



Energy & Water
Ombudsman NSW



Research survey report: Consumers' use and experience of 'credit fix' agents

Energy & Water Ombudsman (NSW)

Research survey report:

Consumers' use and experience of 'credit repair' agents

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Executive summary

A recent survey by the Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON) of customers represented by credit repair agents and our mystery shopper research into credit repair agents highlight common consumer circumstances and practices by agents that are of significant concern to EWON, including:

- Consumers' lack of awareness of credit listing until there is need for them to obtain credit
- Low awareness among consumers of free alternatives to commercial agents
- Misleading conduct/incomplete information provided by some credit repair agents
- High fees charged by credit repair agents exacerbating financial hardship for consumers.

These findings indicate that a targeted strategy to raise awareness of EWON (and Ombudsmen services more generally) before customers turn to credit repair agents could help consumers avoid significant additional costs.

Recommendations

Findings from the surveys support a three-fold approach to raising awareness of free Ombudsman services *prior* to consumers engaging commercial credit repair services, consisting of:

- 1) **Direct promotion to affected consumers** of the message that free help is available through Ombudsman services and general awareness raising through existing communications and outreach channels.
- 2) **Promotion to creditors** that they should advise customers whose applications are declined on the basis of credit reports that they can contact Ombudsman services free of cost if they dispute their credit default listing.
- 3) **Working with credit reporting entities** to negotiate inclusion of reference to Ombudsman services on credit reports and websites etc.

Survey background and methodology

EWON has been concerned about rising numbers of complaints regarding credit default listings received via commercial advocates, namely credit repair agents and solicitors offering credit repair services.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that customers were unaware that their paid agent would be accessing EWON's free service on their behalf and that often these customers were experiencing financial hardship – hardship likely to be exacerbated by the avoidable fees charged by their agents. When contacted by EWON to confirm they agreed to be represented by their commercial agent, customers commonly indicated there were unaware that there was a free service they could access directly themselves for assistance with energy and water credit listings and reported that, had they known, they would not have engaged a commercial advocate.

This picture suggests that an awareness-raising strategy targeting credit listed consumers would help them avoid unnecessary costs and that such a strategy would require a clearer understanding of customers' referral paths to commercial agents.

To improve EWON's understanding of consumers' circumstances and experiences, we developed a brief telephone survey to find out when, why and how consumers engage credit repair agents, under what conditions and by what referral path.

EWON received 448 credit listing cases between 1 January and 20 July 2012. Of these, 110 (25%) were lodged by a credit repair agent. EWON Investigations Officers surveyed 43 (39%) customers whose cases were brought to EWON by credit repair agents, giving us a solid sample size.

EWON staff also conducted parallel 'mystery shopper' research on 7 credit repair agents. This research consisted of phone calls to the agents describing a scenario where a friend of the caller had recently been rejected for a personal loan on the basis of credit listings for a telecommunications and a gas debt. Information was obtained about the process, costs and timeframes involved and agents were also asked about alternative paths available for a consumer in hardship and unable to pay their fees.

Survey results and findings

Discovery of credit listing and typical consumer circumstances

The customer survey shows that, in the clear majority of cases (88%), consumers do not discover they have a listing against their name until the point at which they are seeking credit (eg mortgage, car loan, small business loan) or a contract (eg mobile phone). This means the problem of needing to have a credit listing removed is often compounded by elevated time and financial pressures.

Customers are also likely to have multiple credit listings (70%) and typically these include telecommunications and/or additional energy or water listings.

In explaining their reasons for engaging a credit repair agent, 47% of respondents said they did not know what to do about the problem, and a further 26% thought someone else would have more success fixing the problem than they would themselves.

The customer survey respondents also reported higher than average CALD¹ frequency (35% against ABS average 24.5% for NSW²). While the sample size is too small to draw firm conclusions, this suggests people from CALD backgrounds may be more likely to experience circumstances leading to credit listing, less aware of Ombudsman services or less confident to deal with creditors directly etc.

These circumstances render many consumers particularly vulnerable to the 'sell' of non-essential commercial assistance, as well as to unscrupulous credit repair agents – even though our surveys show that customers must commit to significant fees to use these agents.

