should introduce <b>immediate, proportionate penalties</b> based on the scale and benefit of the misconduct to harmonise regulatory measures, creating consistency in enforcement.</p>
<b><u>Recommendation 8</u></b>	<p>For legislation to be effective, it needs to be supported by regular surveillance and enforcement by the regulator to educate and shift the market towards a more consumer-centric approach to the digital economy. <b>Australia needs well-resourced Federal and state regulators</b> with the capacity</p>

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and capability to audit and enforce breaches in the complex digital environment.

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### **Recommendation 9**

Subscription traps should be addressed by combining the options outlined in the consultation paper. Treasury should prioritise reforms that make it as easy to cancel as it is to sign up and that require active opt-in after a free trial period. These measures should be supported by clear disclosure at the point of sign-up and before regular charges are made. The ACCC should undertake independent user testing to inform guidance for businesses as to an effective framework for removing barriers.

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### **Recommendation 10**

The Government should introduce specific reforms that will:

- Clearly ban drip pricing, including disclosure of any “per transaction” fees before a purchase process.
- Clearly ban dynamic pricing after the purchase process has commenced.
- Require that companies clearly disclose when dynamic pricing is used and the factors that determine variations in pricing.

Require that a “guest” check out option is required for online shopping, removing unnecessary data gathering in the purchase process.

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### **Recommendation 11**

The ban on unfair trading practices should **offer protections to small businesses**.

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### **Recommendation 12**

Treasury should extend specific prohibitions of unfair business practices to **capture greenwashing**, mirroring protections being rolled out in the EU.

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# General prohibition

## Our position on the proposed definition

Answering focus questions 1, 2 and 5 from the consultation paper

### Borrowing from an existing international definition that works

We note that the Treasury has put forward a definition of unfair trading that aligns more with the EU model for unfair trading than the US model.

Treasury has used and adapted key aspects of the EU definition in ways that risk Australian courts applying the law in fewer situations than would apply in the EU.

Specifically, Treasury has included use of the term “material” / “materially” in conjunction with “detriment”, used in the EU definition. While we acknowledge that using this framing ensures conduct is sufficiently serious, its inclusion differs from Australia’s existing unfair contract terms and unconscionable conduct laws, the inconsistency of which could create confusion from businesses and courts.

### General prohibitions against unfair practices across jurisdictions

We have a preference for greater simplicity in the drafting, ideally using the US definition, which has also been in operation for longer than the EU definition with more case law to understand its application. The US regulator has also taken more court action using its provision, with EU regulators favouring negotiated outcomes with businesses – this means the US version is more tested. We know it works to protect consumers.

The tables below show the comparison of Treasury’s proposal for the general prohibition in Australia, compared to other international prohibitions; the US comprising our preferred model.

**Table 1. Treasury’s proposed general prohibition for Australia**

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A ban on business conduct which:

- Unreasonably distorts or manipulates, or is likely to distort or manipulate, the economic decision-making or behaviour of a consumer, and
  - Causes, or is likely to cause, material detriment (financial or otherwise) to the consumer
-

**Table 2. Examples of definitions used in international general trading prohibitions**

**The US prohibition<sup>6</sup>** Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act (FTC Act) (15 USC 45) prohibits “unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce.”

An act or practice may be found to be unfair where it:

- causes or is likely to cause substantial injury to consumers
- cannot be reasonably avoidable by consumers, and
- is not outweighed by countervailing benefits to consumers or to competition

**The EU prohibition<sup>7</sup>** A commercial practice shall be unfair if:

- (a) It is contrary to the requirements of professional diligence, and
- (b) It materially distorts or is likely to materially distort the economic behaviour with regard to the product of the average consumer whom it reaches or to whom it is addressed, or of the average member of the group when a commercial practice is directed to a particular group of consumers

**The UK prohibition<sup>8</sup>** A commercial practice is unfair if:

- (a) It contravenes the requirements of professional diligence; and
- (b) It materially distorts or is likely to materially distort the economic behaviour of the average consumer with regard to the product

### Recommendation 1

Australia should adopt the US legal approach to unfair trading which provides clear guidance and includes the reference to “unfair”.

If Treasury chooses to adopt the EU model, it should simplify language and align definitions where possible.

<sup>6</sup> Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act (US). Available at: <https://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/supmanual/cch/200806/ftca.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (Europe). Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32005L0029>

<sup>8</sup> The Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (United Kingdom) is available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2008/1277/regulation/3>

## There is no room for “legitimate business interests” in the proposed definition

Answering focus question 4 from the consultation paper

Considering “legitimate business interests” in the definition of unfair practices is unnecessary and counterproductive for several reasons.

Focussing on “legitimate business interests” shifts attention from the impact on consumers to the conduct of businesses. In existing laws such as the prohibition on unconscionable conduct, this focus has failed to lower the threshold for misconduct, limiting the effectiveness of consumer protections by emphasising the business’ justifications rather than the harm caused.

The use of “legitimate interests” in unfair contract provisions differs fundamentally from its use in general prohibitions. While unfair contract provisions aim to ensure a fair allocation of risks and obligations, an unfair trading prohibition addresses subtle and systemic practices that restrict consumer choice or access. Applying a “legitimate interests” test to general prohibitions risks legitimising unfair practices that are common across industries. For example, subscription traps and other dark patterns can be extremely common practices in some sectors. Businesses may be able to argue that, in order to compete with others in their sector, they have a legitimate interest in continuing to use otherwise harmful tactics.

Case law demonstrates the risks of a “legitimate interests” test, as courts often defer to industry norms or business models, even when these practices harm consumers. For example, in *Jetstar v Free* and *Paciocco v ANZ*, courts prioritised business interests over consumer impact, legitimising practices like subscription traps and unjustifiable fees. This approach undermines fairness and fails to meet community expectations.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, we note that adopting language from the US definition would address the legitimate interest issue. Use of the words “outweighed by countervailing benefits to consumers or competition” would exempt or afford protection for legitimate business practices consistent with competition/efficient operation of markets.

### Recommendation 2

Treasury should **not include “legitimate business interests”** in the definition of unfair practices, ensuring a stronger focus on protecting consumers and addressing harmful business conduct.

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<sup>9</sup> CPRC et. al. (2023), *Consumer group submission to the inquiry into unfair trading practices – making unfair illegal*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Submission-Unfair-trade-practices-Treasury-November-2023.pdf>

## The grey list should be expanded

Answering focus questions 3 and 6 from the consultation paper

### The grey list needs to clearly capture post-sale conduct

While the US provides a simple and usable general definition and framework in Section 5 of the FTC, *it does not define specific acts or practices* that constitute “unfair methods of competition”. This has led to a longstanding debate about the scope of the FTC’s enforcement authority.<sup>10</sup>

Treasury’s proposed ‘grey list’ is sufficiently broad to effectively capture a variety of potential practices. It balances the benefits of a principles-based law to stop unfair business practices with the benefits of clarifying key matters to make the law easier to apply.

#### Table 3. Treasury’s proposed grey list

- the omission of material information,<sup>11</sup>
- the provision of material information to a consumer in an unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely manner,<sup>12</sup> including the provision of information in a manner that overwhelms, or is likely to overwhelm, a consumer,
- impeding the ability of a consumer to exercise their contractual or other legal rights,<sup>13</sup> or
- use of design elements in online consumer interfaces that unduly pressure, obstruct or undermine a consumer in making an economic decision.<sup>14</sup>

#### Missing from the grey list includes:

- any practice or design element that unreasonably inhibits access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.

We know that today, many goods and services today require post-sale support for functionality (e.g. software-as-a-service, smart devices), a recent study showing that 89% of smart products don’t provide consumers with information about how long they can expect to receive software updates.<sup>15</sup>

The inclusion of this clause in the grey list would provide a focus on conduct or practices that occur following the purchase of a product or service, including customer service and after-sales support.

<sup>10</sup> Whitecase (2024). Available at: <https://www.whitecase.com/insight-alert/uncertainty-remains-more-one-year-after-ftc-announces-new-unfair-methods-competition#:~:text=In%201914%2C%20Congress%20passed%20the.in%20or%20affecting%20commerce%22%20unlawful.>

<sup>11</sup> ACCC submission; Swetha Meenal Ananthapadmanaban and Jeannie Marie Paterson submission; CPRC et al submission; Law Council of Australia submission; National Legal Aid submission.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> ACCC submission; CPRC Joint submission; Law Council of Australia submission.

<sup>14</sup> CPRC (2022), *Duped by Design – Manipulative online design: Dark patterns in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/duped-by-design-manipulative-online-design-dark-patterns-in-australia/>

<sup>15</sup> FTC (2024). Smart products surveyed fail to provide consumers with information on how long companies will provide software updates. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2024/11/smart-products-surveyed-fail-provide-consumers-information-how-long-companies-will-provide-software>

The existing ACL does not specifically regulate post-sale standards of conduct. While the other general prohibitions can be relevant, practices such as designing customer service systems which impose unreasonable barriers to access to support or a consumer remedy are unlikely to be addressed by existing prohibitions.<sup>16</sup> This is also relevant in terms of product/service designs which have added costs or subscriptions unreasonably built into the product design, not clearly disclosed, and inhibit reasonable access to the good or service already purchased.

### Recommendation 3

We propose that the grey list includes **prohibition of any business practices or design elements that unreasonably inhibit access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.**

### The grey list should address consumer vulnerability

In our previous joint consumer submission, our sector proposed that unfair trading prohibitions addressed if the conduct or practice causes, exploits or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.

Consumer law was developed on the premise that there was an imbalance between consumers and businesses, contributing to consumer vulnerability in the marketplace.<sup>17</sup> However, a focus on information asymmetries in its development has resulted in the position that consumers need to be active and engage with information. Rather than telling people to ‘shop around’, there is a need to make vulnerability a core value of consumer protection to promote inclusion and fairness.<sup>18</sup>

We want to reiterate the importance of prohibiting any exploitative practice or one that targets a known or potential consumer vulnerability. If enacted and enforced, an unfair trade practices provision could contribute to economic transactions being conducted in a way that is equitable, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability who are unable to protect their own interests.

### Recommendation 4

We propose that the grey list includes a **prohibition of any conduct or practice that causes or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.**

<sup>16</sup> CPRC et al (2023). *Consumer group submission to the inquiry into unfair trading practices – making unfair illegal*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Submission-Unfair-trade-practices-Treasury-November-2023.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> This aligns with the Intergovernmental Agreement for the Consumer Law, Clause F(4). Available at: [https://consumer.gov.au/sites/consumer/files/2015/06/acl\\_iga.pdf](https://consumer.gov.au/sites/consumer/files/2015/06/acl_iga.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> See Christine Riefa and Harriet Gamper (2021). *Economic theory and consumer vulnerability: exploring an uneasy relationship*, in *Vulnerable Consumers and the Law* (ed. Christine Reifa and Séverine Sainer), Routledge.

## Economy-wide provisions should automatically apply to financial services

Answering focus question 3 from the consultation paper

An economy-wide prohibition, reflected in both the ACL and the ASIC Act, is required, similar to the US prohibition which applies to all persons engaged in commerce, including banks.<sup>19</sup>

This reform is crucial for maintaining consistency in consumer protection across sectors, addressing potential loopholes and preventing regulatory arbitrage. Exempting financial services from the unfair trading prohibitions would incentivise relevant businesses to exploit regulatory loopholes, creating confusion among consumers.

When the ACL was introduced, its provisions were mirrored in the ASIC Act to ensure a seamless national economy and reduce regulatory complexity. However, Treasury's current approach to exclude financial services from this reform creates risks of delay, misalignment, and uneven consumer protection standards.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup>

Past reforms have already caused discrepancies, such as significantly higher penalties under the ACL compared to equivalent provisions in the ASIC Act, undermining community and business expectations of fairness.

Additionally, excluding financial services could incentivise businesses to structure contracts or activities to evade the new requirements, creating regulatory loopholes and exposing consumers to harm. This is particularly concerning for unregulated credit products, as demonstrated by the use of "buy now, pay later" (BNPL) schemes. These have operated in Australia outside licensing requirements for 9-11 years, presenting significant consumer risks, particularly to First Nations people and vulnerable consumers, who have historically been targeted by unfair practices in financial services.<sup>24</sup> The exclusion of financial services from the ACL opened a loophole for exploitation. The Government invested the better part of 7 years reviewing the matter, developing and passing a remedial policy vis-a-vis the Treasury Laws Amendment (Responsible Buy Now Pay Later and Other Measures) Bill 2024, which only recently passed in late November 2024.<sup>25,26</sup>

A high profile example includes business practices engaged in by Cigno Australia, a Gold Coast based company that was involved in providing short-term, high-fee loans to consumers, often targeting financially vulnerable individuals. Operating without an Australian Credit Licence,

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<sup>19</sup> Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act (US). Available at:

<https://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/supmanual/cch/200806/ftca.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Competition and Consumer Legislation Amendment Act 2011

<sup>21</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (Australian Consumer Law Review) Act 2018, schedule 7

<sup>22</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (Australian Consumer Law Review) Act 2018, schedule 2

<sup>23</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (Acquisition as Consumer—Financial Thresholds) Regulations 2020

<sup>24</sup> ASIC (2018). *REP 600 Review of buy now pay later arrangements*. Available at:

<https://download.asic.gov.au/media/3iyh2qki/rep600-published-07-dec-2018-20230524.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Super Consumers Australia and Financial Rights Legal Centre (2023). *Make unfair illegal in financial services*. Submission from SCA and FRLC. Available at: <https://superconsumers.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SCA-FRLCunfairtradingandfinancialservciesNov23.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Treasury Laws Amendment (Responsible Buy Now Pay Later and Other Measures) Bill 2024. Available at:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Bills\\_Legislation/bd/bd2324a/24bd083#:~:text=of%20the%20Bill-The%20Treasury%20Laws%20Amendment%20\(Responsible%20Buy%20Now%20Pay%20Later%20and,laws%20in%20the%20Treasury%20portfolio.](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/bd/bd2324a/24bd083#:~:text=of%20the%20Bill-The%20Treasury%20Laws%20Amendment%20(Responsible%20Buy%20Now%20Pay%20Later%20and,laws%20in%20the%20Treasury%20portfolio.)

Cigno employed business models designed to circumvent national credit laws, leading to significant consumer harm.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Case Study – provided by Consumer Credit Legal Service (CCLS)**

Rachel (not her real name) was enticed through a social media site to enter a competition for a free glamour photoshoot to the value of several hundred dollars. After entering, Rachel excitedly learnt she had won the competition and organised a time to attend the photoshoot.

During the photoshoot, Rachel found out that while the photoshoot was free, she still needed to pay for the photos. Immediately after the photoshoot, Rachel was then exposed to high pressure sales tactics by the photo studio to purchase some, or all, of her photos through various expensive packages. Rachel was also told if she did not purchase the photos before leaving, that they would be immediately, permanently deleted.

At the end of this process, when Rachel found out the total cost (in excess of \$10,000) Rachel was reluctant to proceed with the purchase. However, the photo studio advised Rachel that she could pay in instalments using a BNPL provider. The photo studio then filled in the application form for Rachel and provided advice on what information was required to get her application approved.

Within a few days, Rachel attempted to cancel her purchase with the photo studio. However, the photo studio had already been fully paid by the BNPL provider and the photo studio refused to cancel the purchase.

Rachel made complaints to both the photo studio and the BNPL provider, but was unsuccessful in getting a remedy.

After she sought CCLS's help, CCLS provided advice to the client and then wrote a letter on the client's behalf to the photo studio, raising various allegations regarding the competition, the photoshoot process and the process of obtaining BNPL funds. After some negotiation, CCLS was able to obtain an outcome that involved a substantial decrease in the amount payable that resulted in a refund through the BNPL provider.

**Rachel's story is not isolated.** CCLS has seen this type of conduct in relation to other clients it has helped. Typically, these matters involve:

- Winning a photo studio competition for glamour or family photographs
- The consumer not properly understanding until later that there is a significant cost associated with purchasing any photographs taken on the day
- Pressure being put on the consumer to agree to purchase an expensive package of photographs at the end of the photoshoot (usually in the several thousands of dollars)
- No cooling off period or expensive cancellation fees
- Use of BNPL to fund the purchase of the photographs at the photo studio
- When attempting to cancel the purchase a few days later, being told it is too late as work has already commenced, and
- Having to continue to pay the BNPL provider while trying to resolve the issue.

<sup>27</sup> ASIC (2024). *ASIC wins Federal Court case against Cigno Australia and BSF Solutions*. Available at: <https://asic.gov.au/about-asic/news-centre/find-a-media-release/2024-releases/24-111mr-asic-wins-federal-court-case-against-cigno-australia-and-bsf-solutions/>

In all of these cases, the consumer has stated that they would not have gone to the photo studio if they had known much earlier the true cost of purchasing the photographs, that they felt pressured during the process, and that they felt trapped to agree to buy something in order that they could leave.

This example perfectly illustrates how interconnected business practices captured under the ACL and the ASIC Act can be and why it is essential that laws capture all aspects of unfair business practices.

Below are four clear reasons why unfair business practices need to be applied to financial services, creating an economy-wide protection.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 4. Reasons why unfair business practice protections need to be expanded to financial services**

<p><b>Some very harmful products and businesses exploit gaps in financial services licensing</b></p>	<p>Some products exploit the complexity of financial services laws, so that they remain unlicensed but avoid the application of the ACL. Examples include dealer-issued extended warranties, which are financial products but benefit from a licensing exemption.</p> <p>Firms that ‘assist’ consumers access to superannuation early for medical treatment, and charge a substantial fee, are typically unlicensed but may be providing a financial service.</p> <p>Not applying the unfair trading prohibition economy-wide will create an incentive to design products that escape the licensing perimeter and create substantial risks of consumer harm.</p>
<p><b>A ban on unfair business practices is different to licensing requirements of ‘efficient, honest, and fair’</b></p>	<p>Licensed credit and financial services providers are required to meet a general obligation to <i>“do all things necessary to ensure that financial services / credit activities covered / authorised by the licence are provided / engaged in efficiently, honestly, and fairly”</i>.<sup>29</sup></p> <p>This duty is a forward-looking obligation requiring licensees to take steps to achieve compliance with the statutory norm before any specific instance of non-compliance has arisen. Case law confirms that where courts do not meet the standard in relation to a particular individual, then this does not mean the obligation has been breached. In <i>ASIC v CBA</i> [2022] FCA 1422, the court determined that CBA’s failure to apply fee waivers to account holders were entitled to them did not of itself demonstrate a breach of the obligation.</p> <p>Further, the ‘efficient, honest, and fair’ duty does not enable a consumer to argue that the duty has been breached and seek a remedy; only a regulator can.</p>
<p><b>Other financial services laws do not replicate a ban on unfair business practices</b></p>	<p>Design and distribution obligations, while an important reform to ensure products better meet the needs and objectives of consumers, does not establish any individual consumer right or standard to specific transactions.</p> <p>The ban on unsolicited selling of financial products is vital, but it does not respond to the full extent of market practices today that undermine consumer autonomy or distort consumer choice. For example, it remains legal to offer services, like a ‘review’ of your superannuation.</p> <p>In ASIC’s review of cold calling business models used in superannuation, they express concern about these practices and refer to them as “deliberate attempts to avoid legal liability”.<sup>30</sup></p>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Section 912A(1), Corporations Act 2001 (Cth); sec on 47(1)(a), National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009 (Cth).

<sup>30</sup> ASIC (2024). Exposing high-pressure cold calling tactics and social media click-bait leading to superannuation switching. Available at: <https://asic.gov.au/about-asic/news-centre/news-items/exposing-high-pressure-cold-calling-tactics-and-social-media-click-bait-leading-to-superannuation-switching/>

Best interests duties, while important, do not respond to the full range of consumer concerns, including insurance brokers who call consumers unexpectedly after making an inquiry via an online quote process; or superannuation firms partnering with employee management software providers to use dark patterns, manipulate choice architecture, and embed fine print to steer people towards advertised funds. Often these strategies cost people time, money and ultimately their wellbeing, yet the onus is only on them as individuals to navigate these systems that haven't been designed with their best interests in mind.

**A ban on unfair business practices can improve the operation of financial services codes and dispute resolution**

An unfair trading prohibition will align well with standards that apply in external dispute resolution, including that determinations by the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA) must consider what is fair and reasonable in all the circumstances. This will enhance understanding of fairness among firms, and can lead to resolving disputes earlier.

While some (but not all) industry codes commit to a broad concept of fairness, applying a legislative unfair trading prohibition will support these industry promises by providing a consistent definition of fairness.

### Recommendation 5

To ensure fairness and consistency, the **unfair trading prohibition must apply to all sectors economy-wide, which includes financial services**. Australian, state and territory governments need to maintain the alignment between the ACL and the ASIC Act in relation to economy-wide consumer protections.

A carve-out for financial services would lead to unequal protections for consumers, undermine the intent of an economy-wide prohibition, and fail to address systemic issues in financial services.

# Our insights on dark patterns and the benefits of the general prohibition to consumers

Answering focus questions 7, 12, 14, 15 and 16 from the consultation paper

Dark patterns range from those that are ubiquitous and frustrating for consumers to those that are misleading and deceptive and can lead to significant consumer harm. CPRC's research into the prevalence and impact of dark patterns in Australia found the following:

- *Consumers are aware of dark patterns and describe them as “manipulative” or “deceptive”*: 58% of Australians are aware that organisations use specific types of design features to try and influence them to behave in a certain way.
- *Businesses from almost every sector were identified*: The top five categories included clothing and accessories, online marketplaces, tech products and services, social media, and department stores.
- *Negative impacts from dark patterns are rife*: 83% of Australians have experienced one or more negative consequences as a result of a website or app using dark pattern design features aimed at influencing their behaviour.
- *More than a third of consumers have experienced a negative financial impact from a dark pattern (34%)*: 20% of Australians spent more than they intended, 17% felt pressured into buying something, and 9% accidentally bought something.
- *Australians' emotional wellbeing is negatively impacted*: 40% felt annoyed when using a website or app, and 28% felt manipulated.
- *Australians are losing control over their personal information*: 29% created an account online they didn't want to, 29% accidentally signed up to something, and 25% shared more personal information than they wanted to (25%).

