

# The Consumer

A publication of the Consumers Association of Singapore

WHAT'S INSIDE?

04

Singapore's Five-Cent Bag Charge:  
Will It Make A Difference?

08

How To Protect Your Prepayments?

12

How To Protect Yourself Against  
Property Rental Scams

16

Green And Thrifty: How To  
Stretch Your Dollar Sustainably

18

Taking The Bite Out Of Misleading Ads

# Contents

President's Message	03
Singapore's Five-Cent Bag Charge: Will It Make A Difference?	04
How To Protect Your Prepayments?	08
In A Nutshell	11
How To Protect Yourself Against Property Rental Scams	12
Consumer Happenings	14
Consumer Issues & Solutions	15
Green And Thrifty: How To Stretch Your Dollar Sustainably	16
Taking The Bite Out Of Misleading Ads	18
Safeguarding Food Safety Through Food Recalls	20



## THE EDITORIAL TEAM

### Editorial Consultants

Toh Yong Chuan  
Jayems Dhingra  
Dennis Phua  
Justin Louis Scott  
Sia Aik Kor

### Production Editor

Zane Ang

### Contributors

Adita Tian Permata Sari  
Zane Ang  
Council for Estate Agencies (CEA)  
Elizabeth Lim  
Nicholas Lim  
Singapore Food Agency (SFA)  
Marcus Tan

### Design & Production

Studio Giraffe

Like this issue?  
Think we missed something vital?  
Tell us at [editorial@case.org.sg](mailto:editorial@case.org.sg)



## Consumers Association of Singapore

170 Ghim Moh Road #05-01  
Ulu Pandan Community Building  
Singapore 279621

Tel: 6277 5100  
Feedback: [editorial@case.org.sg](mailto:editorial@case.org.sg)

[www.case.org.sg](http://www.case.org.sg)  
[www.facebook.com/casesg](https://www.facebook.com/casesg)

# President's Message



*Dear Friends,*

Singapore recently introduced a mandatory disposable bag charge at major supermarkets. This move is aimed at reducing waste and carbon emissions. In this issue, we discuss the effectiveness of the mandatory bag charge and its potential to encourage a greener and more environmentally-aware society in Singapore.

We are also happy to have the Centre for Governance and Sustainability established by the National University of Singapore Business School share valuable insights on the initiative.

Against a trend of increasing prepayment losses suffered by consumers over the years, especially in the beauty and renovation contractor sectors, we share the steps that consumers can take to safeguard their monies such as patronising CaseTrust accredited businesses.

In their article, the Council for Estate Agencies provides practical advice on how consumers looking to rent property can stay vigilant and avoid falling prey to property rental scams perpetrated by individuals posing as property agents.

With recent concerns on food safety, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) sheds light on its surveillance efforts. SFA also shares about how it works with food manufacturers, importers and distributors to ensure the safety and resilience of Singapore's imported food supply.

I hope this issue of The Consumer will provide you with insightful knowledge to make informed purchasing decisions.

### Melvin Yong

President  
Consumers Association of Singapore

# Singapore's Five-Cent Bag Charge: Will It Make A Difference?

Elizabeth Lim, Executive, Marketing & Communications Department

## Assessing the effectiveness of the mandatory five-cent charge on disposable carrier bags

Starting 3 July 2023, Singapore implemented a new measure that requires major supermarkets, including FairPrice, Cold Storage, Giant and Sheng Siong, to charge customers at least five cents per plastic bag provided.

According to the National Environment Agency (NEA), this initiative is intended to reduce plastic waste and encourage sustainable consumer behaviour. It also underscores the importance of household recycling efforts.

A study conducted in 2018 by the non-profit Singapore Environment Council found that Singaporean shoppers are estimated to take 820 million disposable carrier bags from supermarkets a year, which works out to an average of 146 bags a person. With Singapore's new mandatory charge on disposable bags, this may be the correct step towards solving Singapore's waste production problem.

The mandatory bag charge holds the potential to drive positive change towards a more environmentally-conscious society in Singapore.

## The rationale of the five-cent charge



This mandatory charge applies to all types of disposable carrier bags, regardless of the material they are made of. The charge will be enforced in approximately 400 supermarket outlets, which account for about two-thirds of supermarket outlets in Singapore.

The main purpose of this charge is to reduce disposable bag usage and encourage a change in consumer behaviour, promoting the use of reusable bags. The decision to charge at least five cents per bag was made after consulting supermarket operators to balance the impact of cost on consumers with the current cost of living while incentivising the adoption of reusable alternatives.

This complements existing initiatives such as the Mandatory Packaging Reporting scheme which requires manufacturers and retailers to submit packaging data and 3R (reduce, reuse and recycle) plans to NEA.

NEA has also implemented measures to minimise disposable waste at hawker centres, such as prohibiting disposables for dine-in meals and installing water dispensers to encourage the use of tap water over bottled water.