¹ CALD – Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

² Source: http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/1

Fees

Fee structures reported by respondents vary. The mystery shopper enquiries likewise elicited details of various payment options, the most common arrangements being:

- Initial upfront payment or application fee (ranging from \$300 to \$1300), followed by a payment for each listing successfully removed
- Fee for each listing payable whether or not the listing is removed
- Fee per listing, charged only if successful (ie once the agent has the creditor's agreement to remove the listing but before the listing removal is in fact requested and finalised with the credit default agency).

(For further details on fee structures and charges, refer to customer survey data and mystery shopper reports attached.)

The minimum average fee per listing is around \$1,000. It is noted that in the overwhelming majority of cases the debt amount for which the customer was credit listed is under \$500. Several listings in the survey group were for amounts of less than \$120.

It is of considerable concern to EWON that customers are not just paying fees to credit agents when a free service is available, but that these fees typically far exceed the debt amount and include a non-refundable upfront payment of around \$950. In cases where it is determined that the credit listing is compliant, customers therefore find the exercise of attempting to fix their credit situation has only worsened their immediate financial position and delivered no benefit in terms of credit rating to offset this negative outcome.

Credit repair agent conduct

Most customers (67%) reported that their agents did not advise them the agent might access free services, such as EWON, to resolve their complaint.

The mystery shopper research revealed that the application process involves completing and signing a number of documents, including Authority to Act (A2A) forms/letters of authorisation. The Ombudsman A2A forms are likely to be signed in a bundle with other documents, reducing the focus and deliberation a customer can bring to the task of reviewing documentation. Furthermore, a lack of awareness of Ombudsman services means that even if they are mentioned by the agent, or the customer sees some reference to them in the paperwork, the significance of this may not be readily understood by the customer.

When asked in the mystery shopping exercise about the actual process for having credit listings removed, credit repair agents tended to be quite unspecific; they mentioned negotiating with creditors but none mentioned doing this via an Ombudsman. It may be that a significant portion of their cases are completed without engaging an Ombudsman service, in which case it might be argued that no mention would be made in a description of the 'usual' process. More research would be required to confirm the frequency of credit repair agents acting through an ombudsman service, although the fact that 25% of EWON credit repair cases were received through a credit repair agent suggests that it is quite high.

Of significant concern to EWON is that even when asked directly what alternative options there might be for dealing with a credit default listing (specifically a telecommunications and gas debt listing), the agents consistently responded to say there is no alternative to using them other than waiting out the 5 year listing period:

- Several indicated that special knowledge and contacts are required to have a listing removed (“it’s not what you know, it’s who you know”);
- A further two said that it can be attempted by the customer themselves but that success was very unlikely;
- Two included in their reply the offer of additional assistance via their business, including no-doc personal loans and a mystery-shrouded service (“If your friend is in a situation with people chasing her for debts etc, there’s lots of assistance available. Legally I can’t name names, but if this is an issue, that sort of assistance is there and we can help.”)

Referral to credit repair agents

One of the central objectives in EWON undertaking the complainant survey was to ascertain common referral paths so that a prospective messaging strategy could be designed to leverage and/or divert consumers from these referral points.

Survey data shows that, as expected, internet searches using related terms (eg ‘how to fix debt listing’) were the most common referral paths to credit repair agents (both general and specific). However, this referral mode accounted for just 33% of responses. Other referral paths identified included friends and family, utility supplier and advertisement.

Other notable survey findings

1) A number of credit agents contacted as part of the mystery shopper exercise reported that customers have a greater chance of success if they have not paid the debt for which they were listed, as it means the agent has the prospect of debt repayment to use as a bargaining tool in negotiating the lifting of the listing.

EWON notes that this seems unfair for those consumers who, in good faith, have undertaken to repay the debt. Customers have often advised EWON that their credit listed utility debt was a final bill that they either overlooked or did not receive. As soon as they learn of the outstanding bill and acknowledge that it is correct, they are willing to pay the arrears owing.

2) 40% of customers surveyed opted to deal directly with EWON once EWON made contact with them. Of those who opted for EWON to continue dealing with their agent, 64% said their reason for this choice was that they had already paid the fees to the agent.