The dark patterns deemed most unfair involve a business taking advantage of its relative power to influence consumers. Some of these unfair practices have potential to cause financial or significant consumer harms. These dark patterns include **trick questions, redirection / nagging, subscription traps** (discussed in more detail later), **confirmshaming, false hierarchy**, and **data grab** (discussed in more detail later).<sup>31</sup>

## Quantifying the impact to consumers

Despite the growing ubiquity of dark patterns, it does not mean consumers have become accustomed to them or consider them as fait accompli; instead, it is deteriorating their experience in the digital economy. The benefits of the general prohibition would address consumer harm from the increasing prevalence of dark patterns, as well as other unfair business practices.

In terms of quantitative information requested by the supplementary consultation, CPRC has undertaken research focussing on the impacts of dark patterns in the digital environment, harm from which would be mitigated if prohibited.

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<sup>31</sup> CPRC (2022). *Duped by design – Manipulative online design: Dark patterns in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/duped-by-design-manipulative-online-design-dark-patterns-in-australia/>

CPRC found that 83% of Australians had experienced one or more negative consequences as a result of a website or app using design features aimed at influencing their behaviour. More than a third of Australians experienced financial detriment as a result, having accidentally bought something, spent more than intended, or felt pressured into buying something (34%).<sup>32</sup>

Modelling how much money this could cost Australians, if each Australian making up this 34% was duped out of \$5 by a dark pattern, the financial loss at a population level would amount to \$46,108,080. If each were duped \$50, the population amount lost would be \$461,080,800.<sup>33</sup>

### Recommendation 6

Implement a ban on dark patterns – including subscription traps, and data grab (both discussed below) – as a logical and urgent step to ensure consumer protection in the digital age.

## Our insights on the costs to businesses of the general prohibition

Answering focus question 8 from the consultation paper

There is no reason industry should assume the introduction of unfair trading prohibitions will impose costs on all businesses. Businesses engaging in transparent, fair and consumer-centric behaviours will not be required to make any changes; only businesses engaging in opaque and deceptive, unfair practices may face costs to bring their practices in line with what is fair to consumers.

Businesses have the opportunity to be at the forefront of consumer-centric change and to lead by best practice. When looking closely at cost implications to business, it is in the best interests of industry to engage in transparent, fair and consumer-centric practices, or increasingly face consequences such as consumers turning to user friendly competitors. Trust has been widely identified as a key component of well-functioning markets – “individuals and organisations will find it difficult (if not impossible) to operate effectively if they do not enjoy the trust and confidence of the community in which they are located”.<sup>34</sup>

CPRC’s consumer survey revealed a significant portion of consumers reported leaving platforms, losing trust in businesses or having negative feelings towards businesses using dark patterns. CPRC’s research into dark patterns in Australia echoes this, identifying substantial costs to business from customer churn: 18% had their trust in the organisation undermined, and 27% thought negatively of the organisation whose website/app it was, and 30% of Australians stopped using the website or app.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Based on ABS Estimated Resident Population figures as at March 2024. Available at:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/mar-2024>

<sup>34</sup> The Ethics Centre (2018). *Trust, Legitimacy and the Ethical Foundations of the Market Economy*. Available at:

[https://ethics.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Ethics-Centre\\_180410-on-trust-and-legitimacy.original.pdf](https://ethics.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Ethics-Centre_180410-on-trust-and-legitimacy.original.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> CPRC (2022). *Duped by design – Manipulative online design: Dark patterns in Australia*. Available at:

<https://cprc.org.au/report/duped-by-design-manipulative-online-design-dark-patterns-in-australia/>

While in the short-term dark patterns may lead to a financial gain or enable data harvesting that can be monetised, in the long-term it can negatively impact businesses due to a loss of consumer trust and loyalty. Adjusting the mindset from a purely profit-driven perspective to a consumer-centric perspective may assist in reducing the prevalence of those negative outcomes and lead to better business outcomes in the longer-term.

## Penalties should be proportionate and introduced immediately

Answering focus questions 10 and 11 from the consultation paper

Businesses must be held accountable when their actions cause consumer harm. An unfair trading prohibition must allow for penalties, fines and other enforcement actions that adequately deter businesses from engaging or continuing in unfair business practices. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) enforces penalties under the ACL which are designed to be proportionate to the severity of the breach and any benefits gained from the misconduct.

Penalties for unfair business practices should mirror similar penalties across the Competition and Consumer Act.

For corporations, penalties for anti-competitive conduct or breaches of consumer law are the greater of \$50 million, three times the value of the benefit obtained from the breach, or 30% of the corporation's adjusted turnover during the breach period if the benefit cannot be determined.

Individuals face penalties of up to \$2.5 million per breach for anti-competitive conduct and consumer law violations. Criminal cartel conduct may result in up to 10 years imprisonment and fines of up to \$626,000 per offence.

The ACCC can issue infringement notices for certain breaches, with penalties typically set at \$18,780 for corporations, \$187,800 for listed corporations, and \$3,756 for individuals. These measures aim to deter unlawful conduct and promote compliance with competition and consumer laws.<sup>36</sup>

In relation to a transition period, this should not be necessary; businesses acting in an ethical and transparent manner towards consumers will not require any changes to practices. It is only businesses causing consumer detriment and harm that will have to make changes, and it is important for this to occur immediately.

Consumers have been calling for unfair trading prohibitions for a long time. The risk of a transition period is that unscrupulous businesses could take advantage of this to ramp up unfair practices (including subscription traps).

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<sup>36</sup> ACCC, *Fines and penalties*. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/business/compliance-and-enforcement/fines-and-penalties>

### Recommendation 7

We support penalties for unfair trading practices adopting the proportional approach currently used by the ACCC for breaches of the ACL.

Treasury should introduce **immediate, proportionate penalties** based on the scale and benefit of the misconduct to harmonise regulatory measures, creating consistency in enforcement.

## Enforcement of unfair trading practices is alive and well in the US

Answering focus question 13 from the consultation paper

In addition to Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act prohibiting unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce, the FTC enforces several laws against dark patterns (including subscription traps) and protects users against unfair, abusive, or deceptive marketing. These can be seen in the table below.

**Table 5. US Laws around dark patterns**

<b>The Deceptive Experiences To Online Users Reduction (DETOUR) Act</b> <sup>37</sup>	Introduced in July 2023 to prohibit large online platforms from using deceptive user interfaces, known as “dark patterns,” to trick consumers into handing over their personal data.
<b>The Restore Online Shoppers’ Confidence Act (ROSCA)</b> <sup>38</sup>	Prohibits any post-transaction third party seller from charging any financial account without disclosure and express informed consent.
<b>The Telemarketing Sales Rule (TSR)</b> <sup>39</sup>	Requires sellers and telemarketers to disclose all material restrictions, limitations, or conditions to purchase, receive, or use goods or services that they are offering to the consumer.

In recent decades, the FTC has brought numerous enforcement cases challenging harmful practices. By imposing civil penalties such as fines against businesses who violate dark pattern laws, the FTC can hold companies accountable and disincentivise future fraud. If a company is found liable, the FTC may secure monetary settlements intended for consumer redress. The amount assessed against a company is calculated per violation, and rates are linked to the rate of inflation.<sup>40</sup>

In one recent **case against Epic Games**, the maker of the online game Fortnite, the FTC finalised an order requiring Epic Games to pay \$245 million in consumer refunds. The company was accused of using dark patterns to trick players into making unwanted purchases and allowing children to incur unauthorised charges without parental involvement.<sup>41</sup>

Other examples demonstrating the FTC’s commitment to combating dark patterns include:

<sup>37</sup> Warner, Fischer Lead Bipartisan Reintroduction of Legislation to Ban Manipulative ‘Dark Patterns’, available at: <https://www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2023/7/warner-fischer-lead-bipartisan-reintroduction-of-legislation-to-ban-manipulative-dark-patterns>

<sup>38</sup> Restore Online Shoppers’ Confidence Act, available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/statutes/restore-online-shoppers-confidence-act>

<sup>39</sup> Telemarketing Sales Rule, available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/rules/telemarketing-sales-rule>

<sup>40</sup> Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. *Consumer Financial Protection Circular 2023-01*. Available at: <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/compliance/circulars/consumer-financial-protection-circular-2023-01-unlawful-negative-option-marketing-practices/#8>

<sup>41</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2023). *FTC Finalizes Order Requiring Fortnite maker Epic Games to Pay \$245 Million for Tricking Users into Making Unwanted Charges*. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/03/ftc-finalizes-order-requiring-fortnite-maker-epic-games-pay-245-million-tricking-users-making>

- **LendingClub:** In 2022, the FTC returned more than \$10 million to consumers after they were charged surprise fees for their loans. After promising no fees for its services, LendingClub hid additional information about fees behind tooltip buttons on its website, and in between larger, more prominent text.<sup>42</sup>
- **MyLife.com:** In 2021, the FTC and the Department of Justice obtained a \$21 million settlement against MyLife.com for using dark patterns in negative option marketing, misleading consumers about subscription services, and making cancellation challenging.<sup>43</sup>

Jurisdictions worldwide are taking action on dark patterns and it's time Australia did too. For legislation to be effective, it needs to be supported by regular surveillance and enforcement by the regulator to educate and shift the market towards a more consumer-centric approach to the digital economy. Australians who don't speak English as their first language should be engaged in their language as the reform roles out to ensure it's effective.

### Recommendation 8

For legislation to be effective, it needs to be supported by regular surveillance and enforcement by the regulator to educate and shift the market towards a more consumer-centric approach to the digital economy. **Australia needs well-resourced Federal and state regulators** with the capacity and capability to audit and enforce breaches in the complex digital environment.

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<sup>42</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2022). *Plaintiff, v. LendingClub Corporation*. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/cases-proceedings/162-3088-lendingclub-corporation>

<sup>43</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2021). *FTC, DOJ Obtain Ban on Negative Option Marketing and \$21 Million for Consumers Deceived by Background Report Provider MyLife*. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2021/12/ftc-doj-obtain-ban-negative-option-marketing-21-million-consumers-deceived-background-report>

# Specific prohibitions

Consumer groups including CPRC, CHOICE, Consumer Action Law Centre and Financial Rights Legal Centre, identified more than 50 examples of unfair practices as part of a joint submission to the Federal Government.<sup>44</sup> Treasury’s paper outlines four of these cases that demonstrate the need for reform in Australia. We understand these cases would be candidates for early regulatory action.

## Subscription-related practices

Answering focus questions 17, 18, 22, 23 and 24 from the consultation paper

### Our insights on subscription traps

Focussing on one specific but prolific dark pattern – the subscription trap – 2024 CPRC research showed that while subscribing to services is often quick and easy, cancelling these subscriptions can be a frustrating and time-consuming process, yet Australian laws do not require fair subscription practices.

Overall, 75% of Australians with subscriptions have had some form of negative experience when trying to cancel a subscription, close to half have spent more time than intended trying to cancel a subscription (48%) and a third have felt pressured into keeping a subscription (32%).<sup>45</sup>

Other research conducted by ING shows that Australians could save an average of \$1,261 a year by cutting back on subscriptions and other regular outgoings they have forgotten about or don’t use.<sup>46</sup>

CPRC’s research shows the need for a shift in business practices and law reform to genuinely protect consumers from harm. In comparison to consumers around the world, Australians should no longer be subjected to more complex and unnecessary steps to cancel the same service from the same provider. Businesses can make changes now to remove barriers to cancelling a subscription, but ultimately, laws should be updated to protect everyone from harmful subscription practices.

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<sup>44</sup> CPRC et. al. (2023), *Consumer group submission to the inquiry into unfair trading practices – making unfair illegal*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Submission-Unfair-trade-practices-Treasury-November-2023.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2024). *Let me out – Subscription trap practices in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/let-me-out>

<sup>46</sup> <https://blog.ing.com.au/money-matters/saving/unused-or-forgotten-subscriptions/#article-3685>

## International approaches to address subscription traps

The UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) addresses anti-cancellation behaviours deeming the imposition of unnecessary questions or steps before a customer is able to confirm their instructions to cancel an automatic renewal feature, as unfair, as well as having unreasonably longer call wait times to cancel the auto-renewal feature (compared to purchasing a new policy).<sup>47</sup>

In the US, the FTC has commenced proceedings against several companies for unfair or deceptive acts creating a deliberately complex cancellation process, including one major case against Amazon for the Amazon Prime service.<sup>48</sup> This lawsuit will explore how Amazon's design choices created additional costs for its very large subscriber base, demonstrating the potential high financial impact of unfair business practices. A trial is scheduled for June 2025.

Also, recently in the US in 2024, Adobe was sued by the FTC for allegedly making it difficult for consumers to cancel subscriptions and hiding termination fees, steering customers toward plans with concealed costs.<sup>49</sup>

In 2022, Vonage faced FTC action resulting in a \$100 million settlement for employing dark patterns that trapped customers in unwanted subscriptions and imposed junk fees when they attempted to cancel services.<sup>50</sup>

Since then, the FTC has introduced a "Click-to-Cancel" rule to simplify the cancellation of recurring subscriptions and memberships. This rule mandates that businesses must make the cancellation process as straightforward as the sign-up process, addressing consumer frustrations with complex cancellation procedures.<sup>51</sup>

The EU has also taken action using its Unfair Commercial Practices Directive to force Amazon to implement a simpler unsubscribe process. Despite Amazon using very similar tactics in Australia, at least until recently, there is no clear way for a regulator to take action against the company for the costs and harms caused to its customers.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> UK FCA, ICOBS 6A.6 Cancellation of automatic renewal. Available at: <https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/ICOBS/6A/6.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Reuters (2024). *FTC lawsuit over Amazon's Prime program set for June 2025 trial*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/ftc-lawsuit-over-amazons-prime-program-set-june-2025-trial-2024-06-12/>

<sup>49</sup> MarketWatch (2024). *Adobe sued by U.S. regulators for making it too difficult to cancel subscriptions*. Available at: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/adobe-sued-by-u-s-regulators-for-making-it-too-difficult-to-cancel-subscriptions-2ecfdef5>

<sup>50</sup> Federal Trade Commission (2022). *FTC action against Vonage results in \$100 million to customers trapped by illegal dark patterns and junk fees when trying to cancel service*. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2022/11/ftc-action-against-vonage-results-100-million-customers-trapped-illegal-dark-patterns-junk-fees-when-trying-cancel-service>

<sup>51</sup> FTC (2024). *Federal Trade Commission Announces Final "Click-to-Cancel" Rule Making It Easier for Consumers to End Recurring Subscriptions and Memberships*. Available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2024/10/federal-trade-commission-announces-final-click-cancel-rule-making-it-easier-consumers-end-recurring>

<sup>52</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2022). *How Australia can stop unfair business practices*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/how-australia-can-stop-unfair-business-practices/>

## Multiple options need to be used to address subscription traps

The consultation paper outlines four options to address subscription traps. Each have limits as a stand-alone protection.

**Table 6. Options to address subscription traps, and the associated benefits and challenges**

Option	Benefits	Challenges
<b>Option one – pre-sale disclosure of information</b>	Allows informed and engaged consumers to compare options consistently.	Unlikely to radically reduce harm to consumers – there is no evidence that CPRC can point to show that information provision alone will reduce consumer harms.  Does not resolve the problem of difficult to exit processes.  Least likely to help people experiencing vulnerability.
<b>Option two – notification requirement</b>	Provides clear information about when a charge is coming, allowing people to consider costs and act.	Does not resolve the problem of difficult to exit processes.  Unlikely to help people experiencing vulnerability.
<b>Option three – opt-in requirement</b>	Addresses specific harmful practice of fake-free trials that result in surprise charges.	Does not resolve the problem of difficult to exit processes
<b>Option four – removing barriers to cancelling a subscription</b>	Reduces business practices that cause the greatest financial and wellbeing harms to consumers.  Reduces time and administration burdens on all consumers, most likely to help people experiencing vulnerability.	Doesn't address harmful “free trial” practices that result in surprise charges.

Our view is that option four and three are the most beneficial approaches to the problem of subscription traps, with the options targeting related but technically different aspects of the subscription trap phenomenon.

Options one and two have value but only when combined with options three and four.

Establishing a law that requires businesses to offer simple, easy opt-out cancellation options is not a new concept in Australia. In 2018, the National Consumer Credit Code was amended to allow easier online credit card cancellation options after a Senate Inquiry found that consumers could easily sign up for a credit card but typically had to take multiple complex steps to cancel.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Australian Government, *Consumer credit reforms*. Available at: <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/sites/ministers.treasury.gov.au/files/2020-09/Consumer-credit-reforms-fact-sheet.pdf>

In relation to timing of civil penalties, as stated above; businesses acting in an ethical and transparent manner towards consumers will not require any changes to practices. It is only businesses causing consumer detriment and harm that will have to make changes, and it is important for associated penalties for non-compliance to occur immediately.

### **Recommendation 9**

Subscription traps should be addressed by combining the options outlined in the consultation paper. Treasury should prioritise reforms that make it as easy to cancel as it is to sign up and that require active opt-in after a free trial period. These measures should be supported by clear disclosure at the point of sign-up and before regular charges are made.

The ACCC should undertake independent user testing to inform guidance for businesses as to an effective framework for removing barriers.

# Drip pricing practices, Dynamic pricing and Online account requirements

Answering focus questions 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 31 from the consultation paper

## Consumer challenges with dynamic pricing

The technology exists to allow businesses to rapidly set new prices for consumers, even when they are part-way through a purchasing process. Clearly banning the practice of adjusting prices after a consumer has commenced the purchasing process will send a clear signal that new technology needs to be applied fairly in Australian markets.

Another key issue with dynamic pricing is the lack of transparency over how pricing is set in terms of consumer data informing the pricing. For example, what models are involved? What data is being used? How frequently is the data being updated? Are consumers explicitly consenting to the use of their data?

Even more fundamentally, when is dynamic pricing being applied? In the few instances uncovered by researchers and consumer advocates, dynamic pricing isn't disclosed to consumers. A classic example is CHOICE's mystery shop of Tinder Plus, finding the company charged between \$6.99 to \$34.37 to subscribe to the premium service for one month.<sup>54</sup>

Not all dynamic pricing will be unfair to the consumer – we already accept that different prices are charged to different groups like with discounts for students or higher prices for ride share based on demand. However, the pre-condition for fair dynamic pricing is that consumers know when it is used and what factors determine the final price paid. We need to know if a business is setting pricing based on factors like age, gender, interests, past browsing behaviour or even other sensitive conditions like known health conditions. We cannot have a discussion about whether a business practice is fair without a baseline of transparency.

Any new requirements for dynamic pricing should require that pricing is final once the purchasing process commences and that consumers are clearly informed when dynamic pricing is being used and the factors behind variations in price.

Furthermore, while surge pricing appears to be out of scope of this consultation, we argue that surge pricing of essential goods (e.g. at supermarkets) deserves consideration in the context of regulating dynamic pricing. Surge pricing is happening in the US, and is a big concern as it facilitates real-time price gouging of essentials especially during emergencies (e.g. the pandemic), as well as costing people in financial hardship the most.<sup>55</sup>

## Drip pricing – benefits of clarity in the ACL

Similarly, drip pricing is a sales tactic where an initially advertised price is incrementally increased during the purchasing process through additional charges, such as booking or service fees. This practice can mislead consumers into paying more than they originally anticipated

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<sup>54</sup> CHOICE (2020). *Tinder's secret pricing shows how companies use our data against us*. Available at:

<https://www.choice.com.au/consumers-and-data/data-collection-and-use/how-your-data-is-used/articles/tinder-plus-op-ed>

<sup>55</sup> CNN (2024). *Surge pricing your groceries: What could go wrong?* Available at:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/22/business/surge-pricing-groceries-nightcap/index.html>

and is considered misleading under the ACL which prohibits false or deceptive representations about the price of products or services.

In 2015, the Federal Court of Australia found that Jetstar Airways and Virgin Australia engaged in misleading 'drip pricing' practices and were penalised \$545,000, and \$200,000 (respectively), for breaching the ACL by inadequately disclosing additional fees during the online booking process.<sup>56</sup>

While there have been clear court cases against drip pricing, this practice is still commonly used in online booking processes, creating a need for a more specific ban in legislation.

## Our insights in relation to online account requirements

Online retailers that require consumers to set up an account and provide personal information in order to make a purchase, are making consumers disclose more personal information than is reasonably necessary.

### **This practice is well recognised dark pattern known as the 'Data Grab'.**

CPRC's dark patterns research into found that the majority of Australians recalled being asked for more information about themselves than what was needed to access a product or service (89%), feeling substantial levels of concern and mistrust.

- Almost two in five Australians noted that the practice concerns them (39%), and
- One in three felt they couldn't trust the business (33%).

This practice also has detriment to the business; nearly one in three Australians wanted to stop using the website or app (32%).<sup>57</sup>

These results are unsurprising given research has shown that 75% of Australians feel businesses have a high level of responsibility to provide protection against collection and sharing of personal information and eight out of ten consumers are uncomfortable with unnecessary sharing of their information.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly relevant given consumers feel helpless in having control over their own personal information. More than seven in ten Australians perceive that they lack control over online businesses collecting their personal information from, and sharing this information with, other businesses.<sup>59</sup>

The data grab dark pattern can have significant implications for consumers. Their personal information can be used to make predictions about them to drive commercially beneficial outcomes for businesses. Personal information can also be highly sensitive and if not used with care would violate a consumer's privacy. Personal data can also be used to influence what someone consumes and at what price.

This business practice should be specifically banned by requiring that businesses offer a guest check out option as part of online shopping processes.

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<sup>56</sup> Jetstar and Virgin to pay penalties for misleading 'drip pricing' practices. Available at: <https://www.accc.gov.au/media-release/jetstar-and-virgin-to-pay-penalties-for-misleading-drip-pricing-practices>

<sup>57</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2022). *Duped by design – Manipulative online design: Dark patterns in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/duped-by-design-manipulative-online-design-dark-patterns-in-australia/>

<sup>58</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2020). *CPRC 2020 Data and Technology Consumer Survey*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/cprc-2020-data-and-technology-consumer-survey/>

<sup>59</sup> Kemp, K., Gupta, C., Campbell, M. (2024). *Singled out – Consumer understanding — and misunderstanding — of data broking, data privacy, and what it means for them*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/singled-out>

### Recommendation 10

The Government should introduce specific reforms that will:

- Clearly ban drip pricing, including disclosure of any “per transaction” fees before a purchase process.
- Clearly ban dynamic pricing after the purchase process has commenced.
- Require that companies clearly disclose when dynamic pricing is used and the factors that determine variations in pricing.
- Require that a “guest” check out option is required for online shopping, removing unnecessary data gathering in the purchase process.