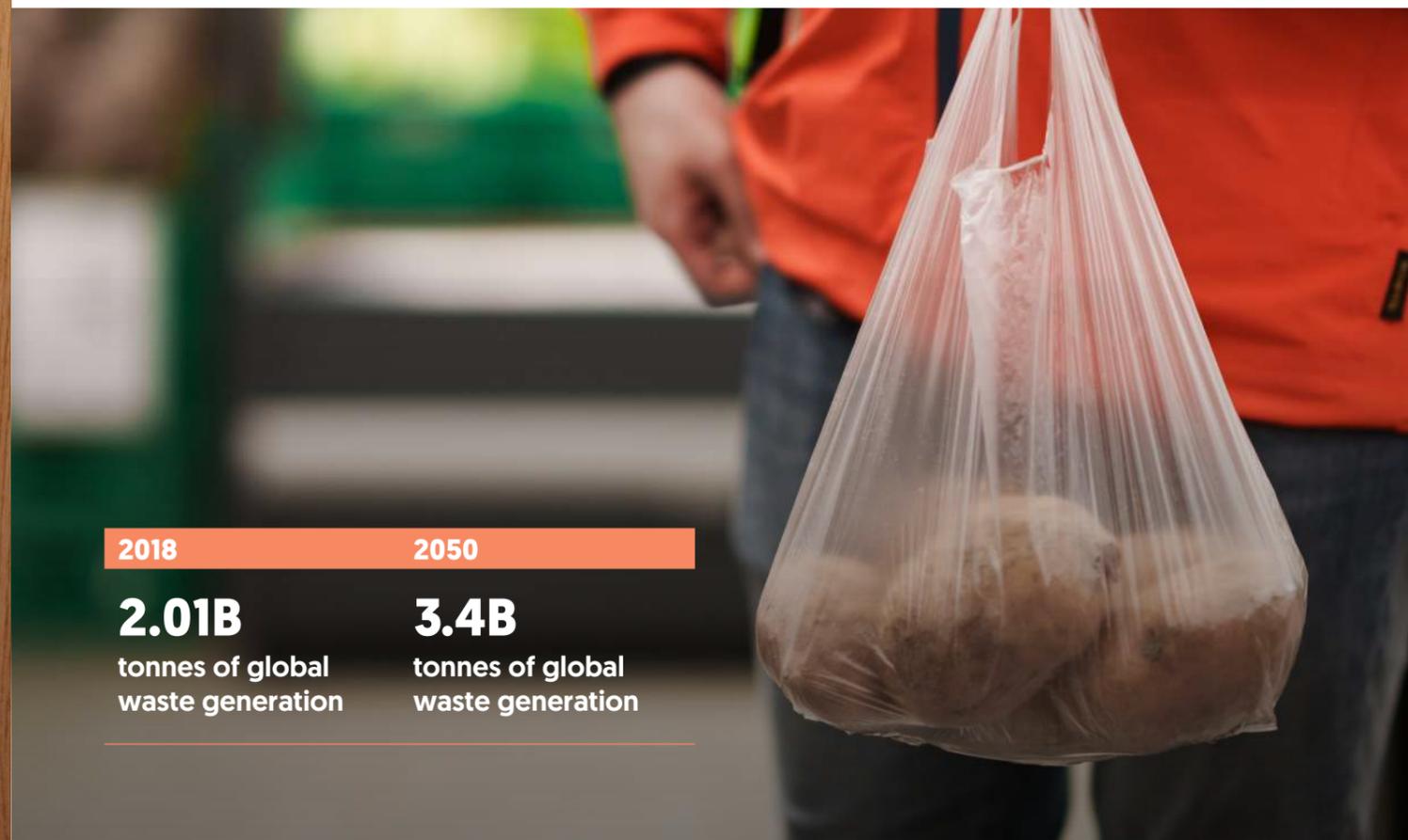
## The problem with plastic waste



According to a World Bank report published in 2018, global waste generation is projected to reach 3.4 billion tonnes by 2050, a 70% increase from 2.01 billion tonnes in 2018. Single-use plastics, which are most commonly used in bags, straws, wrappers and bottles, contribute to this increase.

In Singapore, waste generation has multiplied seven-fold in the past four decades, overwhelming the capacity of the Semakau Landfill. At the current rate of waste generation, NEA expects the landfill to be completely filled by 2035.

Plastic debris that not disposed of properly has also been shown to harm marine life through ingestion, suffocation and entanglement. Microplastics, which are fragments of any type of plastic less than 5 mm in length, pose risks to human health. Toxic contaminants that accumulate on plastic surfaces can enter the food chain, potentially harming humans through seafood consumption.



## Plastic bag charges are not new to the game



Much research has been done on the benefits of plastic bag charges. Take for example a study done on England's mandatory five pence charges on single-use plastic bags introduced in 2015. The study found that there was a swift reduction in plastic bag usage and an increased adoption of reusable alternatives across different demographics with an 85% plastic bag usage in 2016 after the charge was implemented.

According to a field study conducted in Buenos Aires City, Argentina, supermarkets, which implemented a plastic bag charge, witnessed a substantial rise in consumers using their own bags, compared with control supermarkets without the charge.

In a study closer to home, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Singapore found companies that actively implemented bag charges, such as Decathlon, H&M, LEGO® Certified Stores (Bricks World), SaladStop!, The Body Shop, Uniqlo, Watsons and Wing Tai Retail, observed that over 60% of customers started bringing their own bags. These initiatives demonstrate the positive impact of bag charges in raising awareness and reducing single-use plastics.

In March 2023, Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment, Dr Amy Khor, in her speech at the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment's Committee of Supply Debate in Parliament, heralded Singapore's bag charge as a powerful behavioural nudge to promote sustainable practices. It establishes a new default where shoppers are assumed not to need a bag unless requested.

## But plastic bag charges do not solve all problems



Plastic bag charges have been shown to reduce their usage, but there can be unintended environmental consequences if customers switch to alternative materials with larger resource footprints which may have worse consequences to the planet.