EWON customer case studies

Case study 1

Yasmin, a single mother with two children, had been credit listed by two different energy companies and one telecommunications company for debts accrued with her ex-partner following the failure of their business. The credit repair agent quoted a \$990 upfront fee and \$990 for each listing that was removed.

When the telecommunications listing was removed the credit repair agent requested that she pay \$2000 upfront. The credit repair agent threatened to credit list her when she said that she couldn't afford this, however she has now entered into an \$80 per week payment arrangement.

Yasmin decided to deal directly with EWON after we contacted her to explain that she didn't need to use a credit repair agent. Yasmin reported that the credit repair agent was confusing to deal with. A voice recording was made of her agreeing to the contract with the credit repair agent however when she received a written copy of the contract and recording she noted that the recording stopped at each point where she questioned anything that she was unsure about.

Yasmin wanted the energy company to review whether there was any basis to list her debt in the first place. EWON referred Yasmin's complaint to a senior customer service representative at the company in the first instance and invited her to contact EWON again if she wasn't satisfied with the response.

Case study 2

When he obtained his credit report, Iqbal discovered he had been credit listed nearly a year earlier for a dual fuel debt of \$208. He was unsure why the listing had occurred as he was unaware of any amount outstanding on the account.

Iqbal contacted the energy supplier to resolve the matter but with only limited English skills he found the experience frustrating and upsetting. Iqbal was able to explain that he had not been aware of the outstanding debt, and he then paid the \$208.

When he spoke to the supplier again, he learned that the debt was for his previous address. He believed he had taken the correct steps to finalise his account and update his contact details when he moved and he confirmed that the new address on the supplier's record was correct. However, it had come to his attention when he received a call from another credit provider advising of his arrears that there was a problem with his mail redirection and that some of his mail had gone missing.

Iqbal took his case to a credit repair agent, who in turn came to EWON to resolve the matter. It emerged that the \$208 debt included a \$50 early termination fee for transferring the gas account, but that this transfer never occurred.

On the basis that the listed debt amount was therefore incorrect, the supplier agreed to remove the listing. They also issued a refund cheque for this amount in Iqbal's favour.

Case study 3

Anne discovered she had been credit listed for an electricity debt of \$189 when an application she made for a loan was rejected. She was keen to have her credit history cleared so she would not be prevented from obtaining credit in the future, so she contacted the retailer and paid the debt. The retailer suggested that she contact a credit repair agent to see about getting the listing removed.

The credit agent engaged by Anne approached the retailer on her behalf, but was unsuccessful in obtaining their agreement to request removal of the listing. The agent then brought the case to EWON. EWON contacted Anne to confirm that she agreed to being represented by the credit repair agent. We explained that consumers can deal with us directly and that EWON's service is free. Anne decided to withdraw her permission for the agent to advocate for her and requested that EWON deal directly with her in resolving the matter.

EWON investigated the circumstances around the credit listing. The debt was for an account closed by Anne when she moved interstate. Anne said that she called the retailer to close the account and to request the final bill be sent to her forwarding address, which she provided. Anne said she received no mail or phone call in regard to the account and disputed the default listing on the basis that the prescribed notice was not issued.

The retailer confirmed they had received her request and had mailed the final account to her new address, as provided. Their records showed a number of attempts had been made to contact Anne by phone and mail when payment was not received and that they had acted in accordance with regulatory requirements.

EWON advised Anne that there did not appear to be any basis upon which the retailer would be required to remove the credit listing as it was compliant with the obligations of a credit provider. Unfortunately, Anne had already paid a non-refundable up front fee of \$950 to the credit repair agent, so she was left with the default listing on her credit report and a \$950 dent in her savings.

Survey conclusions and recommended actions

The referral pattern from the survey data indicates that an effective campaign to raise awareness of EWON's services (and Ombudsman services more broadly) to credit listed consumers should include a strong online component communicating the message about EWON's free service to this subset of consumers directly. An online strategy should be developed to combine both paid and organic search.