## Barriers to accessing customer support

Answering focus questions 32, 33 and 24 from the consultation paper

### Insights into barriers to accessing customer support

For consumers, things can go wrong with goods and services, and the individual is entitled to use and enjoy the good or service already purchased. However, there is a point where customer service can be so lacking, so tricky or so appalling that it is unfair.

We likely need case law to fully explore the point when poor customer service becomes unfair, but until then we can easily point to extreme examples that should be captured by a ban on unfair trading practices. For example, companies that offer no phone or mail service for customer contacts, only an email or webform that customers report getting no response from. Or a telecommunications company that repeatedly promises to arrive at a home at a certain time to fix an issue but then doesn't do so – assuming a customer had to take time off work or faced other personal costs for multiple missed appointments; this would add up to an unfair outcome. Another example seen by consumer organisations, is where companies offer a “30 day change of mind” policy but then offer no practical option to contact the company in that period to allow for a refund or other promised remedy.

Interestingly, in the face of goods and services failures we see substantial proportions of consumers who never raise an issue or lodge a complaint with the business. This likely reflects a fatigue with poor customer support or a lack of trust that customer support will genuinely address issues.

### What are the barriers to complaining?

There is a substantial body of evidence showing that many consumers find it difficult to obtain remedies from suppliers and manufacturers for consumer guarantee failures. The 2023 Australian Consumer Survey found that 31% of surveyed consumers have not had their

problem resolved, while of the 69% of those whose issues were resolved, a third of those were not satisfied with the resolution.<sup>60</sup>

CPRC's recent research with customers of telecommunications companies and digital gamers emphasises this difficulty, showing that consumers *don't know how* to raise a complaint, *don't know where* to raise a complaint, are skeptical they'll receive a response (let alone a remedy), and believe that the time and effort isn't worth the recompense at the end of a likely arduous process.

1. In 2023 in a study of Australians with a telco connection, CPRC found that close to a third of Australians had experienced one or more serious issues with their telco or telco service, worthy of a complaint. 77% of these serious issues (of which we observed close to 3,000 within the past 12 months) were not raised or lodged because the individual was overwhelmed by the process.<sup>61</sup>
2. In 2024 in a study of Australian digital game players, CPRC found that close to half of players who incur financial or time loss from a game don't complain or seek support (42%). They cut their losses and do nothing further, due to a disbelief anything worthwhile will eventuate.<sup>62</sup>

This problem could be addressed by recommendation three in this submission – ensuring that the grey list adequately captures post-sale use and enjoyment of a product or service.

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<sup>60</sup> Australian Consumer Law (2023). *Australian Consumer Survey*. Available at: <https://consumer.gov.au/consultations-and-reviews/australian-consumer-survey/>

<sup>61</sup> CPRC (2024). *Barriers to effective dispute resolution in the telecommunications industry*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/barriers-telco-dispute-resolution>

<sup>62</sup> CPRC research conducted in 2024, yet to be published (early 2025).

# Other considerations

## Application to business-to-business dealings

Answering focus question 35 from the consultation paper

Unfair trading protections should extend to small businesses. Across consumer groups, we regularly see issues where large and powerful businesses use their market power in ways that cause unfair outcomes for small businesses. In many ways, small businesses face the same challenges as individual consumers when dealing with larger businesses.

CPRC has seen clear examples where small businesses are harmed by dark patterns from large businesses. For example, Adobe offers software that many small businesses rely on, from creative contractors to small businesses that create their own PDFs. In February 2023, CPRC referred an issue about Adobe’s subscription trap practices to the ACCC for action specifically due to harm caused to small businesses – we have yet to hear an outcome on this complaint and suspect action is challenging without an unfair trading practices ban.

As of February 2023, Adobe imposed a termination fee of a lump sum payment of 50% of the remainder of an annual subscription fee. This fee is imposed as a penalty for early termination of an annual subscription plan. As a consequence, if users were to cancel their subscriptions at the fourth month of their plan, they would lose access to the software and have to pay a lump sum of 50% of the subscription fee that they would have otherwise incurred for the remaining 8 months (of their annual subscription plan) as a penalty. The detailed termination clause, with information about the percentage payable upon cancellation of the annual subscription, is hidden within the fine print of the section ‘Subscription and cancellation terms’ and is not transparent.

### Recommendation 11

The ban on unfair trading practices should **offer protections to small businesses**.

## Specific prohibitions should stop greenwashing

### The harm caused by greenwashing

Many Australians want to purchase products with environmental benefits. CPRC research has found that 45% of Australians always or often use green claims when making purchases. However, people are finding it difficult to trust the information provided by companies, with at least 50% of people saying they're worried about the truthfulness of green claims.<sup>63</sup>

While regulators have power to stop businesses from making misleading claims, greenwashing is about more than just companies outright lying. CPRC's research has found that most ads using green claims are vague, unhelpful and unclear. These vague ads give companies a "green halo" without helping customers to genuinely compare their options.

In partnership with the Australian Research Council Centre for Excellence for Automated Decision Making + Society (ADM+S), CPRC analysed 8,963 Facebook ads with a green claim. The research found that most ads in the set used vague and unhelpful terms. The top three most observed terms, often used without context for the consumer, were "clean", "green" and "sustainable".<sup>64</sup>

For example, an energy retailer was running an ad with a claim of "Same energy. Greener company." There was no context provided to the customer about what made the company "greener" or whether efforts made the company greener relative to its own past performance or competitor actions. Another example from the research is an ad from electronics company Panasonic which claims that the company is "for the planet". Again, a consumer can't use this information to compare the actions of this company to competitors. It is a claim that delivers a sense of doing good without any detail to back up actions.

In a recent mystery shop of more than 120 appliances conducted by CPRC in 2024 found that two in five large, energy-intensive home appliances had green claims at the point of sale – claims such as "eco-friendly", "resource efficient", and "energy-savvy" in the presence of green colour tones and environmental imagery, but in the absence of further substantiating information. In a series of eight discussion groups conducted around Australia, CPRC also found that 80% of participants would rely on green information when buying a large energy-intensive home appliance.<sup>65</sup>

### The need for a specific ban against greenwashing

These vague green claims cannot be easily dealt with by regulators using existing laws. In fact, regulators have struggled to get courts to confirm that even some specific green claims are misleading. For example, in *ACCC v Woolworths*, the court found that "biodegradable and compostable" products in the W Select Eco range were not false or misleading, even though the products would take significant periods of time to break down in composting conditions.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in *ACCC v Kimberly-Clark*, Kleenex Cottonelle wipes using claims that they were

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<sup>63</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2022). *The Consumer Experience of Green Claims in Australia*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/report/green-claims>

<sup>64</sup> Gupta, C., Bagnara, J., Parker, C., Obeid, A.K., (2023), *Seeing green - Prevalence of green environmental claims on social media*, Consumer Policy Research Centre + ADM+S. Available at: [https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CPRC\\_Seeing-Green-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CPRC_Seeing-Green-Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Consumer Policy Research Centre (2024). *Consumer use and misuse of product information on large appliances*. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CPRC-ECA-Qualitative-Research-BRIEFING-NOTE14.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> *Australian Competition and Consumer Commission v Woolworths Group Limited* [2020] FCAFC 162.

“flushable” were not false or misleading despite evidence of the risk of harm to sewer systems.<sup>67</sup>

## What does effective regulation look like?

The EU has had a ban on unfair practices since 2005 and has already used this protection to limit the harms of greenwashing. In April 2024, the European Commission wrote to 20 airlines requesting that they substantiate green claims.<sup>68</sup> The action targets claims that airlines are moving towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions without clear and verifiable commitments, targets or an independent monitoring system. Consumer groups in the EU are also calling for current laws to be used to stop claims that plastic bottles are “100% recycled” or “100% recyclable” even when this isn’t possible for all materials in a PET bottle.<sup>69</sup>

The EU has recently extended its unfair practices law to explicitly capture greenwashing. The Directive (EU) 2024/825 on Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition was finalised in February 2024 and will be enforced from September 2026.<sup>70</sup>

As part of this expansion to its unfair practices law, the EU has specified that companies will not be able to make use of generic environmental claims without evidence of “excellent environmental performance” relevant to the claim. Generic claims include eco-friendly, eco, green, nature’s friend, natural, animal-friendly, cruelty-free, sustainable, climate neutral, and generic claims based on offsetting alone.<sup>71</sup>

### Recommendation 12

Treasury should extend specific prohibitions of unfair business practices to **capture greenwashing**, mirroring protections being rolled out in the EU.

<sup>67</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission v Kimberly-Clark Australia Pty Ltd [2020] FCAFC 107.

<sup>68</sup> European Commission (30 April 2024), *Press release: Commission and national consumer protection authorities starts action against 20 airlines for misleading greenwashing practices*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_2322](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_2322)

<sup>69</sup> BEUC (2023), *Unbottling greenwashing*. Available at: <https://www.beuc.eu/unbottling-greenwashing>

<sup>70</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/825 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 February 2024 amending Directives 2005/29/EC and 2011/83/EU as regards empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and through better information. Available at: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/825/oj>

<sup>71</sup> CPRC (2023). Submission to the Senate Inquiry – Greenwashing. Available at: <https://cprc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CPRC-Submission-Senate-inquiry-into-Greenwashing-June-2023.pdf>

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## **Attachment 2**

**Consumer movement's 2023 joint submission to  
Treasury's Consultation Regulatory Impact  
Statement, *Protecting consumers from unfair trade  
practices***

## Submission

# Make unfair illegal

Submission from consumer advocates on Treasury's Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement, *Protecting consumers from unfair trade practices*

November 2023



### **About the submission**

The development of the submission was led by the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC) in partnership with Gerard Brody and with consultation with various consumer groups.

This submission is being jointly made by Consumer Policy Research Centre and the following organisations:

- Australian Communications Consumer Action Network
- AMES Australia
- CHOICE
- Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC)
- Consumer Credit Legal Service WA (CCLSWA)
- Consumers' Federation of Australia (CFA)
- Energy Consumers Australia (ECA)
- Financial Counselling Australia (FCA)
- Financial Rights Legal Centre (FRLC)
- Owners Corporation Network (OCN)
- Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC)
- Queensland Consumers Association (QCA)
- Redfern Legal Centre
- Reset Australia
- Super Consumers
- Westjustice

### **Contact for submission**

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### **Statement of Recognition**

Signatories of this submission acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia.

## It's time for change – it's time to make unfair illegal

An economy-wide prohibition on unfair trade practices is a vital addition to Australia's consumer laws. There are a range of practices that cause consumer harm, and are detrimental to the competitive process, that are not currently unlawful. These practices have become more prevalent with the widespread uptake of online commerce, while also existing in the offline world.

The traditional approach to consumer protection, focusing on preventing misleading, deceptive or unconscionable conduct and outlawing only the worst forms of exploitation, falls short of addressing the complex psychological biases that influence consumer decision-making. Market factors such as information overload, complex product choices, and limited competition can also undermine or impede consumer autonomy. Organisations can exploit these biases and factors, often in nuanced ways, resulting in consumer manipulation and distrust. Furthermore, most Australians believe that unfair practices are unlawful, demonstrating the law is out of step with community expectations. Harms can result not only from sales and marketing, but also from product design and pricing, and after-sales conduct (such as making it difficult to access customer service, a remedy or repairs). Moreover, distrust can lead to consumer disengagement, ultimately affecting marketing effectiveness and healthy competition.

This submission argues that a new economy-wide prohibition, reflected in both the Australian Consumer Law and the *Australian Securities and Investments Act*, is required. We posit this reform is crucial for maintaining consistency in consumer protection across sectors, addressing potential loopholes and preventing regulatory arbitrage. We argue that exempting financial services from the unfair trading prohibitions would incentivise businesses to exploit regulatory loopholes, creating confusion among consumers.

To deliver the greatest benefit, a new prohibition should be drawn broadly **and prohibit any conduct or practices which are, or are likely to be, unfair**. A broad prohibition will mean the law is responsive to conduct and practices that exist today and those that may develop over time. The prohibition should be accompanied by a definition of unfairness that includes conduct and business practices that:

- unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers
- take unreasonable advantage of a lack of consumer understanding or ability to protect their own interests, or consumers' reasonable reliance on the trader
- omit, hide, or provide unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous, or untimely material information, or
- unreasonably inhibit access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.

This definition promotes the National Consumer Policy Objectives<sup>1</sup>, particularly the enablement of confident consumer participation in markets and fostering effective competition. It is also responsive to gaps in existing laws and draws upon norms from international laws, thereby removing uncertainty in interpretation of the scope.

An unfair trade practices prohibition could also respond to businesses that exploit First Nations Australians, for example, via the design of marketing and products. Many court decisions (discussed herein) have found such practices to have not breached consumer laws, leaving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers vulnerable. In this way, a new prohibition would support the **National Indigenous Consumer Strategy**.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Agreement for the Australian Consumer Law, Clause E, July 2009, <https://federation.gov.au/about/agreements/intergovernmental-agreement-australian-consumer-law>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://nics.org.au/>.

This submission responds to each of the options in the Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS), and concludes that **Option 4 would present the greatest net benefit**. Option 4 would not only ensure protection from the broadest range of both current and emerging unfair trade practices, but would also promote business certainty through a 'blacklist' of specified unfair practices.

Crucially, an economy-wide prohibition on unfair trade practices would also promote equity and the Federal Government priority of promoting wellbeing across the community. The subtle nature of many unfair practices often goes unnoticed by consumers, impeding recognition of potential victimisation. Even in cases of accurate identification of unfair treatment, consumers making different choices might not influence providers to act more fairly. Furthermore, the widespread use of sophisticated targeting technology able to distinguish customers based on vulnerabilities not only harms consumers, but can have widespread anti-competitive effects, by giving businesses engaging in unfair practices a competitive advantage over those that do not.

Enforcing a provision against unfair trade practices would ensure more equitable economic transactions, and would foster a healthier marketplace, particularly benefiting vulnerable individuals unable to protect their own interests. Lastly, fair transactions contribute to the development of a cohesive social environment and shared values, aligning with the **Federal Government's commitment to wellbeing**.

This submission is set out as follows:

- Section 1 provides a comprehensive overview of unfair trade practices that cause harm.
- Section 2 provides an overview of the gaps in the Australian Consumer Law relating to unfair trade practices.
- Section 3 summarises the economic and social benefits of prohibiting unfair trade practices.
- Section 4 proposes a design of a prohibition on unfair trade practices.
- Section 5 provides a response to the options in the Consultation RIS, including the preferred option.
- Section 6 explains in detail why the prohibition on unfair trade practices must also apply to financial services, opposing the proposed carve-out.
- Section 7 outlines the need for comprehensive remedies and sanctions to apply to the new prohibition.

## Summary of recommendations

### Recommendation 1:

In developing the design of an unfair trading prohibition (including the definition of 'unfair'), ACL Ministers should adopt the following principles:

1. The provision should promote the National Consumer Policy Objectives, particularly to enable confident participation of consumers in markets and to foster effective competition.
2. The provision should respond to gaps in Australia's existing consumer protection laws.
3. The provision should build upon existing norms and laws internationally, so as to promote greater certainty in scope.

### Recommendation 2:

An unfair trading prohibition should be drawn broadly, enabling it to be responsive to conduct and practices that exist today and those that may develop over time, as follows: *"A person must not, in trade or commerce, engage in conduct or practices that are, or are likely to be, unfair"*.

### Recommendation 3:

An unfair trading prohibition should be accompanied by a definition of 'unfair', that includes conduct or practices that:

- unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers
- take unreasonable advantage of a lack of consumer understanding or ability to protect their own interests, or consumers' reasonable reliance on the trader
- omit, hide, or provide unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous, or untimely material information, or
- unreasonably inhibit access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.

### Recommendation 4:

An unfair trading prohibition should be further accompanied by a guiding principle that requires consideration of consumer vulnerability, such as whether the conduct or practice causes or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.

### Recommendation 5:

An unfair trading prohibition should not adopt principles relating to the supplier's 'legitimate interests', the 'average' consumer, or a 'substantial' harm or detriment test.

### Recommendation 6:

An unfair trading practices prohibition should adopt the model proposed in Option 4 of the Consultation RIS, incorporating a general prohibition together with a 'blacklist' of specified unfair trade practices.

### Recommendation 7:

The 'blacklist' of unfair trade practices should be specified and managed by the regulator, and subject to public consultation.

### Recommendation 8:

An unfair trade practices prohibition should be economy-wide, and there should not be a carve-out for financial services. The reform should apply to both the *Australian Consumer Law* and the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act*.

### Recommendation 9:

The full range of penalties and remedies, including civil penalties and actions for damages and compensation, should be available for breach of an unfair trade practices prohibition.

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# 1. Unfair trade practices that cause consumer harm

There are a range of unfair trade practices that cause consumer harm. The Consultation RIS lists a selection of practices, but there are many more.

Unfair practices can be categorised as follows:

- Marketing and selling practices—includes manipulative design online, as well as failing to be upfront or complete in consumer communications (online or in-person).
- Product or service design and pricing—includes designing a product or service or using a pricing strategy that disadvantages consumers, or is not aligned with consumer and community expectations.
- Post-sale practices—includes imposing unreasonable barriers on accessing customer service, complaint processes, or service cancellation.

Table 1, on the following pages sets out a range of unfair practices and examples that are unlikely to be prohibited under the Australian Consumer Law. Many of the examples comprise of practices that have raised concerns among international consumer protection regulators with regard to breaching fairness standards.

The practices discussed in Table 1 are also considered unfair by the Australian community, as demonstrated by 2023 nationally representative CHOICE research<sup>3</sup> which found substantial perceived unfairness of the following:

- Businesses charging higher prices for a product or service based on the personal information they collect online—89%.
- Businesses that force consumers to use their chatbot for customer service without providing alternative contact details (e.g. a phone number)—84%.
- Businesses that make it difficult to cancel an online subscription to an unwanted product or service—90%.
- Businesses selling an extended warranty product that does not provide coverage for anything additional to what is available under the law—84%.
- A business requiring consumers to endure a marketing presentation/pitch to get a price or conditions of what is for sale (e.g. holiday timeshare)—74%.
- A debt company targeting someone who has a limited understanding of finances and/or English, offering to relieve them of debt for a fee—86%.
- A company that uses aggressive sales tactics to sell unaffordable and poor value products to people living in remote Indigenous communities—89%.

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<sup>3</sup> CHOICE, Consumer Pulse Survey, June 2023.

**TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES**

Category	Practice	Examples
<p><b>Marketing and selling</b></p>	<p>Using manipulative techniques on online shopping and other websites</p>	<p><b>Practices that create false urgency or scarcity.</b> For example, limited time only deals without an end-date can create urgency. The UK Competition and Markets Authority’s (CMA) enforcement program will focus on ‘urgency tactics such as countdown clocks, to pressure shoppers to make quicker purchases.’<sup>4</sup> The UK CMA example in the Consultation RIS relating to action against hotel booking sites for showing other customers looking at the same hotel, in the absence of clarity around search dates is relevant here.<sup>5</sup></p>
		<p><b>Using pre-ticked boxes or adding unsolicited items or costs into a ‘basket’ during an online checkout process.</b> CPRC’s <i>Duped by Design</i> described several online retailers, including Appliances Online, which automatically includes a ‘care plan’ in a shopper’s online cart, requiring the consumer to opt-out if they don’t wish to purchase this.<sup>6</sup></p>
		<p><b>Trick questions or ambiguous language which can manipulate or confuse consumers.</b> In its guidance on unfair commercial practices, the European Commission includes the following example: <i>During the ordering process in an online marketplace, the consumer is asked several times to choose ‘yes’ and ‘no’: ‘Would you like to be kept informed about similar offers? Would you like to subscribe to the newsletter? Can we use your details to personalise our offer?’ Halfway through the click sequence, the buttons ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are reversed intentionally. The consumer has clicked ‘no’ several times, but now clicks ‘yes’ and accidentally subscribed to a newsletter.</i><sup>7</sup></p>
		<p><b>Design used on websites or online services to enable unwanted charges or product sign-up.</b> The example in the Consultation RIS of Fortnite using ‘counterintuitive, inconsistent, and confusing button configuration leading players to incur unwanted charges based on the press of a simple button’ is relevant.<sup>8</sup> Another example implicates accounting software provider MYOB, that funnelled customers to an underperforming, high-fee superannuation fund via its employee onboarding software, and hid the ability of employees to maintain contributions with their existing fund.<sup>9</sup></p>
		<p><b>Requiring extensive personal or credit card details to view product websites and prices</b> (e.g. membership or meal delivery services)</p>

<sup>4</sup> UK CMA has published an open letter in March 2023 about the risk of unfairness associated with urgency claims: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/using-urgency-and-price-reduction-claims-online>. The regulator has opened two investigations, one in relation to [Emma Sleep](#) and another in relation to [Wowcher](#).

<sup>5</sup> UK CMA, Hotel booking sites to make changes after CMA probe, 6 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hotel-booking-sites-to-make-major-changes-after-cma-probe>

<sup>6</sup> CPRC, *Duped by Design*, 2022, at <https://cprc.org.au/dupedbydesign/>, page 11.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, *Guidance on the interpretation and application of Directive concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices*, [https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-topic/consumer-protection-law/unfair-commercial-practices-law/unfair-commercial-practices-directive\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-topic/consumer-protection-law/unfair-commercial-practices-law/unfair-commercial-practices-directive_en), Page 101.

<sup>8</sup> FTC, Fortnite Video Game Maker Epic Games to Pay More Than Half a Billion Dollars over FTC Allegations of Privacy Violations and Unwanted Charges, 19 December 2022, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2022/12/fortnite-video-game-maker-epic-games-pay-more-half-billion-dollars-over-ftc-allegations>.

<sup>9</sup> Hanna Wootton, ‘MYOB allegedly manipulating users into joining its sub-par super fund’, *Australian Financial Review*, 12 March 2023, <https://www.afr.com/policy/tax-and-super/myob-allegedly-manipulating-users-into-joining-its-subpar-super-fund-20230307-p5cpvj>.