Consider paper bags; they are better for the environment in some ways compared to plastic bags. They are recyclable, biodegradable and suitable for composting. Nevertheless, paper production is resource-intensive. Crafting a paper bag consumes approximately four times the energy required for a plastic bag.

Moreover, the chemicals and fertilisers employed in paper bag production compound environmental harm.

Cotton bags, on the other hand, use renewable resources and are biodegradable. They are sturdy and reusable. However, studies reveal that cotton bags have some of the worst environmental impacts. Cotton cultivation demands vast amounts of land, water and chemicals. The energy required for processing and transportation is substantial. Their bulkiness increases shipping costs, and textile recycling is limited. To match the environmental footprint of a plastic bag, a cotton bag must be used a staggering 7,100 times.

Even bags made from organic cotton, grown without pesticides, fare poorly environmentally. They require 30% more water and land due to lower yields compared to conventional cotton. To equal the environmental impact of plastic bags, organic cotton bags need to be used 20,000 times.

On the other hand, studies have found that plastic bags used less fuel and water and produced less greenhouse gas gases, acid rain emissions and solid waste than the paper and cotton bags. While plastic bags contribute to pollution on land and in waterways, they have a lesser impact on climate change and land use compared with paper and cotton bags.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Singapore's mandatory five-cent charge on disposable bags is a significant step towards reducing plastic waste and promoting sustainable behaviour. While the move addresses the issue of single-use bags, it is important to recognise that broader efforts are needed to tackle packaging waste and consider the environmental impact of alternative materials.

Bag charges have proven effective globally, raising awareness and driving behavioural changes. However, it is crucial to consider a holistic approach that includes waste reduction, improved packaging design and reusable alternatives. Singapore has the potential to continue its progress towards an environmentally-conscious society by implementing a combination of measures and encouraging responsible consumption and production practices.



## The Consumer interviews Ms Sharmine Tan, Sustainability Lead, Centre for Governance and Sustainability (CGS), NUS Business School, who shares her insights on the mandatory plastic bag charge.

### Are there any potential unintended consequences or drawbacks of implementing plastic bag charges that policymakers should be aware of?

There is potential overspill of impact to other retailers, such as hoarding of plastic bags from other stores. In the United Kingdom, all retailers, regardless of size, must charge for single-use plastic carriers. Setting a uniform standard for all retail stores can be beneficial and minimise confusion.

Consumers will be looking for alternatives to plastic bags as bin liners. Policymakers could spearhead an ecosystem-wide collaboration to heighten the general knowledge of consumers on proper recycling practices. This reduces the reliance on single-use plastics to bin trash.

We will likely observe an initial uptick in the sale of reusable bags as the result of the plastic bag charges. At this juncture, it is important to educate consumers on the number of times to reuse reusable bags for it to outweigh the environmental cost of production.

### How have other countries or regions successfully implemented plastic bag charges and what lessons can be learned from their experiences?

Countries that have successfully implemented plastic bag charges have two things in common. First, they have a standardised plastic bag charge. Second, they have a dependable waste collection infrastructure.

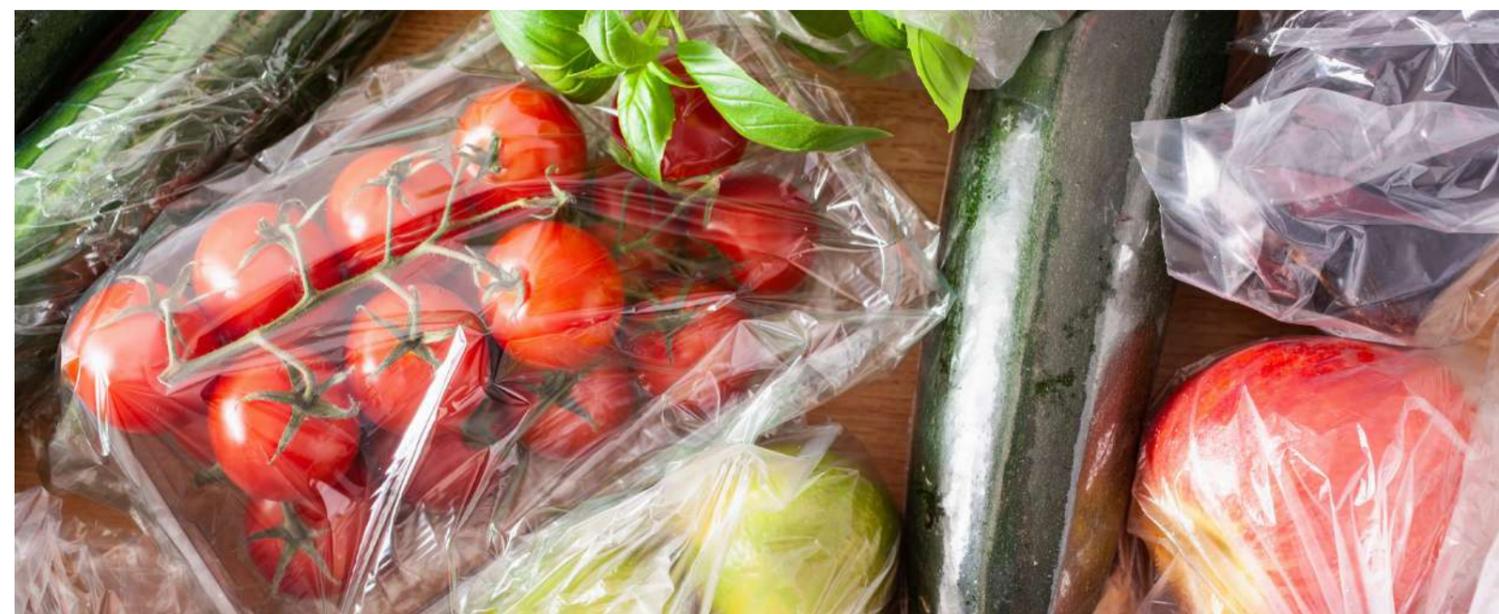
Single-use plastic bags are mostly reused as bin liners. In countries where consumers are required to purchase large trash bags in different colours to sort recyclables, we see a decline in the reliance on small single-use bags.