Our outreach and communications materials also provide an important vehicle for promoting awareness in the general community about using Ombudsmen services for credit listing issues. A review of outreach and communications content to ensure this message is covered off clearly is therefore also recommended as a secondary, general strategy for direct messaging to consumers. Research by other agencies shows credit literacy among some CALD groups is low and this needs to be taken into account in broaching the topic of credit issues with these communities.³

However, targeted messaging to credit listing affected consumers specifically should not be focused just around referral points. The most common factor among surveyed complainants is when/how they discovered they had been credit listed: 88% first learned about their credit default listing when their application for credit or a contract was declined. This stage in the consumer process therefore provides a critical opportunity for reaching a large majority of prospective complainants to advise them that Ombudsmen provide free services for investigating and, potentially, having credit listings removed.

During this stage, the consumer (a) becomes aware there is a credit history problem (when the prospective creditor says they have been declined) and (b) comes to learn the reason for the actual listing(s) (when they then seek a credit report from Veda Advantage or Dun & Bradstreet). Each of these information events presents a possible messaging channel:

- 1) the prospective creditor's response to the declined customer and
- 2) the credit report (or the application process for obtaining it).

It is therefore recommended that negotiation with creditors and credit reporting agents to deliver our message be considered.

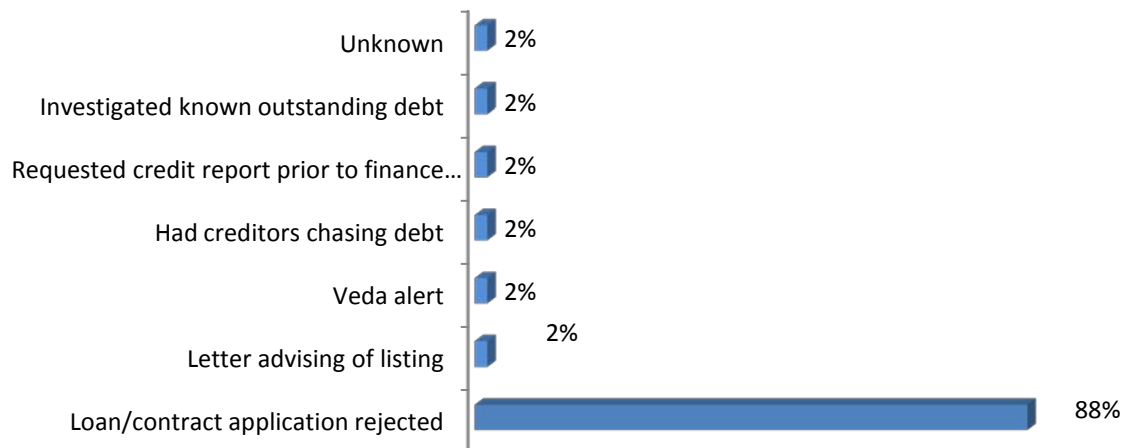
³ For example Financial and Consumer Rights Council's report *The Cultural Diversity of Money, Credit and Debt* at <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ccib/reports/kliger/report.pdf> September 2012

Addendum 1: Credit repair complainant survey data

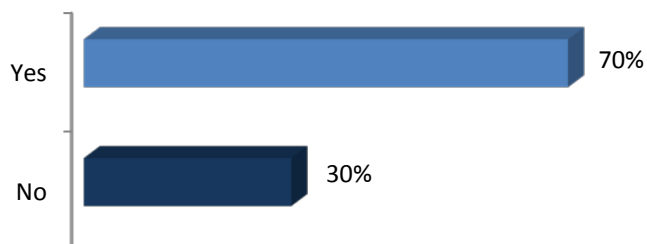
1. Are you aware of EWON and/or other Ombudsman services?