Category	Practice	Examples
	Using personalised persuasion techniques or limiting access to services, through use of data or personalised insights	<p><b>Practices that draw upon aggregated data about consumer behaviour and preferences.</b> Using this data in an opaque and non-transparent way exacerbates unfairness, as does using information about the vulnerabilities of specific consumers or a group of consumers for commercial purposes. In its guidance on unfair commercial practices, the European Commission includes the following example: <i>A trader is aware of a consumer's history with financial services and the fact that they have been banned by a credit institution due to the inability to pay. The consumer is subsequently targeted with specific offers by a credit institution, with the aim of exploiting their financial situation.</i><sup>10</sup></p> <p><b>Collecting excessive amounts of personal information and data for surveillance.</b> This practice was identified as the second most common unfair practice in the CHOICE supporter survey (49.7%). As an example, “RentTech” providers (third-party online services designed to aid tenancy applications), have been found to collect excessive data. Concerns have been raised about potential discrimination or unfair treatment and/or surveillance of renters based upon this data.<sup>11</sup></p> <p><b>Using screen scraped data to monitor, identify and target consumers.</b> Lenders using bank account information captured as part of loan application, where screen scraping technology can then identify when borrower is low on cash, and subsequently directly advertise to the customer (e.g. has been found to occur with payday lenders).<sup>12</sup></p>
	Omitting important information, failing to provide or making it difficult for the customer to obtain upfront and complete disclosure, which may not amount to misleading conduct	<p><b>Extended warranty promotions.</b> Promoting the value of an extended warranty product should not be done in the absence of upfront information about existing consumer guarantee rights and remedies in the Australian Consumer Law. In the case of <i>Director of CAV v Good Guys</i>, this was found not to amount to misrepresentations.<sup>13</sup></p> <p>Furthermore, extended warranty products (which may also be described as some form of enhanced or premium ‘service’) may set out prescriptive rights and remedies (for example, a fixed number of times a failed good may be serviced by a trader before a consumer can ask for a refund) which in fact provide weaker recourse than the existing ACL rights. Ready access to customer service to raise a problem with a good or service may also be conditional on paying extra for such a product, while consumers who do not pay for an extended warranty may face additional delays and barriers in raising an issue.</p> <p>Practices that prevent customers from receiving full disclosure and other material information, including about extended warranty exclusions have been observed being used by a number of second-hand car dealers.</p> <p><b>Rental Cars and Car Hire Damage Waivers or Excess Reduction.</b> Consumers renting a vehicle are told there is cover if there is a collision or damage to the vehicle and told they can pay a fee to reduce the cost of any damage, which would otherwise automatically run in the thousands. Often these contracts also contain terms that are not explained to consumers at the point of hire, which exclude any damage cover for a sweeping range of situations, including the driver not taking reasonable care or the driver breaching any road rule.</p>

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, *Guidance on the interpretation and application of Directive concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices*, Page 100.

<sup>11</sup> CHOICE, RentTech platforms making renting that much harder, 2023, <https://www.choice.com.au/consumers-and-data/data-collection-and-use/how-your-data-is-used/articles/choice-renttech-report-release>.

<sup>12</sup> Financial Rights Legal Centre, Consumer Action Law Centre & Financial Counselling Australia, Submission to ePayments Code Review, January 2021, page 9, [https://financialrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/210118\\_ePaymentsCodeProposal\\_Letter\\_FINAL.pdf](https://financialrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/210118_ePaymentsCodeProposal_Letter_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> *Director of Consumer Affairs Victoria v Good Guys Discount Warehouses (Australia) Pty Ltd* [2016] FCA 2022.

Category	Practice	Examples
		<p><b>Sign up processes completed on tablets.</b> Frontline services such as Consumer Action Law Centre regularly speak to people who have no knowledge or copies of any terms or conditions signed by them because they were just handed a tablet to sign, which had already been ‘scrolled through’ by the salesperson to the signature spot. This often seems to occur in tandem with other high-pressure situations, such as when a salesperson attends the consumer’s home for a service or sales pitch.</p> <p><b>Making unsubstantiated green claims.</b> The following practices with respect to ‘greenwashing’ have been considered unfair under UK and EU regimes for failing to be upfront, or being misleading by omission:<sup>14</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making an environmental claim related to future environmental performance without clear, objective and verifiable commitments and targets and an independent monitoring system.</li> <li>• Making an environmental claim about the entire product when it concerns a single aspect of the product.</li> <li>• Displaying an unsubstantiated ‘sustainability’ label, i.e. labelling that is not based on a certification scheme or not established by public authorities.</li> </ul>
	Subscription traps	<p><b>Keeping consumers subscribed.</b> For example, the use of marketing tools that trick people into ongoing subscriptions, through free trials or other means. For example, CPRC’s research found that Kogan automatically adds a free 14-day trial to its membership program via a pre-ticked selection during checkout. The onus is then on the consumer to realise and then make the effort to unsubscribe to a service they may not have intended to purchase in the first place.<sup>15</sup> The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently alleged unfair conduct by Amazon, whereby the option to purchase items on Amazon without subscribing to the Amazon Prime service was more difficult for consumers to locate.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>The practices of subscription traps can also include making the process to unsubscribe difficult to navigate. This is further covered in the post-sale practice section of this table.</p>
	Subverting choice of communication to enable marketing pressure	<p><b>Unsolicited calling after a consumer lodges an online enquiry.</b> Several insurers and insurance brokers call consumers unexpectedly after they make an inquiry via an online quote process, without having made this expectation clear on their website.</p>
	Pressure selling that may be endemic in a particular market	<p><b>Pressuring potential buyers.</b> Potential buyers may be put under considerable pressure, for instance, by companies that create barriers to consumers leaving a sales presentation by ‘locking’ them in a room and pressuring them to sign a contract before exiting (e.g. timeshare providers).</p>

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, ‘Circular Economy: Commission proposes new consumer rights and a ban on greenwashing’, 30 March 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_2098](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_2098). CMA, Environmental sustainability and the UK competition and consumer regimes: CMA advice to the Government, March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-sustainability-and-the-uk-competition-and-consumer-regimes-cma-advice-to-the-government>

<sup>15</sup> CPRC, *Duped by Design*, 2022, at <https://cprc.org.au/dupedbydesign/>, page 12.

<sup>16</sup> FTC, FTC Takes Action Against Amazon for Enrolling Customers in Amazon Prime without Consent, 21 June 2023: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/06/ftc-takes-action-against-amazon-enrolling-consumers-amazon-prime-without-consent-sabotaging-their>.

Category	Practice	Examples
<b>Product/service design and pricing</b>	Altering a product attribute or pricing without informing customers of the implications	<b>Changing agreements without informing consumers.</b> Medibank phased out agreements with hospitals, resulting in customers losing access to ‘no gap’ radiology and pathology services. In <i>ACCC v Medibank</i> , <sup>17</sup> this was found not to be unconscionable nor misleading.
		<b>Shrinkflation.</b> Supermarkets often reduce package sizes without transparently informing the customer. This has been found to be unfair by the Spanish Competition Regulator. <sup>18</sup>
		<b>Premium increases without explanation.</b> Insurers have been found to increase consumers’ premiums substantially without any explanation as to why.
		<b>Charging for a service attribute that was previously part of a free membership.</b> Charging for previously free membership services without updating (reducing) the price of the membership accordingly, can be deemed unfair.
	Pricing practices that penalise loyalty	<b>‘Price walking’.</b> The UK FCA has found many insurance companies have increased prices for existing customers at renewal, known as ‘price walking’. <sup>19</sup> This sort of loyalty charging can be considered unfair.
	Using personalised pricing practices that are unreasonable or not based on a legitimate need	<b>Using pricing optimisation techniques or algorithms.</b> Using these techniques that result in higher prices for cohorts of consumers without a reasonable basis (i.e. the consumer presents higher risk for the trader). The Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) has recently launched legal action against Insurance Australia Group (IAG) for enticing customers to renew their insurance using a price optimiser that allocated a smaller price increase to policies predicted to be less likely to renew at higher prices; and a larger price increase to the policies that were predicted to be more likely to renew at higher prices. Among the claims, ASIC alleges this contravenes the insurer’s obligation to provide services efficiently, honestly and fairly. <sup>20</sup> Also a study currently being conducted jointly by CPRC and RMIT has found some initial evidence of businesses engaging in personalised pricing based on a range of factors that consumers are unlikely to be aware of.
	Limiting payment options, or imposing additional fees for payment, for an essential service	<b>Limited payment options.</b> Some utility providers, particularly telecommunications, require payments to be via ‘autopay’ or direct debit, despite this payment method disadvantaging many financial constrained consumers.

<sup>17</sup> *ACCC v Medibank Private Limited* [2018] FCAFC 235.

<sup>18</sup> Consumer and User Organisation, OCU denounces six companies in the fact of competition, 23 June 2022: <https://www.ocu.org/organizacion/prensa/notas-de-prensa/2022/reduflacion>.

<sup>19</sup> FCA, FCA confirms measures to protect customers from the loyalty penalty in home and motor insurance markets, 28 May 2023: <https://www.fca.org.uk/news/press-releases/fca-confirms-measures-protect-customers-loyalty-penalty-home-motor-insurance-markets>.

<sup>20</sup> ASIC, ASIC alleges IAG misled home insurance customers on pricing discounts, 25 August 2023: <https://asic.gov.au/about-asic/news-centre/find-a-media-release/2023-releases/23-228mr-asic-alleges-iag-misled-home-insurance-customers-on-pricing-discounts/>.

Category	Practice	Examples
		<p><b>Additional fees.</b> Some rental providers impose additional fees for making rental payments online, or there may be additional fees charged for rental application processes, e.g., background checks. Tenants are also regularly directed and given little practical choice by real estate agents but to make rental payments via direct debit through the agency’s nominated third-party rental payment app that often charge additional fees.</p> <p><b>Monthly pricing higher than annual pricing.</b> Insurance firms can charge higher amounts for customers who pay their premiums monthly, instead of yearly.</p> <p><b>‘Auto-pay’ limitations.</b> Credit card providers can limit options to set up ‘auto-pay’ to make repayments, increasing the risk of consumers being charged interest or overdue fees.</p>
	Designing product or business model that targets financial vulnerability, desperation or addiction	<p>The following practices leverage a customer’s desperation or inability to protect themselves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Pawnbroking.</b> The general practice of pawnbrokers is to provide a short-term low-value loan on security of an item that often has sentimental value. This often encourages people in financial distress to extend payment arrangements month after month as they cannot repay the principal lent and can only meet the period fees and interest.</li> <li>• <b>Debt negotiation services.</b> In <i>Wade v J Daniels &amp; Associates</i>,<sup>21</sup> the claim alleged that the debt negotiation provider knew of the consumer’s financial position and did not advise its services were unlikely to achieve a solution to keep her home, such as a refinance. The court found that the arrangement did not breach consumer laws.</li> <li>• <b>Exploitation of visual stimuli.</b> Poker machine design has exploited visual stimuli displayed whenever a player receives a return, whether or not the amount won exceeded the amount waged. Features have also been designed to inflate and misrepresent to the player the likelihood of winning. In <i>Guy v Crown Melbourne &amp; Anor</i>,<sup>22</sup> the Federal Court held that the conduct was not unconscionable and the representations made were not misleading, despite agreeing that the information displayed was confusing.</li> <li>• <b>‘Carnapping’.</b> ‘Carnapping’ is a co-ordinated practice organised by businesses in tandem – at various times involving car hire, smash repairs, tow truck companies, and debt recovery lawyers (“legal recoveries firms”) – which take advantage of drivers’ limited legal, insurance and mechanical knowledge, as well as their understandable stress and worry following motor vehicle accidents. A typical carnapping matter involves roadside referral by an attending tow truck driver or via search-optimised online advertising directing the ‘not-at-fault’ driver to specific car hire, smash repairs and recoveries firms. The driver often signs documents at or directly after the scene of an accident.<sup>23</sup> While legal services boards have issued clear professional conduct directives and taken enforcement action against some legal practitioners acting to recover alleged debts in these matters<sup>24</sup>, there is not an outright prohibition on these arrangements where they amount to unfair conduct by all participants.</li> </ul>

<sup>21</sup> [2020] FCA 1708.

<sup>22</sup> [2018] FCA 36.

<sup>23</sup> Westjustice, *Don’t Settle For Less: The Settlement Justice Partnership and Fairer Outcomes For Refugees in Melbourne’s West*, at [https://westjustice.org.au/cms\\_uploads/docs/westjustice-settlement-justice-project-report-final.pdf](https://westjustice.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/westjustice-settlement-justice-project-report-final.pdf) on p.59.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, *Acting in Motor Vehicle Accident Claims*, [https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/Fact%20sheet%20-%202015-06-17%20-%20FINAL%20Acting%20in%20motor%20vehicle%20accident%20claims%20-%20LPL%20Update%28rev%2020%29\\_0%20%281%29.pdf](https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/Fact%20sheet%20-%202015-06-17%20-%20FINAL%20Acting%20in%20motor%20vehicle%20accident%20claims%20-%20LPL%20Update%28rev%2020%29_0%20%281%29.pdf).

Category	Practice	Examples
	Product or service models that create a reasonable reliance by the consumer that their interests will be safeguarded	<p><b>Selective comparison services.</b> Comparison services or intermediaries may create an expectation that it will act in the person's best interests. It may be unfair for such services to not compare the entire market, or to not promote the best offer, where this isn't disclosed to the user. While the service is not unfair per se, there should be a higher standard.</p> <p><b>Bundled essential services.</b> Some intermediary companies offer arrangements where utility connection may be automatically arranged in tandem with moving into a new home (for example, through a real estate agency's promotion of the service). There are no standards to ensure the utility that the consumer is connected to will offer the most affordable or appropriate plan, or that important information such as concessions are disclosed and factored into billing at the point of entry into a contract.</p>
	Charging for a service that a consumer can access for free, without informing them	<p><b>Credit repair agencies commonly charge customers to correct credit reports</b> when complaints can be made for free via external dispute resolution firms. There are also organisations which charge for applications for early release of superannuation, and take a proportion of the funds, without clearly informing customers that they can make applications directly.</p>
	Designing complex products to evade particular consumer protections or regulatory standards	<p><b>Artificial structures.</b> Some warranty firms design their product so that the provider is an 'administrator' only, rather than the warranty provider, and posit that the retailer (often a car dealer) is the warranty provider. This is despite the warranty firm designing the product, and managing and deciding claims. The artificial structure appears designed to limit consumer access to redress and avoid standards that would be required if the warranty firm issued the product directly, for example, access to external dispute resolution and licensing standards.</p> <p><b>Bonus content in the education market:</b> Consumer advocacy organisations have also come across arrangements (particularly in the unregulated private courses and education market) where significant portions of the service being paid for are classified as "bonuses" included as free additions to the agreement, with only nominal elements of the service being treated as being provided for consideration. This then creates a consumer impediment if the service fails to meet consumer guarantees, but a provider claims that the consumer is ineligible for any refund on any free 'bonus' material.</p> <p><b>Embedded networks.</b> Owners of apartment buildings or strata schemes can be subject to unfair practices as a result of the practices of developers and related entities. For example, the creation of embedded networks to provide electricity, gas, water, and telecommunications can mean that residents are not entitled to the same protections as other customers. Embedded networks are installed by a developer often for free (or the embedded network operator will pay the developer a fee), in return for a long-term arrangement allowing the operator to provide monopoly and inflated contracts. This arrangement also impacts both resident owners and tenants, who are held captive to that provider.<sup>25</sup></p>

<sup>25</sup> See interview by MP Ray Williams (Member for Castle Hill) on embedded network issues: <https://www.raywilliamsmp.com.au/rw-blog/fighting-to-stop-the-embedded-network-rot>

Category	Practice	Examples
		Similar issues have been observed in relation to long-term building management contracts entered into on behalf of owners, which impedes residents' choice of service provider. These arrangements (contracts commonly between the service provider and an owners corporation) are not commonly covered by unfair contract term laws. <sup>26</sup>
	Planned obsolescence	<p><b>Planned obsolescence.</b> The EU Unfair Commercial Practices Directive includes this as an unfair practice, involving 'deliberately planning or designing a product with a limited useful life so that it will become obsolete or non-functional after a certain period of time'. Related unfair practices could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• undisclosed, planned obsolescence that relies on high switching costs to force consumers to regularly purchase additional or replacement products</li> <li>• a lack of disclosure that a product will be obsolete in an unreasonably brief period of time, as a result of internal decisions of future support, or</li> <li>• not providing security updates for smart products for a reasonable amount of time, thereby putting sensitive consumer information at risk.</li> </ul> <p>The example in the Consultation RIS of CMA UK taking action against Apple Inc where customers were not warned that their phone's performance could slow down following a software update also fits in this category.<sup>27</sup></p>
	Including a condition or exclusion in an insurance policy that is unrelated to the risk insured	<b>Unrelated disclosure clauses.</b> Consumer advocates have raised concerns about insurance policies that require disclosure of bankruptcy, and then deny cover should there have been non-disclosure, in circumstances where the bankruptcy is unrelated to the insured risk being covered.
	Bundling products or costs into one item, making it difficult to compare	<b>Bundling.</b> Funeral homes commonly bundle various goods and services, making it difficult to compare quotes across different providers (different packages have different inclusions). <sup>28</sup>
	Other pricing practices of concern	<b>Non-display of selling price on or close to a product.</b> This lack of price clarity and transparency often occurs in convenience stores, bars and pubs. The practice prevents informed choice and price comparison.
		<b>No scales provided.</b> A supermarket not providing scales to allow consumers to weigh products (especially fruit and vegetables) prevents weight-based price comparison, as well as impeding knowledge of the total cost.
		<b>Ambiguous label design.</b> A supermarket or store using the same or similar design as a 'special' or 'discount' price ticket to advertise full-priced items can be misleading and lead to higher priced purchases. This can also include was/now price labelling strategies where the "now" price is actually the full-price from weeks/months ago. <sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For more information, see Expert Panel, Embedded Network Review Final Report, July 2022, <https://engage.vic.gov.au/embedded-networks-review>.

<sup>27</sup> CMA, Apple iPhones consumer protection case, 22 May 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/apple-iphones-consumer-protection-case>.

<sup>28</sup> See CHOICE, Funeral Home investigation, September 2019, <https://www.choice.com.au/health-and-body/healthy-ageing/ageing-and-retirement/articles/funerals-investigation-how-much-do-funerals-cost>.

<sup>29</sup> See CHOICE's Shonky Award to Coles and Woolworths, 2 November 2023, <https://www.choice.com.au/shonky-awards/hall-of-shame/shonkys-2023/coles-and-woolies>.

Category	Practice	Examples
		<p><b>Pricing claims that are impossible to verify.</b> For example, advertising a therapeutic bed with a \$1000 discount without being upfront about the price, or requiring a sales consultation to verify the price is underhanded and could be considered unfair.</p> <p><b>Hiding commissions and other payments in a charge described as an ‘insurance premium’.</b> This practice has been raised in the context of owners’ corporations.<sup>30</sup></p> <p><b>Increasing annual or regular prices for services without explaining why prices are increasing.</b> This is particularly unfair in relation to insurance where the consumer may be able to take some action to mitigate the price increase, especially for insured items that depreciate in value over time.</p>
<b>Post-sale practices</b>	Designing customer service systems which impede access to support or remedy	<p><b>Impeding access to effective customer service / complaints processes.</b> In the case of <i>ACCC v Mazda</i>, the court found that Mazda gave consumers who reported faults with their vehicle the “<i>run around’ by engaging in evasion and subterfuge, and providing ‘appalling customer service’</i>”. The Full Federal Court found that this did not amount to unconscionable conduct.<sup>31</sup></p> <p>Other unfair practices might involve forcing a customer to use a particular service channel (i.e. forcing to use online communication when the customer’s preference is for phone; or vice versa) or simply imposing unreasonable delays or other barriers to customer service.</p>
		<p><b>Complicating the cancellation process.</b> The US Consumer Protection Regulator (FTC) has alleged that Amazon knowingly complicated the cancellation process for Prime subscribers who sought to end their membership.<sup>32</sup> The UK FCA said that breaches fairness standards include imposing unnecessary questions or steps before a customer is able to confirm their instructions to cancel an automatic renewal feature, and having unreasonably longer call wait times to cancel the auto-renewal feature (compared to purchasing a new policy).<sup>33</sup></p> <p><b>‘Confirm-shaming’.</b> The use of emotional and judgemental language to discourage digital service cancellation is unfair. The European Commission Guidance on Unfair Commercial Practices includes the following example: <i>In order to unsubscribe from a digital service, the consumer is forced to take numerous non-intuitive steps in order to arrive at the cancellation link. These steps include ‘confirm-shaming’, whereby the consumer is prompted, without reasoned justification, to reconsider their choice through emotional messages several times (‘We’re sorry to see you go’, ‘Here are the benefits you will lose’) and ‘visual interference’, such as prominent images that encourage the user to continue with the subscription instead of cancelling.</i><sup>34</sup></p>
	Creating unnecessary barriers to service cancellation	

<sup>30</sup> CHOICE, Backroom deals in strata insurance and how they're costing you', 10 October 2023, <https://www.choice.com.au/money/insurance/home-and-contents/articles/conflicts-of-interest-in-strata-insurance>.

<sup>31</sup> *ACCC v Mazda Australia Pty Ltd* [2023] FCAFC 45.

<sup>32</sup> FTC, FTC Takes Action Against Amazon for Enrolling Customers in Amazon Prime without Consent, 21 June 2023: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/06/ftc-takes-action-against-amazon-enrolling-consumers-amazon-prime-without-consent-sabotaging-their>.

<sup>33</sup> UK FCA, ICOBS 6A.6 Cancellation of automatic renewal, <https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/ICOBS/6A/6.html>.

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, *Guidance on the interpretation and application of Directive concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices*, Page 102.