It takes collective effort to cultivate a mindset shift towards an eco-conscious lifestyle. We need to educate, empower and equip (3Es).

We need to educate and step up to raise awareness of the impact of plastics and proper techniques to recycling. We need to provide training to empower front-liners who are implementing the plastic bag charges. Lastly, we need to equip – build a network of reliable waste collectors and waste infrastructure.

### How can public attitudes and behaviours towards plastic bag use be influenced or changed through these charges?

Price-sensitive individuals are the first converts. The 3Es (educate, empower and equip) are the enablers aimed at fostering a change mindset.



# How To Protect Your Prepayments?

Marcus Tan, Senior Consumer Relations Officer, Consumer Relations Department  
Zane Ang, Executive, Marketing & Communications Department



Cindy (not her real name) engaged the services of a renovation contractor to renovate her new home. Upon confirmation with the contractor that the works could be completed within three months, she paid close to \$14,000 as downpayment.

Although the works were scheduled to commence in September 2021, the works only started in December 2021 due to severe delay on the part of the contractor. Even so, progress was slow.

Frustrated by the contractor's tardiness, Cindy decided to visit the contractor's showroom in hopes of understanding the reasons for the delay and how the works could be expedited. To her dismay, the showroom was shuttered.

Cindy tried calling the contractor several times but none of the calls were answered. The contractor had disappeared, along with her prepayments.

Cindy is not alone. She is one of many consumers who lost their prepayments due to sudden business closure.

According to consumer complaints received by the Consumers Association of Singapore [CASE] from 2020 to 2022, more than \$1.3 million in prepayments were lost due to sudden business closure. Prepayment losses increased by a sharp 24% from \$520,000 in 2021 to \$645,000 in 2022. For the first half of 2023, consumer prepayment losses stood at \$302,000. The beauty and renovation contractor sectors are key concern areas when it comes to prepayment losses. These sectors generally require customers to pay a substantial lump sum, sometimes to the tune of five-figure amounts, upfront before they can utilise the services.

Due to the challenging economic climate, businesses have found it hard to manage their cash flows. Cash flow is the lifeline of every business and when a business does not have adequate cash flow to run day-to-day operations, it will go into insolvency.

When a business becomes insolvent, secured and preferential creditors will be paid first. The balance will then be divided amongst unsecured creditors such as customers.

Under such circumstances, consumers have the most to lose. It will be an uphill battle for them to recover the unutilised portions of their prepaid packages or payment because by then there is usually nothing left to be distributed.

In a case involving an aesthetic clinic, Mandy (not her real name) signed and fully paid for a facial package worth \$1,700. She looked forward to using the package but it soon became a pain for her to use the package.

The consultants were unresponsive to Mandy's text messages. When she called the clinic to make appointments, the available slots were more than a month away. Even when she successfully secured appointments, the appointments would be cancelled on short notice with the consultants.

**\$1.3m** 

**in prepayments were lost from 2022 to 2023 due to sudden business closure**

The breaking point was when Mandy saw online reviews about how other customers had similar experiences with the clinic. Some customers also went down to the clinic only to find that it has shuttered for good.

Mandy's loss is part of the \$285,000 in prepayment losses against the beauty sector reported to CASE in 2022, which is about 44% of total reported prepayment losses for the year.

Against the backdrop of alarming prepayment losses, CASE had called on the government to consider mandating prepayment protection in industries which collect substantial prepayments such as the beauty and renovation contractor industries.

But until the laws are strengthened to expressively safeguard consumer prepayments, what can consumers do to avoid massive prepayment losses?

Here are some suggestions:

01

## Patronise CaseTrust accredited businesses



Since 2011, CASE has implemented prepayment protection requirements in selected CaseTrust accreditation schemes such as the Spa and Wellness and Renovation schemes.

Prepayments or deposits or both that are collected by accredited businesses are protected against sudden business closure.

In the event of sudden business closure, affected consumers will receive the unutilised portions of the prepaid package or payments as pay-outs.



# 02

## Consider pay-per-use options



Consumers should carefully consider their needs and risk appetite before making any prepayments, especially if the purchase is a discretionary purchase.

While the beauty sector generally pitches packages as attractive deals, consumers should think twice.

Although consumers may enjoy savings per use over time for long-term packages, they should consider shorter term packages or pay-per-use options. By doing so, consumers would reduce the amount of prepayment that would be at risk if the business closes suddenly.

# 03

## Work out a payment schedule according to project milestones



For renovation contracts, consumers and businesses should work out a mutually acceptable payment schedule in accordance with key project milestones.