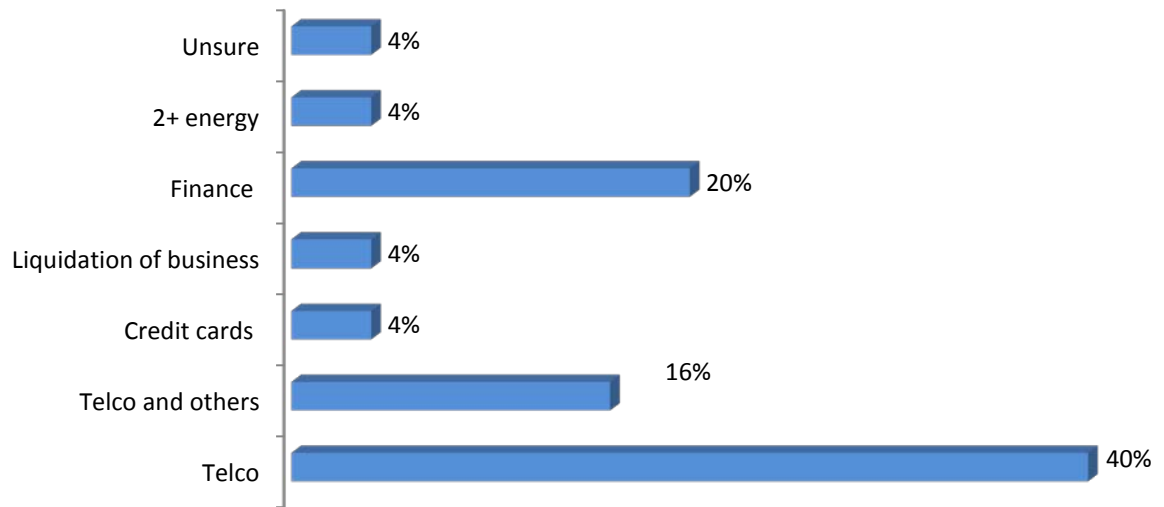
2. How did you find out you had a credit listing for a utility debt?



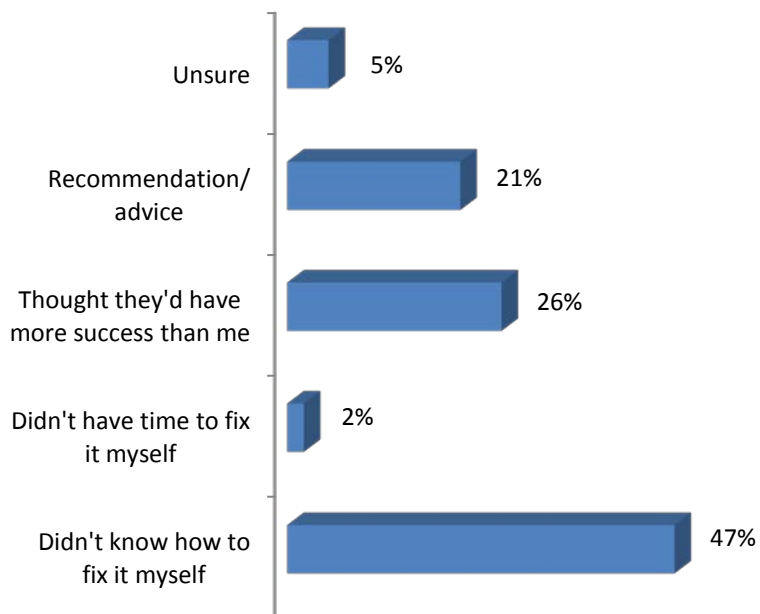
3. Is the credit repair agent helping you with credit listing for any other debts?