Category	Practice	Examples
		<b>Impeding access to guarantees.</b> Marketing a product with a ‘money back guarantee’, but then making it difficult to access the guarantee is unfair. This may include, for example, products or services where a person is required to engage with a ‘gauntlet’ of customer service staff to finalise a refund request, pressured to continue using the product, or otherwise delayed in a way that may cause an advertised or contractual guarantee to expire and prejudice other consumer rights and remedies.
	Omitting pertinent information about refund or return entitlements	<b>Omitting information about consumer guarantees.</b> In the case of <i>ACCC v LG</i> , the Full Federal Court determined that LG’s practice of ‘negotiation’ around remedies, without reference to consumer guarantee rights, was not misleading conduct. <sup>35</sup>
	Imposing unfair conditions of service access	<b>Imposing unreasonable conditions on flight credits.</b> CHOICE asserts that Qantas charging additional money to use a flight voucher, or putting unreasonable limitations on credit redemptions or access is unfair. <sup>36</sup> This is outside of the terms of service, and extends to credit redemption systems meaning that consumers could not access flight credits.
	Limiting repair rights unreasonably	<b>‘Authorised repairers only’.</b> Requiring a product to only be repaired through particular or authorised repairers, or limiting rights when customer chooses alternate repairer (i.e., access to further support) is unfair. This appears to be a recurring issue among insurers, particularly where it is suggested that honouring a claim is conditional on a designated repairer irrespective of how long the repairer takes.
		<b>Common points of failure.</b> Designing goods with known / common points of failure to increase revenue from replaceable parts is unfair.
		<b>Unique parts. Designing goods with unique parts</b> (e.g., curved screen) to limit repairability or increase revenue from replaceable parts is unfair.
	Using unfair tactics to require payments, beyond legitimate interests	<b>Leveraging unreasonable payments.</b> Storage companies, towing companies and pawnbrokers can hold goods of value (including sentimental value) to demand payments, often of amounts far more than the cost of goods or cost of holding goods, affecting people experiencing vulnerability. <sup>37</sup>
	Hiding mandated customer information with confusing or distracting information, including marketing	<b>Hiding mandated information.</b> Superannuation funds, which are required to inform their members when and how they fail a performance test, have been observed to include unnecessary information in letters to members to confuse and distract from the test failure, e.g. discrediting the performance test methodology, referring to other awards or rankings their product had received.

<sup>35</sup> *ACCC v LG Electronics Australia Pty Ltd* [2018] FCAFC 96.

<sup>36</sup> CHOICE, Qantas flight credit policy unfair to consumers, 12 April 2022, <https://www.choice.com.au/travel/on-holidays/airlines/articles/qantas-flight-credits-failure>

<sup>37</sup> See Consumer Action Law Centre, Submission to Review of Warehouseman’s Liens Act, 2017, <https://consumeraction.org.au/review-of-the-warehousemens-liens-act-1958-position-paper/>

## 2. Gaps in the Australian Consumer Law

The Consultation RIS usefully sets out limitations of existing protections in the Australian Consumer Law (the ACL). This section of the submission responds to that discussion and considers limitations both with the standards-based provisions in the ACL as well as the specific provisions, which prohibit defined behaviours. In both cases, we demonstrate that the existing laws do not respond effectively to the types of unfair practices listed in Table 1.

The majority of the general community already think businesses are required to treat consumers fairly, demonstrating that the community expectation is inconsistent with the existing requirements. Research conducted in 2023 by CHOICE found that **72% of consumers believe that Australian businesses are already required by law to act fairly towards consumers**, and **69% believe Australian businesses already face penalties if found to have been acting unfairly**.<sup>38</sup> As will be further discussed in section 3 (below), inconsistency between the law and community expectations can contribute to consumer distrust and impede market effectiveness and healthy competition.

### 2.1 Limitations of standards-based provisions in the ACL

The standards-based provisions in the ACL include the following:

- The prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct.<sup>39</sup> The standard set by this prohibition is also reflected in the provisions which prohibit false and misleading representations in specific circumstances.<sup>40</sup>
- The prohibitions against unconscionable conduct. This includes both the statutory prohibition in connection with the supply or acquisition of goods and services,<sup>41</sup> and the prohibition on 'unconscionable conduct within the meaning of the unwritten law'.<sup>42</sup>
- The prohibition on unfair terms in consumer and small business contracts.<sup>43</sup>
- The prohibition on physical harassment, undue harassment, and coercion.<sup>44</sup>

#### Misleading and deceptive conduct

There are several difficulties with the prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct when applied to unfair practices, as demonstrated in Table 1 above. The first relates to misleading **omissions** or **silence**, which is acknowledged in the Consultation RIS.

##### *Lack of obligation to be upfront in communication*

First, judicial interpretation confirms that the prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct does not require a business to be upfront in its communication, or to specifically inform the consumer about all material aspects of the product or service supply or acquisition. While the Consultation RIS refers to the case of *ACCC v AGL South Australia Pty Ltd*,<sup>45</sup> there are two further cases that also demonstrate the associated harms, particularly in the context of a business failing to inform a customer of their refund rights.

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<sup>38</sup> CHOICE, Consumer Pulse Survey, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Section 18, ACL.

<sup>40</sup> Section 29-31, and section 33-34, ACL

<sup>41</sup> Section 20, ACL.

<sup>42</sup> Section 21, ACL.

<sup>43</sup> Section 23, ACL.

<sup>44</sup> Section 50, ACL.

<sup>45</sup> [2014] FCA 1369.

### ***Australian Competition and Consumer Commission v LG Electronics Pty Ltd***<sup>46</sup>

In the context of a defective appliance in combination with an expired manufacturer's warranty, LG Electronics made various representations outlining what it was prepared to offer a customer as a remedy, making no reference to the customer's consumer guarantee rights or remedies under the consumer guarantee provisions of the ACL. These representations were found not to be misleading, even though the consumer guarantee provisions would have provided the customer with remedies greater than what LG Electronics offered. The court held that these were mere 'offers', as part of a 'negotiation', and were not considered to be representations of the consumers' statutory rights. The finding of this case unfairly puts the onus on the customer to know their consumer guarantee rights. A lack of knowledge can arguably cause detriment whereby the result is a poorer remedy than what the consumer is legally entitled to.

### ***Director of Consumer Affairs Victoria v The Good Guys Discount Warehouses (Australia) Pty Ltd***<sup>47</sup>

This case was based on five store visits whereby Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV) inspectors posed as customers during a mystery shop and asked questions about a television. Questions included what would happen if the television was defective or broke down, and in response, salespeople provided information about an extended warranty, in the absence of information about consumer guarantee rights or remedies. It was alleged that this implicitly represented that the consumer's sole source of rights was the extended warranty, (while legally, consumers have rights under the ACL, and may have been entitled to a remedy). The court held that the implied representations were not made, noting that the customer was provided with, or had available a brochure which explained that the extended warranty did not exclude ACL rights.<sup>48</sup>

Both cases confirm that silence is not considered misleading. The prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct does not require a business to be upfront about consumer rights. There is case law that finds that the court's task is to view the conduct as a whole, including representations and omissions, to determine whether the conduct is misleading.<sup>49</sup> In other cases, the court has adopted an approach which analyses whether the circumstances give rise to a 'reasonable expectation' that if a relevant fact existed, it would be disclosed to the person who claimed to be misled.<sup>50</sup>

That said, the above cases do confirm a clear gap in the existing law—there is presently no requirement on a business to be upfront and inform the customer about all material matters relating to the supply or acquisition of goods or services. In *ACCC v AGL South Australia Pty Ltd*, the court held that 'the test of reasonable expectation is not satisfied by an appeal to vague notions of fairness or some concept of optimal disclosure'.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the case law associated with misleading omissions is complex and inconsistent, thereby impeding business compliance.

### ***Creating confusion doesn't equate to breach of law***

A second difficulty with the prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct is that **there has not been a breach found by an Australian court, even when it has been accepted that a representation is confusing.** It has been held, for example, that the prohibition is not intended "to cover confusing conduct in the sense that the conduct causes the public to reconsider or doubt its preconceived ideas" (see next case example).

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<sup>46</sup> [2017] FCA 1047.

<sup>47</sup> [2016] FCA 22.

<sup>48</sup> [2018] FCA 36.

<sup>49</sup> *Miller v Associated Insurance Broking Pty Ltd* [2010] HCA 31 at [23].

<sup>50</sup> *Demagoge v Ramensky* [1992] FCA 557.

<sup>51</sup> [2014] FCA 1369 at [24].

### ***McWilliam's Wines Pty Ltd v McDonald's System of Australia Pty Ltd***<sup>52</sup>

In 1980, the court rejected the allegation that the use of the expression 'Big Mac' in advertising by McWilliams Wines for one of its brands of wine, may lead potential purchasers to incorrectly perceive a connection between McWilliams and McDonalds.

The above decision may have been reasonable in the context of trade in the 1980s; however, commerce and representations move much more quickly today, such that even fleeting confusing statements may easily lead a consumer into making an erroneous choice or decision. Despite this, the position has been followed as per the example below.

### ***Guy v Crown Melbourne (No 2)***<sup>53</sup>

Shona Guy had suffered from gambling addiction for 14 years and sought a declaration that the Dolphin Treasure gambling machine was designed to be addictive and produce uneven results. The claim alleged that the gambling machine provider knowingly used sounds and visual stimuli which are displayed whenever a player receives a return, regardless of if the amount won did or did not exceed the amount wagered. It was also alleged that the advertised claim of 87.8% returns was false, as this figure is calculated over the lifetime of a machine and includes jackpots that players rarely win. Ultimately, the return of 87.8% is unlikely to be experienced by a player in one 'gambling session'. The court held that the representation was 'likely to cause confusion to the hypothetical gambler' and that 'the gambler is likely to believe, at least momentarily, that the statement is directed at her or his individual chances of winning on the machine'. However, the judge also said that this confusion could be remedied "*by the gambler looking at some of the information available at the casino or on the internet*". The court held that the system was not unconscionable.

### *Deception isn't captured by the law*

A third difficulty with the prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct relates to the concept of deception, particularly when applied to corporations, where it can be difficult to prove state-of-mind; a relevant consideration for penalties.

Professor Elise Bant has written that it is almost impossible to prove 'deceptive' conduct against large, modern companies. Deception requires showing deliberate dishonesty and knowledge on the part of those who are "*directing mind and will*", and that "*in large corporations, where roles and responsibilities are dispersed between a huge array of managers, employers and agents, attributing knowledge and dishonesty to defined 'leading' individuals is incredibly challenging and expensive for regulators and victim*".<sup>54</sup>

### **Unconscionable conduct**

There are a range of limitations in relation to the statutory prohibition on unconscionable conduct in section 21 of the ACL. One is articulated in the Consultation RIS. That is, **it requires a high threshold to be met**. The cases summarised in the Consultation RIS relating to *Medibank*, *Mazda*, and *Pitt*, all confirm the threshold is high.

It was initially intended that section 21 extend unconscionable conduct beyond the equitable notion in 'the unwritten law', that is, that the threshold should not be so high. Later amendments further attempted to broaden the breadth of conduct it addresses:

- In the second reading for the bill that introduced the statutory prohibition on unconscionable conduct, the explanatory memorandum said it "*was envisaged to prohibit [undue influence and*

<sup>52</sup> *McWilliam's Wines Pty Ltd v McDonald's System of Australia Pty Ltd* [1980] FCA 159.

<sup>53</sup> [2018] FCA 36.

<sup>54</sup> Elise Bant, 'Misleading Conduct? So What!', *Pursuit*, available at <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/misleading-conduct-so-what>.

*unconscionable conduct in equity] but would, in addition, extend to other conduct that is, in all the circumstances, unconscionable”.*<sup>55</sup>

- A 2008 Senate Committee reported that the provision was “*not working effectively because the courts are not interpreting the section as broadly as was the legislative intent*”, and the “*current interpretation of section 51AC sets the bar too high*”.<sup>56</sup>
- New interpretive principles were added in 2012, to make it clear that the provision ‘is not limited to the unwritten law’, that it can ‘apply to a system of conduct or a pattern of behaviour’, and that it ‘can extend beyond the formation of the contract to both its terms and the way it is carried out’.<sup>57</sup>

Not only has the threshold remained high, but it is contested by superior court judges. While the majority now appear to think that the standard does not require ‘moral obloquy’, there is still disagreement among High Court judges.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps a key reason that the Parliament’s intention has not been reflected by the judiciary, and that there has been confusion and disagreement, is its maintenance of the word ‘unconscionable’ in the provision rather than broader language, like ‘unfairness’.

There are two other limitations in relation to the prohibition on unconscionable conduct. The first is that recent lead authorities have determined that conduct is unconscionable, in breach of the legislation, if it is “*so far outside societal norms of acceptable commercial behaviour as to warrant condemnation as conduct that is offensive to conscience*”.<sup>59</sup>

Such analysis focuses on the **moral conduct of the wrongdoer**. There is less consideration on the impact of the conduct on consumers, or whether the practice impedes the ability of consumers to make effective choices. This was evident in the cases of *Mazda* and *Medibank*, where the courts commented that the conduct may have caused an unfair impact, yet it was not deemed unlawful:

- in *Mazda* where the court noted that “*failures to provide sufficient support and assistance [to customers] and delays in diagnosing the cause of faults [of cars] and taking steps to address them imply poor, even at times what might be characterised as appalling customer service*”.<sup>60</sup>
- In *Medibank*, the court noted that it will not be unconscionable merely because “*hardship has or may be caused to a consumer by conduct*”, also noting “*unfair the conduct may have been*”.<sup>61</sup>

To determine statutory unconscionable conduct, the analysis also considers the conduct of the wrongdoer as compared to ‘acceptable commercial behaviour’. That is, it focuses on rogue conduct rather than conduct that is endemic in a market. Where many or all relevant providers engage in similar conduct (e.g. some dark patterns and the like), it will likely be considered ‘acceptable commercial behaviour’.

**The focus on the wrongdoer, rather than the impact on consumers, and prohibiting conduct to that which is ‘so far outside the societal norms of acceptable commercial behaviour’ limits the effectiveness of the statutory prohibition.**

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<sup>55</sup> House of Representatives, Trade Practices Amendment (Fair Trading) Bill 1997, Explanatory Memorandum at 22.

<sup>56</sup> Senate, Standing Committee on Economics, The need, scope and content of a definition of unconscionable conduct for the purposes of Part IVA of the Trade Practices Act 1974 (2008).

<sup>57</sup> Competition and Consumer Legislation Amendment Act 2011 (Cth), Sch 2, s 4.

<sup>58</sup> *ASIC v Kobelt* [2019] HCA 18. Kiefel CJ and Bell J noted that ‘moral obloquy’ had been considered to have ‘a role to play’ by the Full Federal Court, but said it was not a substitute for the words of the Act. Keane J said that unconscionable conduct ‘imported the high level of moral obloquy associated with the victimisation of the vulnerable’. Gageler J took a different view, regretting his previous use of the term, saying it potentially misled one into considering the standard had a requirement of conscious wrongdoing.

<sup>59</sup> *ASIC v Kobelt* [2019] HCA 18 at [91]. This has been followed by numerous Federal Court and other cases. We note, however, that other judges have criticised a requirement to search for societal norms or ‘acceptable social and community standards’, noting that the prohibition does not specifically reference this and the search for such norms and values ‘is little more than intellectual fairy floss’: *AHG WA (2015) Pty Ltd v Mercedes-Bens Australia Pacific Pty Ltd* [2023] FCA 1022 at [3506].

<sup>60</sup> *ACCC v Mazda Australia Pty Ltd* [2023] FCAFC at [583]

<sup>61</sup> *ACCC v Medibank Private Limited* [2018] FCAFC 235 at [246]

A further limitation of the prohibition on unconscionable conduct is its **mal-adaptability to deal with systemic issues with conduct** or a pattern of harmful practices, rather than merely conduct relating to particular conduct, consumers, or transactions. This is despite direction from Parliament that the section is “capable of applying to a system of conduct or pattern of behaviour”<sup>62</sup> and is evident in the failure of various regulatory cases that have alleged systemic unconscionable conduct. See the following two examples.

#### ***Unique International College Pty Ltd v ACCC [2018] FCA 155***

The Full Federal Court held that the ACCC had not established an unconscionable business system on the part of the education provider, Unique International College, regarding the exploitation of the VET FEE-HELP system. The fact that the college had aimed its course at students from low socio-economic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, people from remote and regional backgrounds, and the unemployed, was found non-determinative as that was the very purpose of the government scheme. In addition, the ACCC had focused on the effect of the business system employed by the college on six individual students. The Court held that this evidence was insufficient because the ACCC failed to demonstrate that the selection of these individual students had been through a random or representative process, with the process disclosed on the evidence.

#### ***ASIC v Kobelt [2019] HCA 18***

The owner Mr Kobelt, of a remote store in the South Australian APY Lands, offered an informal credit scheme known as ‘book-up’ to the local Anangu community. The local community members were extremely poor, had low financial literacy and had little or no access to credit or vehicles outside the store provided by Mr Kobelt. The book-up scheme allowed Anangu customers to purchase goods and second-hand vehicles on credit by providing their debit cards, PINs, and details of their income. Mr Kobelt used these details to withdraw the whole of the customers’ money from their bank account on the day they were paid. Around half of withdrawn money was used to pay down debt, while the balance was to be used as credit for items or cash advances at the store. The credit charges were not disclosed but were high. ASIC argued that the scheme amounted to systemic unconscionable conduct. The High Court found that the system did not contravene the statutory prohibition, with the majority finding that the system provided Anangu customers with a benefit in enabling them to manage their money more effectively and access credit to purchase second-hand vehicles and other goods offered by the store. A particular focus was on the finding that Mr Kobelt was acting in good faith and not dishonestly.

If, as in *Unique*, a regulator is unable to point to multiple examples of wrongdoing, together with a claim about the way the business practice operates, to sustain a claim of systemic unconscionable conduct, then there are limitations with the existing provision. A particular problem is the focus of the provision on ‘conduct’ rather than broader business practices, which may be systemic. Similarly, the *Kobelt* decision found that the ‘book up’ system was not systemically unconscionable. The court focused on the professional conduct of Mr Kobelt and found he individually did not act dishonestly or against conscience. There was less focus on the impact of the business system established for the Anangu customers, or the question of the business model impeding any freedom of choice (e.g. by binding them to the store). The majority in *Kobelt* did not consider distorting or impeding the choice of customers to be significant or determinative.

### **Unfair contract terms**

The courts have held that the concept of unfairness for the purposes of the unfair contract term provisions is ‘of a lower moral or ethical standard than unconscionability’.<sup>63</sup> However, the reach of the regime is **limited to terms of standard form contracts**. As noted by the Consultation RIS, the provisions do not address unfair conduct that may occur prior to entering contracts, or the parties’ dealings while the contract is in place. The test for unfair contract terms also allows the Court to consider whether a term

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<sup>62</sup> Section 21(4)(b), ACL.

<sup>63</sup> *Paciocco v Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Ltd* [2015] FCAFC 50; (2015) 236 FCR 199 [363]–[364]; *Australian Securities and Investments Commission v Bendigo and Adelaide Bank Ltd* [2020] FCA 716 [20].

which would otherwise be unfair is justified due to legitimate business interests. This limits the utility of the unfair contract terms provisions, particularly where a practice may be common across an industry.

### *Coercion and undue harassment*

The other general prohibition in the ACL, while not being described as such by the Consultation RIS, is the prohibition on the use of physical force, undue harassment, or coercion in connection with the supply or possible supply, or payment for, goods and services.

In relation to the examples of unfair practices in Table 1, the prohibitions on the use of physical force or undue harassment will rarely be relevant. The former requires in-person contact; the latter is concerned with repeated, unwelcomed, and unjustified pressure calculated to intimidate, demoralise, or exhaust.<sup>64</sup> These provisions have been commonly used in relation to debt collection conduct.

The prohibition on coercion; however, is arguably broader and may be more adaptable to forms of unfair conduct or business practices.

It has been held that coercion does not require threatening conduct or intimidation, but that it extends to forms of compulsion which negate free choice.<sup>65</sup> In *ASIC v Select AFSL Pty Ltd (No 2)*, 14 vulnerable consumers (10 of whom were Indigenous and living in remote Australian communities) were pressured into entering various life, funeral, and accidental injury insurance agreements. Most of these consumers did not speak English as a first language and had little understanding of, and were misled with respect to the products being sold to them. Furthermore, they were rushed through sales discussions and contracts. Questions from the consumers in sales calls often went unanswered, and their requests for time to consider their options were ignored.

However, the court focussed on the need to rule based on “*some conduct, which is capable of compelling a person or applying pressure to act in a particular way*”. Many of the forms of unfair persuasion or manipulation referred to in Table 1 are likely to fall short of the compulsion required to meet the threshold for coercion, demonstrating that despite being more nuanced, this type of manipulation can cause detrimental effects.

## **2.2 Limitations of specific unfair trade practices provision in the ACL**

The ACL includes a range of provisions prohibiting specific types of unfair trade practices. These include:

- bait advertising<sup>66</sup>
- offering rebates, gifts, prizes, or other free items with the intention of not providing them<sup>67</sup>
- wrongly accepting payment in various circumstances<sup>68</sup>
- unsolicited sending out of credit or debit cards<sup>69</sup>
- asserting payment for unsolicited goods or services<sup>70</sup>
- pyramid schemes,<sup>71</sup> and
- referral selling.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *ACCC v McCaskey* [2000] FCA 1037.

<sup>65</sup> *ASIC v Select AFSL Pty Ltd (No 2)* [2013] FCA 350.

<sup>66</sup> Section 35, ACL.

<sup>67</sup> Section 32, ACL.

<sup>68</sup> Section 36, ACL.

<sup>69</sup> Section 39, ACL.

<sup>70</sup> Section 40, ACL.

<sup>71</sup> Section 44, ACL.

<sup>72</sup> Section 49, ACL.

Nearly all these provisions were included in the *Trade Practices Act 1974* when it was enacted, and consequently respond to specific concerns with various unfair business practices as they existed in the 1970s and 1980s. It should be noted that these specific provisions have rarely been added to since, nor have they been used in recent years.

Business practices have adapted significantly since those earlier times, with the development of e-commerce and digital platforms, as well as new technologies. As noted in the Consultation RIS, this has led to greater complexity, with enhanced roles for intermediaries as well as requiring consumers to deal with multiple parties and different types of commercial relationships. As described further in Section 4 (below), this creates an urgent need to update the consumer law, including specific prohibitions, to account for the changed (and changing) nature of modern commerce.