A typical payment schedule is as follows: 10% upfront upon confirmation; 80% as various stages are completed (e.g. hacking, masonry, electrical works, carpentry); final 10% upon satisfactory completion and resolution of defects.

If consumers notice something amiss such as repeated delays in completion of the stages, they should not make further payments.



# In A Nutshell

## Five Important Tips When Shopping On E-marketplaces



Check the **seller's ratings and reviews** to gauge its track record.



Exercise caution when you encounter **prices that appear too good to be true.**



Transact only via communication and payment channels **within the e-marketplace.**



Patronise e-marketplaces that have **prepayment protection mechanisms** such as escrow in place to safeguard your prepayment until the goods are received in satisfactory order.



Refer to the **E-commerce Marketplace Transaction Safety Ratings** by the Inter-Ministry Committee on Scams to understand the safety measures of each e-marketplaces before you make any transaction.



Scan QR Code to see E-commerce Marketplace Transaction Safety Ratings

# How To Protect Yourself Against Property Rental Scams

Council for Estate Agencies

Since January 2023, more than 305 people have lost at least S\$1.7 million to scammers who pretended to be property agents<sup>1</sup>. How can you protect yourself from being the next victim of such property rental scams?

## How the scam works



These scammers put up fake property advertisements on property listing platforms, impersonating a legitimate property agent while indicating another phone number which does not belong to the legitimate property agent.

When contacted by members of the public looking to view the property, the scammers would deceive the victims by furnishing real details of the legitimate property agent's Council for Estate Agencies (CEA) registration number and business card, and purported photographs and videos of the property.

The scammers would then ask the victims to pay a rental deposit to a Singapore bank account to view or secure the rental of the property. The scammer would pressurise the victims to pay the rental deposit quickly, by claiming that there is high demand for the property and they would lose the opportunity to rent if they were late in paying the deposit.

In some cases, before asking for the rental deposit, the scammers would ask for the victims' personal details to prepare a purported lease agreement. The scammers would keep up the pretence by sending a copy of the agreement with the name and national registration identity card (NRIC) of the supposed property owner to the victims for their signature.

Eventually, the victims would realise that they had been cheated when the scammer stopped contacting them after the rental deposit was paid, or when they managed to contact the legitimate property agent.



**Do not pay any rental deposit to secure the renting of a property without confirming the identity of the person advertising the property.**

## How to stay safe?



01

**Download ScamShield<sup>2</sup>** to block unsolicited messages that offer fake property listings.

02

**Verify the legitimacy of the property advertisement** by searching for the property agent on the CEA Public Register<sup>3</sup> using the advertised phone number. If the search does not lead to a property agent's profile page, it means that the phone number is not registered with CEA by any property agent, and this is an indication that the advertisement could be a scam and the property agent's name and CEA registration number could have been abused by scammers.

03

**Inform the Singapore Police Force** if you suspect that you may have been a victim of a scam.

<sup>1</sup> According to a Singapore Police Force advisory dated 21 March 2023. [police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20230321\\_police\\_adv\\_on\\_resurgence\\_of\\_rental\\_scams\\_involving\\_scammers\\_impersonating\\_property\\_agents](https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20230321_police_adv_on_resurgence_of_rental_scams_involving_scammers_impersonating_property_agents) <sup>2</sup> [scamshield.org.sg](https://scamshield.org.sg) <sup>3</sup> [cea.gov.sg/aceas/public-register/sales/1](https://cea.gov.sg/aceas/public-register/sales/1)



Scan QR code to download ScamShield



Scan QR Code to access the CEA Public Register



# Consumer Happenings



## Shopee adopts CASE's Standard Dispute Management Framework for E-marketplaces

On 27 April 2023, CASE signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Shopee Singapore with the latter adopting CASE's Standard Dispute Management Framework for E-marketplaces. The framework serves as a guide for efficient and equitable resolution of consumer disputes to give consumers greater assurance when they shop on e-marketplaces.

Mr Melvin Yong (right), President, CASE and Mr Ian Ho (left), Vice President, Shopee Singapore at the Memorandum of Understanding Signing Ceremony between CASE and Shopee Singapore, witnessed by Ms Low Yen Ling (centre), Minister of State, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth



## Meeting with Financial Industry Disputes Resolution Centre

On 3 May 2023, CASE met up with our partners from the Financial Industry Disputes Resolution Centre (FIDReC) to explore collaboration opportunities to raise awareness of FIDReC as an alternative dispute resolution avenue for consumers with disputes with their financial institutions.

Mr Melvin Yong (second from right), President, CASE and Ms Lee Siow Hwee (right most), Executive Director, CASE with partners from the Financial Industry Disputes Resolution Centre



## Visit to BlueSG

On 10 May 2023, CASE visited BlueSG to better understand their business operations and how they implement processes and policies to deliver their car sharing services to consumers. We had a fruitful discussion on how consumer concerns could be better managed to give consumers peace of mind and assurance when they opt for car sharing services.

The CASE team with the BlueSG team

# Consumer Issues & Solutions

*Dear CASE,*

I visited a hair salon for a haircut. When I was there, their staff scanned my scalp and claimed that I needed urgent treatment for a scalp condition. They then brought me into an enclosed room and promoted a 20-session treatment package for \$1,500. As I did not agree, they did not allow me to leave their premises. They continued to do their sales pitch and threatened that if I did not undertake the treatment, the condition of my scalp would deteriorate. I eventually relented after two hours as I was exhausted from talking to them. What can I do?