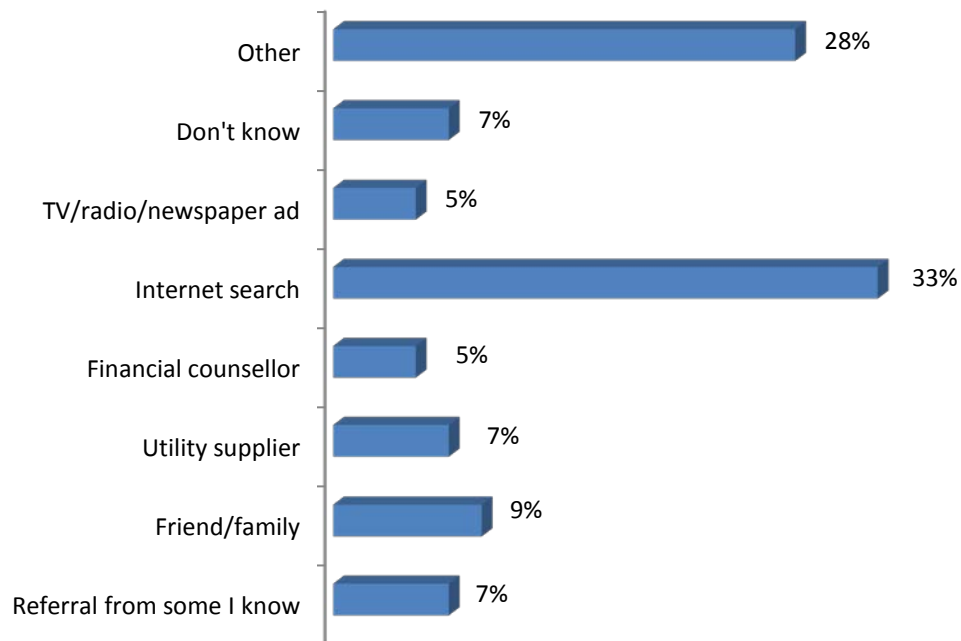
3a. What other debts?



4. Which best describes your reasons for engaging a credit repair agent?

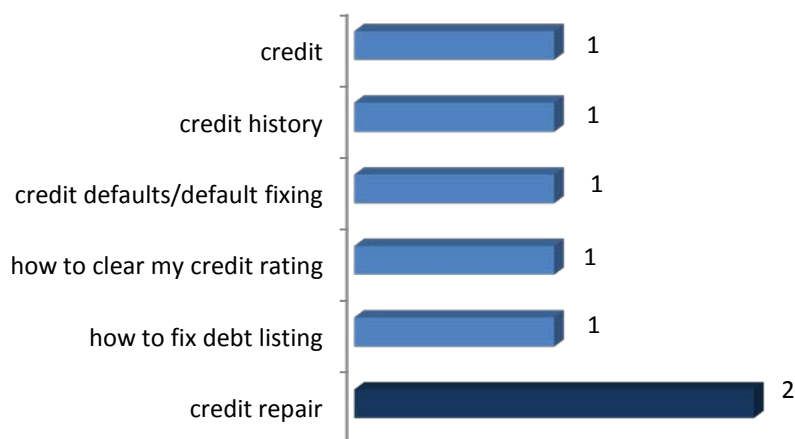


5. How did you find out about the credit agent you engaged?

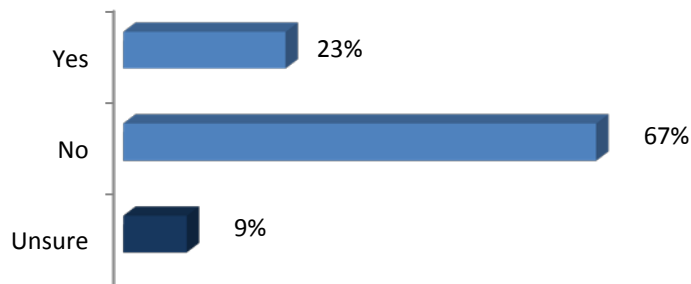


(‘Other’ included accountant recommendation and mortgage broker recommendation.)

5a. What words or phrases did you use to search?



6. When you engaged the credit repair agency, did they advise you that they might access free services, such as EWON, to resolve your complaint?



7. Would you mind saying what the agent's fees are?

\$500 to engage the service, then \$1000 off any listings removed. Total cost of \$2500 if both listings are removed
\$490 upfront. If default is removed, another \$490
\$900 for unlimited amount of default listings. Customer thinks the fee is \$400 for just one listing but he had 3.
\$1000 up front. Customer could not recall if there were additional fees.
\$950 up front; pay more if successful.
She is unsure on the fees, referred by mortgage broker
He advised that so far they have not charged him for the current request. It is not clear if he has an ongoing payment structure with them or if they are charging for each fee removed. Customer wasn't sure if there will be further payment.
Paid \$2000 to \$3000 (customer not sure of exact figure). Other listing has been removed.
Customer has paid just under \$4000 so far and 2 listing have been removed
She wouldn't disclose but mentioned that she paid for several credit issues.
\$990.00 for each successful removal (nearly \$6000 if all are removed for him).
\$2000 – customer is currently paying \$200p/f.
Stage 1 \$1300 to start - in total.
Stage 2 \$800 -in total.
Stage 3 - \$208 per default.
\$1800.00 per listing. (\$900.00 up front and another \$900.00 if successful.)
Customer has paid \$2000.00 and if debt can't be removed he will be refunded in full.
\$900
\$300 to apply, if removed \$900
Customer wouldn't disclose but indicated he has paid for the service already in full (no listings removed as yet).
Not willing to advise
\$1000 to get credit listing removed
\$1900