### 3. Economic and social benefits of addressing unfair trade practices

The Consultation RIS describes the emergence of unfair trade practices and new types of consumer harm, that can be addressed through a prohibition on unfair trade practices. It also describes how unfair trade practices can distort competition, which relies on consumers being able to make free and informed choices about the products and services that best suit their needs. This section builds on that analysis.

Consumer protection has traditionally sought to ensure consumers have sufficient information and are not misled, can trust businesses and make informed choices. Confident consumers are in turn, believed to be instrumental in maintaining a healthy competitive process whereby businesses that best satisfy consumer needs can thrive. Regrettably, this has led to a limited focus of consumer protection law centring around ensuring effective disclosure, for example, through prohibiting misleading conduct.

#### 3.1 Traditional economic view alone is not fit-for-purpose

While a traditional economic view can lead to broader provision of information for consumers, lessons from psychology and behavioural economics about consumer decision-making can help build a more holistic approach to consumer protection. Consumers cannot simply process information and make the optimal choice, as the body of evidence shows they are subject to many biases in decision-making. These may include the following:

- Inertia – this can be due to a preference for inaction, or the tendency to follow ‘the path of least resistance’.
- Loss aversion – people are more sensitive to losses than gains, so may be afraid to act in case they incur losses.
- Anchoring or default bias – consumers start from a reference point and then make insufficient adjustments as further information is considered.
- Endowment effect – consumers place a higher value on something they own, or imagine they own, and therefore demand more to give up an object than they would be willing to pay to acquire it.
- Over-confidence – people are likely to overestimate their future usage or overestimate their ability to predict their future usage.
- Hyperbolic discounting – people tend to put too much weight on the prospect of an immediate reward.

The exploitation of these biases, particularly through marketing and selling practices, can result in the manipulation of consumer choices despite information being provided. The reality is that consumers are not robots with optimal information processing powers.

Falling short of manipulation, the following is an outline of some market factors that can also disadvantage consumers in their relationships with businesses, as well as diminish consumer confidence:

- **Information overload** — in the modern information-rich world, consumers are regularly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available. This can lead to confusion and uncertainty rather than confidence.
- **Complexity of products and choices** — many consumer markets, including financial services, telecommunications, and utilities, involve inherent complexity. Products and choices can have different inclusions and allowances, making it difficult for people to fully understand their options, compare, and make choices.
- **Barriers to accessing services** — the service sector has become more important in the Australian economy, and many products now contain a service element through subscription pricing models.

Barriers to accessing services, including customer service or support, particularly affects those experiencing vulnerability, and has become a focus of regulators.<sup>73</sup>

Due to these factors, as well as behavioural biases, confidence is not merely a function of consumer information provision. Different types of interventions, such as a focus on fair conduct, and ensuring businesses meet consumers' reasonable expectations, are therefore required to promote consumer confidence.

A further problem with the traditional economic view of consumer protection relies on the “*fallacy of trust in markets' concept*”.<sup>74</sup> Trust is difficult to define, but includes the idea of benevolence—that is, consumers will trust when they can believe a supplier will act in ways beneficial to them.

The reality is, however, that consumers regularly experience and see many reasons not to trust suppliers. Treasury's Australian Consumer Law survey found that six in ten consumers experienced a consumer problem over a two-year period, and 49% were dissatisfied with the response from the business.<sup>75</sup> Many more, if not all consumers may witness poor treatment of others experiencing problems, either through the experiences of family or friends, or through the media, all of which may lead to consumer distrust.

Siciliani et al argue that, rather than promoting trust, what consumers 'really need is simply not to distrust service providers in general'.<sup>76</sup> They argue that if distrust is embedded, it can exacerbate consumer inertia and disengagement. When distrust is embedded across multiple providers, then consumers may be particularly prone to simply 'giving up'. Interestingly, distrust can often be observed to be embedded in the consumer advice provided by government and industry sponsored consumer education, for example, via messages to 'read the fine print'.

A failure to intervene in the face of significant distrust will not only harm individual consumers but also negatively impact market effectiveness and healthy competition that drives positive consumer outcomes. If businesses are not incentivised to provide superior customer care and service, consumers may be less likely to play their part in 'activating' competition.

A common response to market distrust is for policymakers and governments to impose intrusive types of intervention. These might include specific and detailed rules (such as licensing rules), and pricing limits or caps. There is arguably a higher risk that these types of interventions may have an unintended consequence, as the competitive process is essentially overruled.

We argue that **a prohibition on unfair business practices, by contrast, can help set a standard that meets consumer and community expectations.** If enforced, such a prohibition could decrease the likelihood of embedded consumer distrust. It could also increase consumers' confidence in their choices, and knowledge that their choices promote competitive outcomes. It will also mean the need for specific interventions are less pressing. Below in Section 5 we identify some specific and detailed rules which have been enacted, that might not have been required should we have had a prohibition on unfair trade practices.

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<sup>73</sup> Essential Services Commission, *Getting to fair: breaking down barriers to essential services*, August 2021, <https://www.esc.vic.gov.au/other-work/regulating-consumer-vulnerability-mind>.

<sup>74</sup> Paolo Siciliani, Christine Riefa, and Harriet Gamper, *Consumer Theories of Harm: An economic approach to consumer law enforcement and policy making*, Hart Publishing, 2019, page 92-96.

<sup>75</sup> Treasury, Australian Consumer Law Survey 2016, <https://consumer.gov.au/consultations-and-reviews/australian-consumer-survey>, page 38, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Siciliani et al, above, p 95.

### 3.2 Consumers can't always vote with their feet

Some argue that consumer learning after suboptimal experiences is a market expectation. In economics, a 'moral hazard' argument may be: a high standard of consumer protection might discourage consumers to be informed and circumspect, thus facilitating unfair treatment. Further, alternative 'fairer' suppliers will always exist, to fill gaps, receive consumer loyalty, and will ultimately be the businesses that thrive. However, many consumers who are victim to the types of unfair practices identified in Table 1 may not even realise they are a victim. The harm is far more nuanced compared to, for example, clear and upfront exploitative pricing (which may encourage people to shop around). The unfair practices we are concerned about are subtle, and often hidden.

Even if some consumers recognise that they have been treated unfairly, and therefore make different choices in the future, this may not necessarily help others by incentivising providers to act more fairly. The use of technology and individualised offers enables businesses to be highly targeted in their approaches.

### 3.3 Unfair practices compound inequity

Further, where sophisticated consumers benefit from the fact that naïve customers are exploited (as might be the case in relation to loyalty penalties), the impact of unfair practices may compound the inequity. If enacted and enforced, an unfair trade practices provision could contribute to economic transactions being conducted in a way that is equitable, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability who are unable to protect their own interests.

Consumer law was developed on the premise that there was an imbalance between consumers and businesses, contributing to consumer vulnerability in the marketplace. However, a focus on information asymmetries in its development has resulted in the position that consumers need to be active and engage with information. Rather than telling people to 'shop around', there is a need to make vulnerability a core value of consumer protection to promote inclusion and fairness.<sup>77</sup>

More broadly, beyond consumer law where transactions are conducted fairly, a sense of social cohesion and shared values within a society can develop. Ultimately, when individuals believe that they are being treated fairly in economic interactions, it contributes to a more harmonious social environment. This aligns with the Federal Government's recent commitment to wellbeing as an economic goal<sup>78</sup>—social cohesion being a key aspect of wellbeing.

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<sup>77</sup> See Chritine Riefa and Harriet Gamper, 'Economic theory and consumer vulnerability: exploring an uneasy relationship', in *Vulnerable Consumers and the Law* (ed. Chritine Riefa and Séverine Sainer), Routledge, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Australian Treasury, *Measuring what matters statement*, <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/p2023-mwm>, July 2023.

## 4. Design of a prohibition on unfair trade practices

The Consultation RIS makes some general comments about the definition of ‘*unfair*’ for purposes of a prohibition on unfair trade practices. It does not; however, propose any specific test or definition. This section proposes a definition of ‘unfairness’ and responds to some of the other models from overseas jurisdictions.

To address the broad array of harmful practices of concern, the new prohibition should be drawn broadly, enabling it to be responsive to conduct and practices that exist today, as well as those that may develop over time.

We propose that the general prohibition should be as follows:

*A person must not, in trade or commerce, engage in conduct or practices that are or are likely to be unfair.*

Below are some fundamental principles that should inform the development of a test for unfairness:

1. The definition should promote the National Consumer Policy Objectives, particularly to enable confident participation of consumers in markets and foster effective competition.<sup>79</sup>
2. The definition should respond to gaps in Australia’s existing consumer protection laws.
3. The definition should build upon existing norms, so as to promote greater certainty.

This prohibition should be accompanied by a definition of ‘conduct or practices that are unfair or likely to be unfair’, as including conduct or practices that:

- unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers
- take unreasonable advantage of consumers’ lack of understanding, consumers’ ability to protect their own interests, or consumers’ reasonable reliance on the trader
- omit, hide, or provide unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous, or untimely material information, or
- unreasonably inhibit access to or enjoyment of a good or service already purchased.

For reasons discussed above, we strongly recommend that a key goal of the new prohibition should be to enable the law to respond to consumer vulnerability.<sup>80</sup> As such, we recommend that the prohibition should be further accompanied by a guiding principle that requires consideration of the vulnerability of consumers, such as whether the conduct or practice causes, exploits or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.

### 4.1 Broad prohibition

The broad prohibition draws on United States law, and section 5 of the *Federal Trade Commission Act*. It sets a broad standard in the headline provision. Our proposed prohibition is limited to conduct in ‘trade or commerce’ but is not otherwise limited. In this way, it aligns with the prohibition on misleading or deceptive conduct, and sets a simple moral standard, leaving it to the courts to uphold that standard and regulators to provide guidance.

Unlike statutory unconscionable conduct, we do not consider the prohibition should be limited to conduct in connection with “*the supply or acquisition (or likely supply or acquisition) of goods or services to a person*”. This is because unfair trade practices can be practices that harm consumers as a whole, or harm a cohort of consumers (rather than a single person), and may not always relate to supplying or acquiring

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<sup>79</sup> Intergovernmental Agreement for the Australian Consumer Law, Clause E, <https://federation.gov.au/about/agreements/intergovernmental-agreement-australian-consumer-law>, 2 July 2009.

<sup>80</sup> This aligns with consumer law objectives, see Intergovernmental Agreement for the Consumer Law, Clause D(4).

goods or services. For example, certain unfair data practices may involve the collection and use of data from consumers who are merely searching for goods or services, and may not even acquire these.

We also propose that the prohibition should cover both conduct and practices. This responds to the existing provisions which prohibit ‘conduct’, and perhaps do not allow for sufficient consideration of broader **business practices** or **systems**. ‘Conduct’ can invite a focus on a specific transaction, while ‘business practices or systems’ can address a particular business model or systemic issues.

## 4.2 Definition of unfair practices

Our proposed definition is inclusive; it is not designed to be an exhaustive definition. However, drawing on the laws of other jurisdictions and the Australian experience, we consider it is helpful to articulate what is included in conduct or practices that are unfair, to help guide businesses, regulators, and courts. Following, we discuss the application of four limbs.

### Limb 1: Unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers

This draws on the European Union approach to unfair practices but addresses some of the criticism of those provisions. The following table sets out how this limb addresses the principles proposed above.

Promote NCP objective	This limb focusses on conduct or practices which ‘unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers’ promotes the National Consumer Policy Objective. For consumers to confidently participate in markets and for their choices to foster effective competition, their free choice and autonomy should be respected.
Respond to ACL gaps	This limb would address gaps caused by the interpretation applied to statutory unconscionable conduct. The current focus of inquiry is on the conduct of the wrongdoer and whether it is outside of the norms of acceptable commercial practice. Rather than a focus on the conduct of the wrongdoer, which as described above is a limitation of the prohibition on unconscionable conduct, this limb would promote a focus on the conditions for consumers to have autonomy in the marketplace and be able to make choices freely, that align with their needs and preferences.
Build upon existing norms	The words are drawn from the EU’s Directive on Unfair Commercial Practices, which refers to practices which ‘materially distort or is likely to materially distort the economic behaviour of the average member of a group it is directed towards’. It avoids; however, reference to the ‘average consumer’ which has set a high standard of expected behaviour for consumers. <sup>81</sup> The reality is that there is no ‘reasonable’ or ‘average’ consumer, and consumers are heterogenous, and experience and engage with information and the marketplace in varying ways. <sup>82</sup> An ‘average consumer’ standard also disadvantages consumers experiencing vulnerability, noting that a key objective of consumer policy in Australia is to meet the needs of consumers who are most vulnerable, or at the greatest disadvantage. <sup>83</sup>
Other comments	The use of ‘unreasonably’ draws in an objective standard, supports a common-sense approach, and enables a balance to be applied to recognise reasonable

<sup>81</sup> Various cases of the EU Court of Justice define the average consumer as someone who is not easily misled, ‘reasonably well-informed and reasonably observant and circumspect’: *Gut Springenheide GmbH and Rudolf Tusky v Oberkreisdirektor des Kreises Steinfert* [1998] ECR I-4657 para 37.

<sup>82</sup> CPRC, How Australia can stop unfair business practices, 2022, at <https://cprc.org.au/stopping-unfair-practices>, page 9.

<sup>83</sup> Intergovernmental Agreement for the Australian Consumer Law, Clause F(4).

conduct or practices that might merely seek to persuade rather than manipulate.

**Limb 2: Take unreasonable advantage of consumers’ lack of understanding or ability to protect their own interests, or consumers’ reasonable reliance on the trader**

This limb draws on the United States approach to abusive practices, interpreted to prohibit ‘leveraging certain circumstances to take unreasonable advantage’.<sup>84</sup> The following table sets out how this limb addresses the principles proposed above.

Promote NCP objective	This limb focuses on business conduct or practices that unreasonably place an organisation’s interests ahead of consumer interest in defined circumstances. The provision would promote the NCP objective by supporting consumer empowerment and protection. It would also help ensure consumer protection ‘meets the needs of consumers who are most vulnerable or at the greatest disadvantage’, by prohibiting product/service design, conduct and practices that take unreasonable advantage of consumers’ marketplace vulnerability.
Respond to ACL gaps	<p>This limb would address gaps caused by the interpretation applied to the prohibition on unconscionable conduct. While equitable unconscionable conduct is designed to prohibit exploitation of some vulnerability or disadvantage, the case law interpretation requires a high bar, meaning that it is not meeting consumer or community expectations. Furthermore, the focus has typically been on particular types of vulnerability or special disadvantage (i.e., something that ‘seriously affects the ability of the innocent party to make a judgment as to his [or her] own best interests’<sup>85</sup>), rather than marketplace or situational vulnerability which is a broader concept, applicable to many Australians when adopting this non-traditional definition.</p> <p>This limb would also respond to businesses that exploit First Nations Australians through design of marketing and products that take unreasonable advantage of cultural norms; for example, businesses which have promoted funeral plans or book-up credit services, for which courts have failed to find in breach of existing consumer protections.</p>
Build upon existing norms	The words are drawn from the prohibition of abusive practices in the US Consumer Financial Protection Act (Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform Act). <sup>86</sup> The US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has said this provision covers conduct that a) sets people up to fail (i.e. setting up payment arrangements that consumers cannot afford to repay), b) leverages circumstances where people have no choice to deal with a specific provider (i.e., the context of debt collection, or credit reporting, or similar), and c) leverages consumer reliance on a business (i.e. where the business has promoted itself as having some expertise or defined role, e.g. switching sites or intermediaries).
Other comments	The reference to taking ‘unreasonable’ advantage draws on an objective standard, supports a common-sense approach, and enables a balance to be applied to recognise that not every business is in a fiduciary relationship with a consumer. What is <u>unreasonable</u> would depend on the nature of the product, service, business, consumer and context.

<sup>84</sup> Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, Policy Statement on Abusive Acts or Practices, April 2023, <https://www.consumerfinance.gov/compliance/supervisory-guidance/policy-statement-on-abusiveness/>

<sup>85</sup> *Commercial Bank of Australia Ltd v Amadio* (1983) 151 CLR 447 and 462.

<sup>86</sup> See sections 1031(d) and section 1036.

### Limb 3: Omit, hide, or provide unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely material information

This limb draws on the United Kingdom approach to unfair practices. The following table sets out how this limb addresses the principles proposed above.

Promote NCP objective	Omitting, hiding, or providing unclear material information can similarly distort consumer decision-making. This limb promotes the National Consumer Policy Objective, recognising that consumers require material information in a way that is accessible and understandable to confidently participate in consumer markets, and for their choices to foster effective competition.
Respond to ACL gaps	This limb would address gaps caused by the interpretation applied to misleading and deceptive conduct; in particular, the problem of misleading silence or omissions (described above).
Build upon existing norms	The words are drawn from section 6 of the UK’s Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations. This has been utilised by UK’s Competition and Markets Authority to address greenwashing and misleading omissions, with the Green Claims Code stating ‘consumers can be misled where claims do not say anything about environmental impacts’. <sup>87</sup>
Other comments	The reference to ‘material’ information draws on an objective standard, supports a common-sense approach, and enables a balance to be applied to recognise it would be unreasonable for a business to provide every aspect of information a consumer may desire. What constitutes <u>material</u> would depend on the nature of the product, service, business, and context.

### Limb 4: Unreasonably inhibit access to or enjoyment of goods or services

This limb enables a particular focus on conduct or practices that occur following the purchase of a product or service, including customer service and after-sales support. The unfair practices listed in the third category (post-sale practices) in Table 1 would be addressed by this limb.

Promote NCP objective	Ensuring consumers can reasonably access and enjoy the goods and services they have purchased supports the National Consumer Policy Objective of promoting consumer confidence, as consumers can know they will be supported through after-sales care.
Respond to ACL gaps	The existing ACL does not specifically regulate post-sale standards of conduct. While the other general prohibitions can be relevant, practices such as designing customer service systems which impose unreasonable barriers to access to support or a consumer remedy are unlikely to be addressed by existing prohibitions.
Build upon existing norms	The Singapore prohibition on unfair practice makes it clear that an unfair practice can occur after a transaction. <sup>88</sup> The new Consumer Duty that applies to financial services in the UK includes a principle of ‘consumer support’, including that consumers must be able to use their product as reasonably intended and

<sup>87</sup> CMA, Green Claims Code, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-claims-code-making-environmental-claims/environmental-claims-on-goods-and-services>

<sup>88</sup> Section 5(1), Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act 2023 (Singapore).

	that consumers do not face unreasonable barriers during the lifecycle of the product (such as enquiries, transfer, complaining, cancelling). <sup>89</sup> In the Australian context, the fairness test in the rules of AFCA recognise the context of fair treatment, fair service, and fair remediation. <sup>90</sup>
Other comments	The reference to ‘unreasonably inhibit’ draws on an objective standard, supports a common-sense approach, and enables balance to be applied that might recognise unreasonable expectations placed on businesses to provide support (i.e. where support is outside their control).

### Consumer vulnerability

A substantial benefit of a new prohibition on unfair trading is that it should enable consumer law to respond more effectively to consumer vulnerability. As noted above, there is a need to make vulnerability a core value of consumer protection law to promote inclusion and fairness.

Consumer vulnerability arises when a consumer experiences, or is at risk of experiencing barriers to accessing or engaging with trade or commerce. As a result of these barriers, a consumer can experience economic and/or social exclusion or harm. Barriers can include:

- event and circumstance-based factors such as illness, job loss, financial stress, family violence, death of a loved one, ageing and disability, low education, literacy and language barriers, natural disaster, or a global pandemic
- systemic factors, such as the digital divide, regional limitations, low and adequate rates of income support, racism and colonisation, and
- market-based factors, such as complex product or pricing, marketing practices, or service system design.

Including a guiding principle provision, that would require consideration of consumer vulnerability when determining whether conduct or practices were unfair, would enhance the effectiveness of a prohibition on unfair trade practices and promote inclusion. While it would not be mandatory for consumer vulnerability to be present to declare conduct or practices to be unfair, this consideration would ensure regulators and courts have a clear focus on consumer vulnerability and also encourage the design of remedies that promote inclusion.

### 4.3 Factors that should not be part of the fairness test

The Consultation RIS mentions two principles that may be relevant in determining whether a practice is unfair, that is, it:

1. Is not reasonably necessary to protect the legitimate interests of the party who would be advantaged by the conduct; and
2. Would cause detriment (whether financial or otherwise) to a party if it were to continue.

The Consultation RIS also references the EU and UK prohibition that references ‘the average consumer’, in determining whether conduct is unfair. **We do not support the prohibition adopting such principles.**

<sup>89</sup> FCA, Principal 2A.6 Consumer Duty, <https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/PRIN/2A/6.html>.

<sup>90</sup> AFCA, Fairness Jurisdiction Project, <https://www.afca.org.au/news/latest-news/afca-publishes-fairness-jurisdiction-project-outcomes-report>.

## Legitimate business interest is an unnecessary consideration

There are several reasons why it is unnecessary to consider legitimate business interests in the definition of unfair. Each are discussed in detail below.