*Susan*

*Dear Susan,*

It is an unfair practice under the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act (CPFTA) for a business to take advantage of a consumer by exerting undue pressure or undue influence on the consumer to enter into a purchase transaction.

You have the right to call the police if the salon staff stop you from leaving their premises.

You also have the right to seek redress under the CPFTA.

You may approach CASE for assistance (hotline: 6277 5100, website: case.org.sg).

*Dear CASE,*

I purchased a hair dryer from a seller on an e-marketplace. The product was faulty upon delivery. I reached out to the seller via the e-marketplace but I did not receive a response. I then submitted a feedback to the e-marketplace. However, the e-marketplace did not provide me with a solution to the issue. What should I do?

*Mr Lee*

*Dear Mr Lee,*

Under Part 3 of the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act, colloquially known as the Lemon Law, a consumer may request the seller to repair or replace the goods if they were found to be defective within six months of delivery. If repair or replacement of the goods is impossible or if the cost of repair or replacement is disproportionate in comparison with the monetary amount for other remedies, the consumer may request for a reduction in the amount to be paid or a rescission of contract.

Since payment was made to the e-marketplace, they are required to address your complaint with the seller which may include liaising for repair or replacement. The e-marketplace may also provide either a reduction in the amount paid or rescission of contract for a refund.

You may approach CASE for assistance (hotline: 6277 5100, website: case.org.sg).

### We want to hear from you!

Have a story to share?

Email it to [editorial@case.org.sg](mailto:editorial@case.org.sg)

(max. 200 words)



# GREEN AND THRIFTY: How To Stretch Your Dollar Sustainably

Zane Ang, Executive, Marketing & Communications Department

In view of climate change, Singaporeans are doing their part by making sustainable choices such as adopting eco-friendly alternatives. However, there is a prevailing perception that sustainable alternatives are more expensive than regular products. According to Deloitte's Global Sustainability Survey in 2022, 52% of respondents have yet to create a more sustainable lifestyle due to the cost of eco-friendly alternatives.

That said, sustainable living does not have to be expensive. Let me share some tips to help consumers to embrace green living while being thrifty.



## Embrace energy efficiency

When buying electrical appliances, look out for the Energy Label and the number of ticks that come with the appliance. The Energy Label gives an indication of the energy consumption and efficiency of the appliance at the point of purchase. The number of ticks corresponds to the relative energy efficiency of the appliance. More ticks mean higher energy efficiency and lower energy consumption.

To further conserve energy, make it a habit to unplug electronic devices such as TVs and chargers when they are not in use. Even on standby mode, these devices consume electricity, which can add up over time.

During daylight hours, take advantage of natural sunlight by opening curtains and blinds to save energy. When artificial lighting is needed, opt for light-emitting diode (LED) bulbs which generally consume less energy compared with fluorescent lamps.



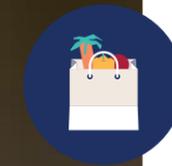
## Choose sustainable transportation

Sustainable transportation means using eco-friendly ways to get around. These options, which are usually cheaper than car ownership, include public transportation, carpool and cycling.

If you need to get a car, consider getting a small vehicle. The smaller the vehicle, the less fuel it consumes and the less emissions it produces.

Being smart about running errands can also make a difference. Plan your trips carefully to combine several tasks into one trip. This way, you use less fuel and reduce pollution by making fewer trips.

For short distances, consider walking or riding a bike instead of taking the car. It is good for the environment, and it is good exercise too! Plus, you get to enjoy the fresh air and see things from a different perspective.



## Smart grocery shopping

Smart grocery shopping can also make a big difference for both the environment and your wallet.

Plan your meals ahead of time. This can save you money and reduce food waste. When you plan your meals, make a shopping list with only the items you need. Avoid impulsive purchases.

To further cut down on waste and costs, consider buying items in bulk for staples like rice, noodles and canned goods. Products in bulk packaging usually require less packaging material compared with products of comparable quantity but in individual packaging. Additionally, many stores offer discounts for bulk purchases so you can save money in the long run.



## Embrace green living by stretching your dollar

Using energy-efficient appliances, choosing public transport and planning our grocery purchases are easy ways to save the environment without spending more. We can all do our part and make a difference for the environment.

# Taking The Bite Out Of MISLEADING ADS

Nicholas Lim, Secretariat, Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore

## An overview of feedback received by the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore in 2022

Have you ever tasted bitterness and sourness before you even put any food in your mouth? For Kathy (not her real name), that was what happened when all she wanted was lunch. The dining establishment she visited stated on its signage that all platters come with rice, but her roast meat platter came with none. When Kathy mentioned this to the staff, the latter claimed that the signage was outdated and wrong, contrary to what she could clearly see.

Kathy's feedback was one of the 71 pieces of feedback that the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS) received in 2022 against dining establishments, restaurants and food & beverage outlets, forming nearly one-quarter of the 303 instances of feedback that ASAS received in the calendar year.

## The beef with food & restaurant ads

With inflation on the rise in the last two years, feedback about the cost of food and shrinking portions has made frequent appearances in news platforms and social media. Of the feedback that ASAS received, 24 pieces of feedback concerned promotions that the complainants said were not honoured when they sought to purchase. Some 20 pieces of feedback concerned food items that did not match the ad or menus in appearance, price, quantity or size.