- **The use of terms ‘unreasonable’ and ‘material’ negates the need to reference ‘legitimate business interests’.** We can ensure that there are balancing factors through use of terms like ‘unreasonable’ and ‘material’ in the definition. Such terms draw in an objective standard and promote a common-sense approach, enabling a balance to be applied to consider what is reasonable in the circumstances, including relevant business factors. On this basis, a specific reference to ‘legitimate business interests’ is unnecessary.
- **The use of ‘legitimate business interests’ places the focus on the wrongdoer instead of the impact to the consumer.** This reference is used in the existing statutory prohibition on unconscionable conduct and has not supported a lower threshold of misconduct for that provision. Section 22 of the ACL sets out the matters the court may regard for the purposes of considering statutory unconscionable conduct. Sub-section (b) says one matter is ‘whether, as a result of conduct engaged in by the supplier, the customer was required to comply with conditions that were not *reasonably necessary for the protection of the legitimate interests of the supplier*’. As described above, judicial consideration of this provision has focused inquiry on the wrongdoer rather than the effect of conduct on consumer choice or access. This has led to a lack of prohibiting conduct that is unfair to consumers.
- **The use of the term ‘legitimate interests’ in the unfair contract provision is different to using it in a general prohibition.** The unfair contract term provisions are designed to address the fair allocation of rights, obligations, and risks in the contractual bargain, recognising that the efficiency of modern-day commerce is supported by standard-form contracts which consumers have no ability to negotiate. The provisions help ensure terms and conditions strike a fair balance of both parties, so the legitimate interests of the supplier are relevant. An unfair trade practices prohibition is different in that it responds to more nuanced and subtle forms of business practices that unreasonably limit consumer choice or access to products and services.
- **Systemic and industry-wide business practices that should be considered unfair may be seen as ‘legitimate’ given the need to consider ‘broad business practices in the relevant industry’ and ‘standard industry practices’.** Existing case law suggests that there are substantial risks with adopting a ‘legitimate interests’ test, as this would likely lead to a reading down of fairness, or the adoption of a threshold which would fail to meet community expectations. For example, in *Jetstar v Free*<sup>91</sup>, a case relating to unfair contract terms, the Supreme Court of Victoria stated that “*the broad business practices in the relevant industry*” are relevant to considering legitimate interests. This would suggest that existing ‘standard industry practices’ such as subscription traps could not be assessed for unfairness, as they might be seen to be ‘legitimate’. Many of the unfair practices in Table 1 are those which occur across many providers in an industry and are not ‘one-off’.

Similarly, the High Court in *Paciocco v ANZ*<sup>92</sup>, in assessing the unfairness of credit card late payment fees, held that ANZ had a ‘legitimate interest’ in the performance of a contract justified the fees. The court focused squarely on the banking business model to understand ANZ’s legitimate interests, and there was little consideration of the impact of the fee on customers. Moreover, the court was largely uncritical in

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<sup>91</sup> [2008] VSC 539.

<sup>92</sup> [2016] HCA 28.

accepting ANZ's evidence about its costs to justify the fee, and considered a broad range of costs which were not directly attributable to the late payment.

### **Any test of substantial harm or detriment will be ineffective and unhelpful**

A requirement that an alleged unfair practice causes detriment seems reasonable but is perhaps unnecessary.<sup>93</sup> After all, the purpose of the reform is to address harm or detriment suffered by consumers. Our greater concern is the approach taken by some jurisdictions, like the United States, which defines an unfair practice as one which causes or is likely to cause 'substantial injury'.

A requirement that harms or detriment be 'substantial', 'significant' or similar will impede the effectiveness of unfair trade practices reform. Such an approach fails to recognise the reality of consumer behaviour. The examples of manipulative patterns in websites (such as those in Table 1) may struggle to reach the standard of 'substantial' detriment. For example, 'obstruction' (also known as the 'roach motel' or 'Hotel California' technique<sup>94</sup>) is a central claim in the Federal Trade Commission case against Amazon, that is, design elements that involve intentionally complicating a process (such as cancellation) through unnecessary steps to dissuade consumers from action. CPRC research into unfair practices also identified that harm is not always tangible (such as linked to financial loss) but can also manifest as negatively impacting emotional wellbeing.<sup>94</sup>

### **The notion of average consumer limits consumer protection**

Both the European Union and United Kingdom refer to the concept of the 'average consumer', particularly in determining whether conduct impedes or distorts a consumer choice.

The use of an 'average' or 'reasonable' consumer in the test of unfairness will severely limit its usefulness, particularly in responding to consumer vulnerabilities. This is because consumers are heterogeneous and experience and engage in varying ways. Furthermore, as humans we experience 'bounded rationality' and there are biases which we are all subject to.<sup>95</sup>

Australia's consumer policy framework has a specific objective 'to meet the needs of those consumers who are most vulnerable or are at greatest disadvantage'.<sup>96</sup> It is important therefore that a test for unfairness meets the needs of those experiencing vulnerability. This could include people for whom English is not their first language, people with disability, older people, people with poor literacy or lower levels of education, people on lower income, and those that are vulnerable to a particular market tactic or practice.

Fundamentally, the use of an 'average' or 'reasonable' consumer would imply a high standard to evaluate whether conduct or practice is unfair. As stated by Professor Lauren Willis, 'a judge reviewing a document after the fact and knowing what she is looking for may decide whether a consumer ought to have noticed disclosure and ought to have understood it, rather than deciding whether real consumers did notice and understand it'.<sup>97</sup> The same will be true for considering whether conduct or business practice was unfair.

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<sup>93</sup> In the UK unfair terms decision of *Director General of Fair Trading v First National Bank*, Lord Steyn stated that the element of detriment did not 'add much' to the formulation of identifying an unfair term [2002] 1 AC 481, 499.

<sup>94</sup> CPRC, How Australia can stop unfair business practices, 2022, at <https://cprc.org.au/stopping-unfair-practices>, page 9.

<sup>95</sup> See, e.g., Case Sunstein & Richard Thaler, *Nudge*, Yale University Press, 2008.

<sup>96</sup> Intergovernmental Agreement for the Australian Consumer Law, Clause F.

<sup>97</sup> Lauren Willis, 'Performance-based Consumer Law', (2015) 82 *U. Chicago L. Rev.* 1309, p 1350, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2485667](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2485667).

**Recommendation 1:**

In developing the design of an unfair trading prohibition (including the definition of 'unfair'), ACL Ministers should adopt the following principles:

- The provision should promote the National Consumer Policy Objectives, particularly to enable confident participation of consumers in markets and to foster effective competition.
- The provision should respond to gaps in Australia's existing consumer protection laws.
- The provision should build upon existing norms and laws internationally, so as to promote greater certainty in scope.

**Recommendation 2:**

An unfair trading prohibition should be drawn broadly, enabling it to be responsive to conduct and practices that exist today and those that may develop over time, as follows: *"A person must not, in trade or commerce, engage in conduct or practices that are, or are likely to be, unfair"*.

**Recommendation 3:**

An unfair trading prohibition should be accompanied by a definition of 'unfair', that includes conduct or practices that:

- unreasonably distort or undermine the autonomy and economic choices of consumers
- take unreasonable advantage of a lack of consumer understanding or ability to protect their own interests, or consumers' reasonable reliance on the trader
- omit, hide, or provide unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous, or untimely material information, or
- unreasonably inhibit access to, or enjoyment of, a good or service already purchased.

**Recommendation 4:**

An unfair trading prohibition should be further accompanied by a guiding principle that requires consideration of consumer vulnerability, such as whether the conduct or practice causes or exacerbates consumer vulnerability.

**Recommendation 5:**

An unfair trading prohibition should not adopt principles relating to the supplier's 'legitimate interests', the 'average' consumer, or a 'substantial' harm or detriment test.

## 5. Our preferred option and response to other options

We recommend Option 4, being a combination of general and specific prohibitions on unfair trading practices, as the policy option that delivers the greatest net benefit. The following section explains why by assessing each option, in reverse order (representing most to least preferred).

### 5.1 Option 4 – our preferred option

#### Creating certainty

As stated by the Consultation RIS, Option 4 would ensure consumer protection from the widest range of both current and emerging unfair trade practices. It would also contribute to public benefit through clearly capturing specific unfair practices that are widespread today through a 'blacklist', while also enabling effective responses to future unfair practices through the general prohibition. Option 4 would additionally have the greatest opportunity to promote consumer confidence and foster more effective competition, as it would create certainty for business, particularly during the period of transition to the new law. As the Consultation RIS states, the specific list would also provide useful guidance to industry.

#### Insignificant or non-existent costs to implement

The suggested costs associated with Option 4 would likely be insignificant or non-existent.

First, if Option 4 is implemented alongside the accompanying definition we propose, the potential cost listed in the Consultation RIS relating to business confidence and innovation would be substantially lessened. This is because there would be a clear test as to what is unfair, and regulatory guidance could help with business confidence. In relation to the prohibition on unfair contract terms, courts have emphasised that the test is clear—it is not to be *“glossed over with moralistic sentiment”* or *“other feel good factors or niceties in order to remedy any perceived disparity between the parties”*.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, a clear test of unfairness, accompanied by specific practices would provide guardrails to business and promote innovation in a way that contributes to positive consumer outcomes.

Second, the Consultation RIS suggests that government and regulators may incur greater costs through increased enforcement and administration. In response, we argue that regulators are already incurring costs responding to complaints about unfair conduct and investigating whether it breaches the law. Sometimes these concerns progress to enforcement action but result in court losses (see cases above). In practice, the reform may make administration of the law and enforcement less costly as investigations and actions may be more straightforward where the practice is more clearly defined and prohibited. Ultimately, we would expect more efficient outcomes, in lieu of matters being defended.

Third, the Consultation RIS also suggests costs relating to business training and compliance, as well as regulatory guidance and education measures, would be incurred as part of Option 4. Outside of Option 1 (no change), these costs are likely to be similar across each of the options, with option four potentially being less costly for businesses due to its overarching clarity, specificity and lack of ambiguity.

#### Regulators to have the power to set and amend the blacklist

The benefits of this Option would also be greatly enhanced if the regulator was afforded the power to set the specific list of unfair terms. This would promote public benefits by:

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<sup>98</sup> *Dialogue Consulting Pty Ltd v Instagram Inc* [2020] FCA 1846 at [322].

- enabling a quick and efficient response to unfair trade practices of specific concern (as noted above, the existing specific unfair trade practices provisions in the ACL have not been substantively updated since the 1970s)
- enabling the list to be managed and updated by the regulator in response to the evolution and change of e-commerce and modern business practices over time
- recognising the specialist expertise and knowledge that the regulator holds, and that it is closer to market participants (regulators also have formal consultative and feedback procedures to enable input from consumer interests), and
- ensuring that decision-making is in line with policy principles (i.e., specified prohibitions would be found to be caught by the general prohibition), making the decision for a practice to be listed to be less likely to be influenced by industry lobbying and vested interests.

It would also be important that the development of the blacklist of specified unfair practices was subject to public consultation. If the regulator was able to specify the blacklist, adding to such a list could be the outcome of a super complaint made by a designated consumer organisation.<sup>99</sup>

### 5.2 Option 3

Option 3 would achieve many of the benefits accomplished by Option 4, but it would miss the opportunity to deliver benefits associated with supporting industry and community certainty. An accompanying list of specific unfair trade practices would give greater confidence about what is caught by the general prohibition.

This option, however, if designed as we suggest above with an accompanying definition, would provide a level of certainty. This is because our proposed definition provides clarity about the types of practices that would be considered unfair. Businesses could simply test their conduct or practices against the four limbs to aid compliance. Certainty would also be supported by the regulator issuing guidance about the prohibition.

As mentioned earlier in this submission, another benefit associated with a general prohibition on unfair trading is that it may obviate the need for a patchwork of specific and potentially costlier rules to address particular issues. There are a range of recent reforms that could be superseded by a general prohibition, including:

- The extension of credit licensing to debt management companies—in 2019, regulatory changes resulted in debt management being defined as a ‘credit activity’, thus requiring a new class of business to obtain an Australian Credit Licence.<sup>100</sup> This was precipitated by the Federal Court decision of *Wade v J Daniels & Associates* which found a particular debt management arrangement was not unconscionable, and therefore the provider was not required to deliver good outcomes for the customer. This might be contrasted with the new licensing requirements (particularly the requirement to provide services efficiently, honestly, and fairly), which ASIC states require that “services provide tangible benefits for consumers’ and ‘tailored to the needs of consumers experiencing vulnerability’”. Should there have been a general unfair trade practices prohibition, this expectation could have been set without resorting to licensing, avoiding the additional costs associated with a regulator having to oversee the licensing scheme and business compliance.
- The regulation of gift cards—in 2018, new specific provisions were added to the ACL regulating gift cards, including minimum expiry dates, disclosure requirements and a ban on post-purchase fees.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> The 2023 Federal Budget proposed that the ACCC will establish a super-complaints function, a mechanism for consumer advocacy groups to more quickly raise a systemic issue with the regulator.

<sup>100</sup> See ASIC Information Sheet 254, available at: <https://asic.gov.au/for-finance-professionals/credit-licensees/applying-for-and-managing-your-credit-licence/debt-management-services-applying-for-a-credit-licence-or-variation/>

<sup>101</sup> See Division 3A, Part 3-2 of the ACL.

This followed substantial public concern about the fairness of gift cards, including a report by the Commonwealth Consumer Affairs Advisory Council. This might be contrasted with regulatory action taken in overseas jurisdictions. For example, the US FTC has used its prohibition on unfair trade practices to address poor disclosure and unfair fees with gift cards.<sup>102</sup> Should there have been a general unfair trade practices provision, specific rules may not have been required.

### 5.3 Option 2

Option 2, retaining the core prohibition of ‘unconscionable’ conduct rather than ‘unfair’ conduct, is likely to involve substantial cost without achieving public benefits.

As discussed earlier, there have been past efforts to expand the scope of unconscionable conduct, initially by enacting a statutory prohibition alongside the prohibition on unconscionable conduct within the ‘meaning of the unwritten law’. There was then further reform to provide legislative guidance about the extent of the provision, including that it ‘is not limited to the unwritten law’, can ‘apply to a system of conduct or a pattern of behaviour’, and ‘can extend beyond the formation of the contract to both its terms and the way it is carried out’.<sup>103</sup>

Despite these efforts, the law has not adapted to the relevant community expectation. In his dissenting judgment in *Kobelt*, Edelman J set out this legislative history and said that it “clearly demonstrates that although Parliament’s proscriptions against unconscionable conduct initially built upon the equitable foundations of that concept, over the last two decades Parliament has repeatedly amended the statutory proscription against unconscionable conduct **in continued efforts to require courts to take a less restrictive approach shorn from either equitable preconditions imposed in the twentieth century, by which equity had raised the bar of moral disapprobation**”.<sup>104</sup>

Given that history, little should be expected to change should Option 2 be adopted. We posit that a key problem is that the word ‘unconscionable’ invites courts to consider antiquated equitable concepts, **rather than a standard that meets modern community expectations.**

Should the statutory unconscionable prohibition be changed so that the word ‘unconscionable’ is revised to ‘unfair’, this would be an improvement in that it would encourage businesses and courts to consider that a different standard is expected. However, the benefits of a new stand-alone provision with the accompanying definition we propose would not be achieved. Specifically, this approach would risk the focus of inquiry remaining on the moral conduct of the business, rather than if **consumers are provided with the conditions to make effective and free choices, as well as able to access and enjoy products and services.**

A further issue with this approach is that we may lose the benefit associated with the existing jurisprudence relating to unconscionable conduct. While the provision has not met community needs and expectations when it comes to fair business conduct, this does not mean that there is no benefit associated with the provision. For example, where conduct is both unfair and unconscionable, this could lead to a greater penalty to recognise opprobrium associated with such conduct.

### 5.4 Option 1

Option 1 is in fact the costliest of the options presented, as it fails to remedy the costs of unfair trade practices on consumers, competitive processes, the economy, and society more broadly (outlined below):

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<sup>102</sup> FTC, Complaint against Kmart Corporation, available at: [https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/cases-proceedings/062-3088-kgmart-corporation-kgmart-services-corporation-kgmart-promotions-llc-matter](https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/cases-proceedings/062-3088-kmart-corporation-kgmart-services-corporation-kgmart-promotions-llc-matter); FTC, Complaint against Darden Restaurants, available at: <https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/cases-proceedings/062-3112-darden-restaurants-inc-gmri-inc-darden-gc-corp-matter>.

<sup>103</sup> Competition and Consumer Legislation Amendment Act 2011 (Cth), Sch 2, s 4.

<sup>104</sup> *ASIC v Kobelt* [2019] HCA 18 at [295].

- **Financial loss**—consumers manipulated into making unintended purchases, unnecessarily incurring significant expenses post-sale, or struggling to cancel subscriptions can impose significant financial harm. Unfair pricing strategies, such as personalised pricing ‘optimisation’ transfers financial costs from consumers to traders. Inadequately addressing unfair business practices will also continue to widen societal inequities, particular for cohorts who are disproportionately targeted and most financially impacted by such practices.
- **Time loss**—manipulative designs, making actions difficult (such as cancellation or even seeking a repair) or ‘sludge’<sup>105</sup> (excessive or unjustified frictions) can cost consumers. Imposing unreasonable time loss on consumers is a significant economic cost. A report by ACCAN has developed a calculation to ‘cost’ loss of time, and we consider that this should be considered as part of the RIS process.<sup>106</sup>
- **Privacy loss**—unfair practices mean that people do not often know that their private or personal data is being used without their permission. A 2022 study on the experience of n=70,000 users found that unfair practices like manipulative design can cause substantial privacy loss—by simply changing the default option (opted into cookies versus opted out), resulted in 95% of users not signing-up to additional cookies, meaning when given a meaningful choice, many will opt to protect their personal data.<sup>107</sup>
- **Psychological harms**—unfair trade practices, particularly manipulative design, can exacerbate distrust and disengagement, and have negative impacts on emotional wellbeing. A CPRC survey of n=2,000 people found 40% experienced frustration, and 28% felt manipulated when a website or app used such a practice.<sup>108</sup>
- **Competition and marketplace harms**—for effective and healthy competition, consumers need to be free to act on the information they are given in the marketplace, and make decisions based on their preferences, needs and financial resources. Where unfair practices inhibit these choices, or place unreasonable barriers on access to or enjoyment of products or services, competition will be less effective.

The Consultation RIS suggests that the status quo provides certainty of consumers and businesses. We do not think that any certainty outweighs the costs listed above. Moreover, we question the certainty provided by existing protections and standards. For example, there have been varying interpretations of the prohibition on unconscionable conduct among superior courts, which has countered certainty.

**Recommendation 6:**

An unfair trading practices prohibition should adopt the model proposed by Option 4 in the Consultation RIS, incorporating a general prohibition together with a ‘blacklist’ of specified unfair trade practices.

**Recommendation 7:**

The ‘blacklist’ of unfair trade practices should be specified and managed by the regulator, and subject to public consultation.

<sup>105</sup> Cass R. Sunstien, ‘Sludge Audits’, Harvard Public Law Working Paper No 19-21, April 2019, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3379367](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3379367).

<sup>106</sup> ACCAN, ‘Still Waiting .. the cost of customer service’, December 2020, <https://accan.org.au/media-centre/media-releases/hot-issues/1825-still-waiting-the-cost-of-customer-service>.

<sup>107</sup> ICPEN, SERNAC research: 95% of users rejected additional cookies with designs that promote privacy, <https://icpen.org/news/1238>.

<sup>108</sup> CPRC, Duped by Design, 2022, <https://cprc.org.au/dupedbydesign/>.

## 6. Financial services and unfair practices

The Consultation RIS states that it confines its attention to an unfair trading prohibition under the ACL and does not consider the extension of the reform to financial services in the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act 2001* (Cth). Instead, this is to be considered through a separate regulation impact assessment process.

This approach should not be taken; rather, the proposed unfair trading prohibition should apply to all products and services, including financial services. The following sets out the reasons why it is essential for an unfair trading prohibition to apply economy-wide, and for there not to be carve-outs for particular sectors.

Initially, when the ACL was first implemented, it was on the basis that its provisions be reflected in the *ASIC Act* for financial services. In the Second Reading Speech enacting the ACL, the Minister stated that the Bill “amends the consumer protection provisions of the *ASIC Act* to maintain consistency with the ACL concerning consumer protection for financial services.”<sup>109</sup> The approach was designed to deliver on a policy objective of a ‘seamless national economy’, reducing regulatory complexity for business.

The benefit of this approach was confirmed when the ACL was reviewed in 2017. The Final Report of the ACL review found that “a key strength of the ACL is its generic nature, applying across all sectors of the economy. This includes the conduct of financial service providers (through mirrored protections in the *ASIC Act*)”.<sup>110</sup>

Key risks associated with the approach proposed by Treasury (that is, to have a separate regulatory impact assessment process) is that there will be delays as well as the potential for ongoing misalignment between the basic consumer protection standards applying to financial services compared to other areas of economic activity.

A recent reform process resulted in misalignment between the penalties that can be applied for the consumer protections in the ACL compared to the mirror provisions in the *ASIC Act*.<sup>111</sup> This means that an energy company, telecommunication provider or retailer can be penalised up to five times more than a bank or insurer for contravention of the same law. We argue that this does not meet community expectations, nor is it good policy. While the Federal Government indicated that there would be further public consultation to address this inconsistency, it has been more than twelve months since this commitment was made.<sup>112</sup>

This experience suggests that any further reform process may be delayed even, substantially so, particularly given the reform will be subject to the lobbying by vested interests in the financial sector.

A second reason that a carve-out for financial services is the wrong approach is that it will distort business choices and activities. Experience suggests that some businesses will design their contracts and arrangements to effectively fit within certain legislative or regulatory definitions, to evade specific requirements.<sup>113</sup> An unfair trading prohibition applying to business activity other than financial services may

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<sup>109</sup> Minister on Deregulation and Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs, Second Reading Speech, Trade Practices Amendment (Australian Consumer Law) Bill (No. 2) 2010.

<sup>110</sup> CAANZ, Final Report, Review of the ACL, page 72, <https://consumer.gov.au/consultations-and-reviews/australian-consumer-law-review>.

<sup>111</sup> The *Treasury Laws Amendment (More Competition, Better Prices) Act 2022* increased penalties for corporations breaching the ACL from \$10m to \$50m, but did not apply this to the equivalent provisions of the *ASIC Act*.

<sup>112</sup> The Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP and The Hon Stephen Jones MP, More competition and better prices, 28 September 2022, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/andrew-leigh-2022/media-releases/more-competition-and-better-prices>.

<sup>113</sup> See, e.g., Ali et al, ‘Consumer Leases and Consumer Protection: Regulatory Arbitrage and Consumer Harm’, 2013, *Australian Business Law Review*, vol 41, No 5 pp-240-269.

risk incentivising enterprising or opportunistic businesses to escape the new requirement. This could create an environment where consumers are unclear of their rights and what they should expect of business conduct.