"Menus often influence a consumer's decision to purchase food and beverages," ASAS Chairman Prof Ang Peng Hwa commented. "Rising costs are not an excuse for businesses to not update their advertisements and point-of-sale materials in a timely fashion and thus misleading consumers. Relying solely on employees to communicate changes in availability and prices is not consistent, reliable or acceptable."

~25%

of feedback received in 2022 was against dining establishments, restaurants and food & beverage outlets

24

pieces of feedback concerned promotions that were not honoured at purchase

20

pieces of feedback concerned food items that did not match the ad or menus

## All sizzle and no steak

ASAS also saw an increase in feedback about ads where the claimed discount or rebate was allegedly unachievable due to the conditions imposed on the promotion. There were 13 instances of such feedback in 2022 involving various industries such as banks, departmental stores and restaurants.

For example, such an ad may state that consumers can enjoy a 50% discount on purchases above \$799 when using a promotional code. However, when the terms and conditions cap the discount at \$125, that is far less than the \$399.50 discount that a consumer would reasonably expect for meeting the minimum spending requirement.

Given the short periods that such sales are usually held over—sometimes as brief as a single day—citizen participation is crucial for effective enforcement of the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice (SCAP) under which advertisers with non-compliant ads can be taken to task. For such sales, advertisers are to ensure that: (1) the headline figure of the promotion should be achievable by a meaningful number of people; and (2) the claimed discount or rebate can be substantiated with examples or records. These positions are well-established and founded on the principles of the SCAP.

**Everyone can play a part to weed out problematic advertising. If you work for advertisers, media owners and agencies, your company may approach ASAS for copy advice if you are uncertain about whether your ad complies with the SCAP. This supports an effective system of self-regulation. The advertising copy should be submitted early to give the ASAS Council enough time to review it. More details on the fees and turnaround time required are available on the ASAS website at [asas.org.sg/advertising-advice](https://asas.org.sg/advertising-advice).**



## Be a smart cookie, spill the beans

Consumers like you can play a part in ensuring ads conform to the SCAP. This is especially so when online ad campaigns are increasingly targeted to individual consumers based on their demographic and interests. You may see ads that ASAS might not otherwise know about. Given the transient nature of such ads, the feedback, ownership and active participation of members of the public are thus more valuable than ever in the regulation of the advertising industry.

If you come across a problematic ad, let ASAS know by submitting your feedback on the ASAS website at [asas.org.sg/Feedback/Online-Complaint](https://asas.org.sg/Feedback/Online-Complaint). Please include as much information as you can to allow ASAS to have sufficient material to follow up with the errant advertiser such as

- ✓ A clear copy of the full ad
- ✓ The details of the platform where the ad appeared (e.g. URL, name of media platform)
- ✓ The date and time when the ad appeared
- ✓ Your reasons for the objections to the ad, with supporting examples (screenshots or recordings) to illustrate why it would be objectionable
- ✓ Any other supporting information (e.g. order confirmation, receipts)

For food and restaurant ads, take a photograph of the item you receive before consumption to show you have reasonable grounds for concerns.

In Kathy's case, ASAS sought clarification from the dining establishment and they acknowledged that they missed out on changing the signage during the last menu update. The signage was updated, ensuring that other hungry diners will not be misled into ordering meat-only platters.

The Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS) is an Advisory Council to the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE). It was set up in 1976 to promote ethical advertising in Singapore and is the self-regulatory body of the advertising industry. The ASAS Council comprises representatives from advertisers, advertising agencies, government agencies, media owners and other supporting organisations. CASE provides secretarial support for ASAS.

# Safeguarding Food Safety Through Food Recalls

Singapore Food Agency

This article was first published on the Singapore Food Agency's digital publication "Food For Thought" on 21 March 2023.

Food can be contaminated anywhere along the supply chain, from the time it is produced to the time it is consumed. When certain food products are found to be unsafe for consumption, together with the industry, Singapore is ready to act.



While there are measures in place to ensure the safety of food that enters Singapore, food may occasionally be found to be unsafe for consumption. Food recalls are directed in such cases to ensure the affected food product does not remain in the market.



The industry plays an important part in safeguarding food safety and preventing unsafe food from reaching consumers by minimising the need for food recalls and being prepared to carry recalls out promptly and effectively where required.

Singaporeans with a sweet tooth may remember when food recalls were directed for various snacks last year. In April 2022, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) recalled batches of the popular Kinder Surprise chocolate eggs linked to multiple cases of salmonella poisoning in the United Kingdom. Several months later, Haagen-Dazs' vanilla ice cream products were recalled as trace amounts of ethylene oxide, a type of pesticide, had been detected.

With over 90% of our food imported, a large volume of food arrives on our shores every day. It is not practical or feasible for SFA to inspect or test all food in the market. This is a challenge that food safety authorities around the world face. In 2021 alone, Singapore imported 2,138 million pieces of hen shell eggs, more than 500,000 tonnes of meat and seafood and over 1 million tonnes of fruits and vegetables. In turn, 28 food recalls, including the Kinder Surprise and Haagen-Dazs products, occurred in 2022.

## How SFA works to ensure safe food



With most of our food imported, safeguarding food safety is an enormous challenge.

SFA takes a science-based risk management approach to food safety that is consistent with international standards. This is carried out through a range of measures, from pre-import source accreditation for higher-risk food to post-import inspection and sample testing for lower-risk food.

SFA also regularly monitors food products in the market to identify any potential food safety risk. Based on various sources of information, such as industry and public feedback, SFA's own surveillance and alerts from overseas counterparts, SFA identifies food products for food safety tests. Enforcement action will be taken for non-compliant consignments. For example, the consignments could be seized or recalled and errant suppliers may be liable to a maximum fine of \$10,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or both.