A particular issue in this regard relates to *unregulated* financial or credit products and services. By unregulated, we mean providers that are not required to obtain an Australian Credit Licence or an Australian Financial Services Licence. The current regulatory regime for credit and financial services is very complex, and it results in uneven licensing coverage. For example, there are a variety of credit products that do not require a licence; these include, ‘buy now pay later’, wage advance products, and other types of fringe lending schemes.<sup>114</sup> There are also various exemptions from licensing requirements, such as the ‘incidental product exclusion’ in section 763E of the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

Consumer advocates have previously argued that these loopholes and complexities allow regulatory arbitrage.<sup>115</sup> Should financial services receive an exemption from the unfair trading prohibition, there may be greater incentives for business structures to consider themselves an unregulated financial services provider. Moreover, businesses that evade licensing and regulatory oversight have commonly created substantial consumer risk; and they may be the businesses that take advantage of carve-out of unfair trade practices for financial services.

Licensed credit and financial services providers are required to meet a general obligation to ‘do all things necessary to ensure that financial services/credit activities covered/authorised by the licence are provided/engaged in efficiently, honestly, and fairly’.<sup>116</sup> It has been suggested that this ‘free-floating norm or duty’ applies in an infinite variety of circumstances, including business models, sales techniques, marketing, risk management, and communications with customers.<sup>117</sup>

This obligation, particularly the reference to fairness, may be argued to require a similar standard or set a similar norms to that of an unfair trade practices prohibition. However, a close analysis suggests that there are significant differences which, unless the proposed carve-out is remedied, will mean that there are inconsistent and insufficient standards applying to financial services:

- **The courts have largely interpreted the obligation as composite, rather than considering it to impose three standalone norms relating to efficiency, honesty, and fairness.** Perhaps the most significant appellate discussion of this provision was the case of *ASIC v Westpac Securities Administration Ltd*.<sup>118</sup> In that decision, Allsop CJ described the provision as follows: “*the rule in the section is directed to a social and commercial norm, expressed as an abstraction*”.<sup>119</sup> This suggests that it operates together as one norm. Similar suggestions were made in the decision of *Story v National Companies and Securities Commission*.<sup>120</sup> This might suggest that the norms need to be traded off against each other, potentially dulling the consumer benefits associated with a fairness norm. We note that the Australian Law Reform Commission has made proposals to separately articulate each of the individual terms, however this has not passed into law.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> There are various other types of providers that don’t have a licence, such as providers that lend for rental bonds or provide loans against the security of rental income.

<sup>115</sup> See, e.g., Joint Consumer Submission, *ALRC Report 137 Inquiry into Financial Services Legislation*, response to Interim Report A, November 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Section 912A(1), *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth); section 47(1)(a), *National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009* (Cth).

<sup>117</sup> Leif Gamertsfelder, ‘Efficiently, honestly and fairly: A norm that applies in an infinite variety of circumstances’ (2021) 50 *Australian Bar Review* 345.

<sup>118</sup> [2019] FCAFC 187.

<sup>119</sup> At [173].

<sup>120</sup> *Story v National Companies and Securities Commission* (1988) 13 NSWLR 661.

<sup>121</sup> Australian Law Reform Commission, Report 137, *Financial Services Legislation*, Interim Report A, Proposal A20, page 510, November 2021, <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/fsl-report-137/>.

- **The provision has been described as “a forward-looking obligation”.** In *ASIC v Commonwealth Bank of Australia*,<sup>122</sup> Downes J stated that the obligation is concerned with “*the taking of steps to achieve compliance with the statutory norm before any specific instance of non-compliance has arisen*”. In that case, failures of the bank in applying fee waivers to account-holders who were entitled to them did not demonstrate a breach of the obligation. This suggests that the provision is process-driven, and requires licensees to have reasonable processes to provide services efficiently, honestly and fairly; it will not respond when there has been unfair conduct or practices. This would mean the obligation fails to meet the community expectation.
- **Fairness is weighed as an equal assessment between parties, reducing emphasis on consumer protection.** The recent case law has also suggested that fairness, in the context of the obligation to provide services efficiently, honestly, and fairly, requires an equal assessment of the interests of both parties, rather than an emphasis on the interests of consumers or whether the conduct or practices create the conditions for consumers to exercise choice effectively. In *ASIC v AGM Markets Pty Ltd (in liq) (No 3)*,<sup>123</sup> Beach J stated: “*Fairness is to be judged having regard to the interests of both parties. Other statutory provisions may be designed to tilt the scales, but not s 912A(1)(a) and the statutory composite norm it enshrines. Disproportionate emphasis should not be given to what is the third part of a composite phrase in a manner which creates unsatisfactory asymmetry in favour of those with whom the licensee deals. This section is not a back door into an ‘act in the [best] interests of’ obligation.*” This suggests that the provision imposes a different standard to that which we might expect from a prohibition on unfair trade practices. The focus appears to be on balancing the legitimate interests of the organisation compared to the interests of consumers, therefore maintaining the status quo and the existing power disparity between financial service providers and consumers. As outlined in section 4.3 above, we recommend that a prohibition on unfair trade practices should not incorporate the concept of ‘legitimate business interests’.

A further limitation of the obligation to provide services efficiently, honestly, and fairly is that it applies to ‘financial services covered by the licence’ and ‘credit activities authorised by the licence’. This might leave room for business practices that are outside the scope or are not authorised by the licence; it is arguable that such practices are not required to meet the obligation at all.

For these reasons, we consider a carve-out for financial services would be inappropriate. It would result in very different consumer outcomes across different types of firms, for no good policy reason.

**Recommendation 8:**

An unfair trade practices prohibition should be economy-wide, and there should not be a carve-out for financial services. The reform should apply to both the *Australian Consumer Law* and the *Australian Securities and Investments Commission Act*, and there is no need for a separate policy development process for financial services.

<sup>122</sup> [2022] FCA 1422 at [156].

<sup>123</sup> [2020] FCA 208.

## 7. Ensuring compliance: remedies and penalties

The Consultation RIS asks whether civil penalties should be attached to a general prohibition on unfair trade practices. We consider that the full range of remedies and sanctions should be available for breach of the prohibition on unfair trade practices. A recent survey of CHOICE supporters confirmed that 99.19% of respondents think businesses should be penalised for acting unfairly towards consumers.<sup>124</sup>

**Civil penalties are especially important.** Civil penalties are intended to ensure there is a public deterrence associated with particular contravening conduct, and this is the reason why civil penalties must be set at a level so as not to be a 'cost of doing business'.

The ultimate goal of an unfair trading prohibition should be to deter businesses from engaging in unfair practices, without engagement from a regulator. This goal cannot be achieved without a realistic threat of consequence such as the availability of significant civil penalties.

Where consumer protection rules or standards have been implemented without civil penalties and other remedies attached, there have been problems with compliance, and it has often been left to the regulator to take costly administrative or less effective action. For example:

- Civil penalties have not been available for unfair contract terms (such penalties will apply from November 2023). The ACCC has reported that this meant it effectively served as a 'compliance officer' for business, as organisations often did not change standard form terms until engagement with the regulator.<sup>125</sup> Even where ACCC took action against a particular business, this did not change the practices of businesses in the same industry, demonstrating that general deterrence is not achieved without the availability of a civil penalty.<sup>126</sup>
- Until 2019, civil penalties were not available for financial services or credit licensing obligations such as the obligation to provide services efficiently, honestly, and fairly. Prior to this, ASIC only had administrative penalties and was limited in its ability to ensure organisations met the required obligations. Barriers to enforcement was a problem recognised by the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Finance and Superannuation Industry.
- Civil penalties are still not available for non-compliance with consumer guarantee provisions in the ACL. Consumer advocates have previously argued that businesses are incentivised not to provide people with a timely refund, repair, or replacement, as they know there are no meaningful penalties for inaction.<sup>127</sup> To be responsive to consumer harm, ACL regulators have commonly resorted to arguing that businesses have misled consumers about their refund rights. However, this is a costly and circuitous route to ensure compliance. As described earlier in this submission, the prohibition on misleading conduct has not meant that businesses must inform consumers about their refund rights.

The prohibition on misleading and deceptive conduct in section 18 of the ACL does not attract a civil penalty. However, this is in the context of a range of other ACL provisions that make specific types of misleading representations or conduct an offence and subject to civil penalties.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, consumer

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<sup>124</sup> CHOICE supporter survey, November 2023, n=4,930.

<sup>125</sup> ACCC, Submission to Review of Unfair Contract Term Protections for Small Business, 2018.

<sup>126</sup> ACCC refers to the example of taking action in relation to unfair terms in waste management small business contracts. Despite court action against one provider, ACCC had to take additional action against other providers to get similar changes to contract terms.

<sup>127</sup> Joint Consumer Submission, Improving the effectiveness of the consumer guarantee and supplier indemnification provisions under the Australian Consumer Law, February 2022, available at: <https://consumeraction.org.au/improving-the-effectiveness-of-the-consumer-guarantee-and-supplier-indemnification-provisions-under-the-australian-consumer-law/>; Consumer Policy Research Centre, (2023), Detours and roadblocks: The consumer experience of faulty cars in Victoria, available at: <https://cprc.org.au/detours-and-roadblocks/>

<sup>128</sup> See sections 29, 30, 31, 33 and 34 of the ACL.

groups have argued that the lack of a civil penalty for misleading and deceptive conduct is a gap, and means that some types of misleading conduct can exist without penalty.<sup>129</sup>

In addition to attracting a civil penalty, consideration should be given to whether contravening the prohibition on unfair trade practices should be an offence provision. At the very least, this should be the case for the specific unfair trade practices on a 'blacklist'. We note that many of the other ACL provisions are offence provisions, including specified false and misleading representations as well as conduct that is coercive or harassing.<sup>130</sup> The Guide to Framing Commonwealth Offences confirms that it is appropriate to use offence provisions where the relevant conduct involves, or has the potential to cause, considerable harm to society or individuals.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, it is essential that the range of other ACL remedies are available for breach of a prohibition on unfair trade practices. These include injunctions<sup>132</sup>, and damages<sup>133,134</sup> which are remedies available to the regulator as well as the person affected. It is essential that people affected can take action, either on their own or as part of a group action. This contributes to efficiency, corporate accountability, and access to justice. The regulator should also be able to seek other remedies such as infringement<sup>135,136</sup> as well as non-punitive orders like community service or benefit orders<sup>137,138</sup> and disqualification.<sup>139</sup> This will deliver a flexible regulatory toolkit and enable the regulator the variety of tools necessary to ensure compliance.

**Recommendation 9:**

The full range of penalties and remedies, including civil penalties and actions for damages and compensation, should be available for breach of an unfair trade practices prohibition.

## 8. Concluding remarks

The call for an economy-wide prohibition on unfair trade practices in Australia emerges from a recognition that current consumer laws inadequately address the breadth of harmful practices prevalent in both online and offline commerce. Traditional consumer protection measures fail to account for the intricate psychological biases influencing consumer decision-making, leading to consumer manipulation and distrust. To bridge this gap, the proposed prohibition aims to address and resolve a wide range of practices that distort consumer autonomy, exploit cognitive vulnerabilities, manipulate information, or obstruct post-sales experiences. Among the options presented by the Consultation RIS, this submission advocates for Option 4, which would not only provide comprehensive protection against existing and evolving unfair trade practices but would also offer businesses certainty through a clearly delineated list of proscribed actions.

Beyond the immediate consumer benefits, the proposed prohibition could be instrumental in promoting equitable economic transactions and advancing the Federal Government's commitment to fostering a healthy marketplace and community wellbeing. The complexity of many unfair practices often remains unnoticed by consumers, rendering it challenging to detect victimisation, and even if identified, changes in consumer behaviour may not suffice to compel providers to act equitably. This can exacerbate competition concerns, by affording businesses that engage in unfair practices an advantage over those that do not.

<sup>129</sup> CALC, FCA and EJA, Submission to the Robodebt Royal Commission, December 2022, available at: <https://consumeraction.org.au/refer-debt-collection-misconduct-to-the-acc/>

<sup>130</sup> See Part 4-1, of the ACL.

<sup>131</sup> Attorney-General Department, A Guide to Framing Commonwealth Offences, Infringement Notices and Enforcement Powers, Page 12.

<sup>132</sup> Section 232, ACL.

<sup>133</sup> Section 236, ACL.

<sup>134</sup> Section 237-8, ACL.

<sup>135</sup> Under section 134 of the Competition and Consumer Act 2010, the ACCC can issue an infringement notice as an alternative to taking civil penalty proceedings under section 224 of the ACL. There are similar arrangements for other ACL regulators in their ACL application legislation.

<sup>136</sup> Section 239, ACL.

<sup>137</sup> Section 246, ACL.

<sup>138</sup> Section 247, ACL.

<sup>139</sup> Section 248, ACL.

Enforcing a provision against unfair trade practices will offer significant advantages to vulnerable individuals, facilitating more equitable economic transactions and contributing to the development of a more cohesive social environment aligned with the Federal Government's agendas of effective competition and community wellbeing.

## Appendix I: Consumer Action Law Centre case studies

### Marketing and selling

Unfair practice relating to omitting/circumventing disclosure of material information.

#### **Air conditioning service provider case study**

Jane\* and her husband are elderly pensioners who had an issue with their air conditioning unit and contacted a plumbing and electrical repair company. They sent a person around who said they would need to send another person around as the issue wasn't readily identifiable. Jane's husband was asked to tap on an iPad that was quickly placed in front of him which he thought was just to confirm that the repairer had attended, and that he had paid the call-out fee of \$100.

Afterwards someone else came around and had a better look at it, cleaned the filters with a hose, but also noted that there was an issue with the panel and suggested Jane replace the whole unit. Jane couldn't afford this.

Afterwards, Jane was told she would need to pay the repairer over \$1,000 for their services. She said she never agreed to this but was told that it was part of the terms and condition that her husband had signed. She was then sent an invoice for over \$1,900.

Consumer Action Law Centre has received a number of calls about this same operator engaging in similar conduct of doing limited work and charging high fees.

*\*Not her real name*

## Product/service design and pricing

Unfair practices in telecommunications relating to:

- harmful payment requirements imposed for essential services, and
- additional charges and practices causing customer confusion, complaint fatigue and financial hardship.

### Telecommunications case study 1

Sue\* is unemployed and receives the disability support pension as her only form of income. She was originally signed up to an expensive Optus “all-in-one bundle” phone plan that she could not afford which included the mobile phone device, a tablet and a smart watch. After seeking legal advice, Sue used the financial hardship policy to remove the watch and tablet from her plan, handing back the devices to Optus to have the outstanding fees waived. When Sue spoke to Optus about dropping down to a cheaper plan, Optus said they could only make changes if she agreed to pay Optus via direct debit. Sue requested she be placed on a prepaid plan, however, she was told she would need to pay over \$800 to buy her mobile phone device before they would switch her plan to a prepaid service. This was unachievable for Sue and she felt she had no other choice but to switch plans. Sue also asked Optus if it was willing to adjust the direct debit dates to work better with her Centrelink payments, but Optus said couldn't do this in their system.

She soon realised that the direct debit payment arrangements were not suitable as they did not align with her Centrelink payment cycle. As a result, Sue started to miss payments to Optus and when the payments did align, multiple months' payment came out at once. This caused significant financial hardship and did not leave enough money to pay for food. Sue was constantly fearful of suspension and disconnection action and felt she had no choice but to take out smaller expensive credit and buy now pay later loans to pay for her essential living expenses which have now increased her financial hardship.

By the time she obtained legal assistance, she was stressed and anxious about communicating with Optus and managing this situation. Sue was struggling with the need to switch to a prepaid service but could not afford a phone debt of approximately \$800. Optus eventually said the only way they could assist was to arrange for Sue to buy out the device plan. They agreed to reduce the debt by 50% and put the remaining \$400 on a payment plan, on the condition that Sue agreed to convert to pre-paid. Sue accepted this offer and was placed on a payment plan of approximately \$130 per month for three months, however, Sue continued to have issues with Optus not honouring the direct debit schedule and she was re-issued an invoice for the \$800 debt. Finally, after Sue contacted Optus once more about the issue, Optus eventually agreed to a full waiver of the \$800 invoice and advised she could keep the device.

*\*Not her real name*

## Telecommunications case study 2

Alan\* contacted the National Debt Helpline in May 2023 after leaving an abusive relationship. He has been struggling to meet his basic living expenses for several years on his modest income and has been overwhelmed by numerous debt matters, including a number of phone debts. Alan's financial situation has only further deteriorated due to the domestic violence, which saw him paying for several Optus services and devices for himself and his ex-partner through accounts placed under his name.

Alan states that approximately two years ago, he was caught unaware when Optus changed one of his accounts to direct debit. He says that he'd been an Optus customer for many years prior to this and had always paid his bills through other payment methods. As the direct debit dates didn't align with his income payments, he began to default on his account and was disconnected by Optus on approximately four occasions. As a result, he incurred additional Optus fees and charges, including multiple \$15 late payment charges. These charges compounded his financial hardship, making it difficult for him to pay for food and rent. He states he was even forced to change banks to stop Optus automatically direct debiting his account when he had insufficient funds.

After Alan left the abusive relationship, he arranged for Optus to transfer his ex-partner's phone plan out of his name. He also asked Optus if he could consolidate his two existing accounts into one to try to save money and to access cheaper plans. However, Optus said this was not possible unless he agreed to place all his accounts onto direct debit payments as it was required under their new terms and conditions.

In addition, Alan states Optus has on a number of occasions charged him two months' payment upfront, including after the most recent changes to his account when his ex-partner's phone was transferred. Alan says he has never understood or had it properly explained why these extra charges are required and on no occasion has Optus agreed to refund him for the extra months' payment. He states Optus simply says it's a necessary 'pro-rata' charge and 'that's the way it is', which has left him confused and unsure about his rights.

Alan says his interactions with Optus over the years have been very stressful. He commented about his frustration with the Optus complaints process, including unresolved complaints often being met with Optus just opening another complaint loop, which has forced him to lodge several complaints with the Telecommunications Ombudsman.

*\*Not his real name*

## Artificial structures

Unfair practices relating to extended warranty/car dealer relationship and selling practices.

### Extended warranty/used car dealer transactions case study

Jay\* is a low income earner who requires an interpreter to communicate in English.

Jay purchased a car for over \$20,000 from a used car dealer who also arranged finance for the car totalling more than \$50,000 and an extended warranty at an extra cost of \$2,000. The terms and conditions of the warranty were not explained to Jay at the time of purchase, including significant limitations on warranty coverage.

Jay says he was told by the car dealer to attend the dealership to sign the finance paperwork which he didn't understand as he was not given access to an interpreter and was shocked when he was approved for a loan.

Jay wasn't allowed to inspect the vehicle before purchase either as he was told another vehicle was 'blocking it'. Within two weeks of collecting the car, it started to experience engine and other mechanical problems that needed repair. Jay is without a car which was taken back by the dealer and the loan repayments have already been making it difficult for him to pay other bills.

Jay states the dealer refused to repair the car despite Jay's rights under the consumer guarantee provisions of the Australian Consumer Law. Jay states that the dealer has told him the repairs needs to be addressed through the extended warranty even though the warranty's terms and conditions contain significant exclusions that limit repair claims and would only cover a fraction of the car repair cost.

The terms and conditions of the warranty state that it is provided by the car dealership, not the warranty provider that assesses and administers claims under the warranty. Although the warranty provider is a member of the free external dispute resolution body, the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (AFCA), the car dealership is not. Consumer Action Law Centre has experienced difficulty getting AFCA to accept complaints against warranty providers in these circumstances. This limits the ability of people like Jay to enforce their rights under the warranty and seek refunds of warranty premiums due to unfair sales practices.

*\*Not his real name*

## Post-sale practices

Unfair practices relating to being forced to incur unreasonably high additional expenses, delays, dispute resolution processes and practices causing customer confusion, complaint fatigue and financial hardship.

### Travel agency case study

Timothy\* is on a temporary visa and currently unemployed but managed to save up to purchase a return plane ticket to Europe and back in order to make it in time for his sister's wedding overseas. He booked the return plane ticket via the on-line website of a popular travel agency.

When he was completing the on-line booking, Timothy failed to notice that the online application form autofill entered his name only as 'Tim', but otherwise allowed the transaction to easily go ahead and charged him just over \$1,500 for the flights.

When Timothy attended the airport the day of the outbound flight, the airline provider refused to allow him to check-in as his first name on the ticket did not match his passport. They told him there was nothing they could do and advised him to immediately contact the travel agency who would be able to arrange for his name to be corrected to enable him to board the flight.

Despite arriving at the airport to check-in 4 hours early, Timothy spent almost the entire time on the phone with the travel agency who initially claimed there was nothing they could do, and Timothy would just have to buy a new ticket and forgo his previous return ticket in full if he wanted to travel that day. After an airline representative intervened on the phone to try assist Timothy negotiate with the travel agency, the travel agency offered a partial credit after deducting approximately \$700 for a 'no show' and additional booking fee. Timothy felt he had little choice but to agree to this to have the chance to get any form of credit. He was then forced to purchase an expensive one-way ticket for a separate flight later that day that cost significantly more than the initial total return ticket to make his sister's wedding after he was forced to miss his initial flight.

Timothy was advised by the travel agency that he would also need to book a separate return flight though them back to Australia if he wanted to make use of the credit, but would need to book it in the name of 'Tim' for the credit to be valid. They told him that he could contact them from overseas to arrange for his name to be changed back to Timothy on his return ticket before he was due to fly back to Australia.

Timothy followed the travel agency's instructions and contacted them from Europe to arrange for his name to be changed back to Timothy on his return ticket, but they refused and said that they wouldn't be able to do it. Timothy was then forced to engage in weeks of back-and-forth email correspondence and make numerous international telephone calls to the travel agency to try sort out the issue. Each time he was forced explain his situation from the start all over again and deal with a different representative who all seemed to be completely unaware of previous discussions. He was also regularly put on hold for long stretches of time and given contradictory verbal and written advice by the travel agency on multiple occasions.

Finally, the day before his return flight back to Australia, the travel agency agreed to correct his name on the ticket. In total, Timothy was forced to spend over \$7,000 to resolve the matter and found himself approximately \$5,000 out of pocket after the credit was applied (due to the cost of the two extra flights and incurring over \$1,000 in overseas phone call charges in order to deal with the travel agency). Timothy's financial loss was in addition to the stress of the hours he was forced to spend on

the telephone and corresponding, not to mention the significant loss of enjoyment of his trip, to get the travel agency to agree to rectify the name error. This is despite the initial booking application having no safeguards to prevent such a simple, but costly, oversight and chain of events from occurring in the first place.

*\*Not his real name*