In 2022, most food recalls were a result of surveillance by SFA and overseas notifications.

## What happens during a food recall



Vigilance is key as food contamination can happen anywhere along the supply chain due to the high volume of imported food into Singapore.

When SFA directs a recall, importers will be required to dispose the affected food products still in the warehouse and work with retailers to recall and remove those already in the market.

Successive measures are also taken. Incoming consignments of the implicated product are subjected to tests before they can be released for sale. SFA may also report the findings to overseas authorities for their own follow-up action and suspend the source of the affected product from exporting to Singapore.

Where needed, SFA communicates food recall information to the public through consumer advisory alerts. Consumers who have the affected products are advised to not to consume them or to seek medical advice if necessary.



## How the industry can play their part



SFA regularly monitors and tests food products in the market to identify and detect any potential food safety risks.

Food companies play an instrumental role in mitigating recalls due to contamination or labelling risk such as food allergen labelling. Besides affecting food safety, a recall can have long-lasting and costly consequences for food businesses, affecting its reputation, productivity, employee morale and profit margin.

To safeguard food safety, food manufacturers, importers and distributors can:

- ✔ Strengthen food product traceability with robust quality check on critical stages of the process.
- ✔ Scrutinise and verify all partners and processes within the supply chain.
- ✔ Ensure that food products comply with the Singapore Food Regulations [e.g. food safety standards, proper labelling].
- ✔ Check if goods require permits or are subject to restrictions and other requirements. Seek advice from SFA if necessary.
- ✔ Be aware of your obligations and responsibilities beforehand to be able to carry out recalls promptly and effectively.
- ✔ Have a responsive team to coordinate the product withdrawal process with SFA [e.g. providing SFA with the necessary details of the product, conducting a post-recall review to prevent further recalls of the product].

## Food safety depends on all of us



Consumers can play a role to safeguard food safety too by equipping themselves with good food safety knowledge.

Food safety is ultimately a common responsibility. Everyone plays an integral part. While SFA puts in place and enforces the regulatory measures, food importers, manufacturers and distributors must play their part by adhering to food safety regulations and ensuring good food safety practices as well as being prepared to act when food recalls are needed. SFA will take enforcement action against errant importers or manufacturers in the event of food safety infringements.



## Food industry suppliers play a proactive role in providing safe food: The Case of RedMart by Lazada

The food industry plays a key role in ensuring the safety of food. For online grocer RedMart by Lazada, this is done through several measures, including implementing strict packaging and storage regulations to avoid cross-infection as well as a complete cold chain for fresh food. When importing exclusive products into Singapore, such as from South Korea's Market Kurly, the RedMart team takes the initiative to translate the product labels to comply with local food labelling standards, allowing consumers to make informed purchase decisions.

RedMart also works closely with SFA during food recalls. In such events, RedMart will immediately remove the affected food products, notify consumers to discard them and provide refunds. With a robust process that allows RedMart to trace down to the shipment, expiry date and customers affected, RedMart is able to complete food recalls in a timely and efficient manner.

Through such proactive measures, food retailers like RedMart reinforce consumer confidence in their company and the safety of their food products.

# In The Next Issue

Prepayment losses in Singapore have been increasing year-on-year based on CASE's numbers. In the next issue, we discuss the practice of gyms collecting prepayments, the impact of sudden closure on consumers and the need for government intervention in the industry.

## Protect Your Online Shopping Sprees With CaseTrust

CASE has launched the new CaseTrust Accreditation Scheme for E-Businesses offering consumer confidence when shopping online. Unique features of this scheme include:

- **Information security:** secure payment mechanisms to safeguard consumers' data,
- **Identifiable merchants:** consumers can easily contact sellers for further enquiries or to resolve disputes,
- **Price transparency:** to safeguard against hidden charges, e.g, no pre-ticked boxes,
- **Ethical advertising:** communication towards elderly and children are age-appropriate and non-exploitive.

There are various CaseTrust accreditation schemes tailored to the unique needs of different industries. Consumers can look out for the CaseTrust logo on the businesses' shopfronts or e-commerce websites as a sign of their commitment to good business practices.



Find the list of CaseTrust accredited companies



## Subscription Form

If you would like to stay in the know of The Consumer, fill up the form below and send it back to us via mail or email to [editorial@case.org.sg](mailto:editorial@case.org.sg)!

<b>Name (Dr/ Mr /Mrs/ Miss/ Mdm)*:</b>	
<b>Company / Designation (if applicable):</b>	
<b>Mailing address:</b>	<b>Postal code:</b>
<b>Tel (Office):</b>	<b>Tel (Mobile):</b>
<b>Email:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	<b>Signature:</b>

Please tick subscription plan:

- 1 year (4 issues)** \$13.12 (UP: \$21.60)       **2 years (8 issues)** \$26.24 (UP: \$43.20)       **3 years (12 issues)** \$39.37 (UP: \$64.80)

Enclosed cheque/money order of S\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Cheque No \_\_\_\_\_ Bank \_\_\_\_\_ being payment for subscription indicated above. The Cheque should be made payable to "Consumers Association of Singapore", mail to: "The Consumer" Subscription, Consumers Association of Singapore (170 Ghim Moh Road, #05-01, Ulu Pandan Community Building, Singapore 279621).

\* Delete where inapplicable