\$4000 upfront. However, the customer had two listings which he mentioned to EWON. It is not clear if he has others but no others were mentioned. It appears it was \$4000 flat, with no other charges for the listing being removed.

Not sure yet

\$550

\$700 if removed only.

\$900 per listing if they remove a listing; \$0 if they don't.

\$1000 for the removal of a credit listing and a membership fee of \$500.

\$998 first payment and \$998 if the credit listing is removed.

\$550 up front and \$1000 for each credit listing removed.

\$990 sign up fee and \$990 for each default.

For each default \$1089. Only pay if successful in having listing removed.

\$50 a fortnight payment plan to cover \$900 for each credit listing removed.

\$2000

\$1000 per listing plus payment of the debt.

\$1000 up front, and further payment if removed. However, agency advised they only take the \$1000 if they feel they can remove the listing.

\$2000 if it gets removed; if not removed still liable for \$1000.

\$1000 upfront and \$1000 per listing removed.

\$990 sign up, \$990 for each default listing removed.

\$990 admin fee, \$990 per listing.

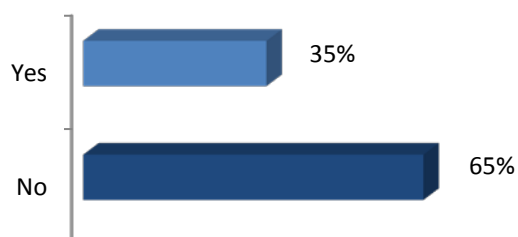
He doesn't know as his wife is handling the matter. He thinks it was \$550 to start with and that there is a charge as well for having the listing removed, but he is not sure what this is.

Has paid \$990, and agents wants another \$1000 when done. Customer has requested refund but been refused. Already paid \$2000 for one fixed.

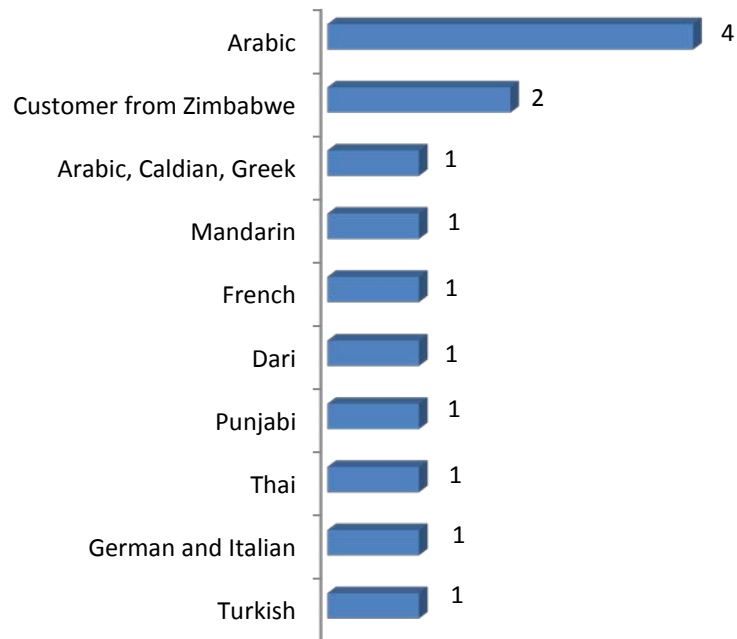
About \$1000, no extra payment if successful.

\$200

8. Do you regularly speak a language other than English at home?



8a. What language(s) other than English do you speak at home?

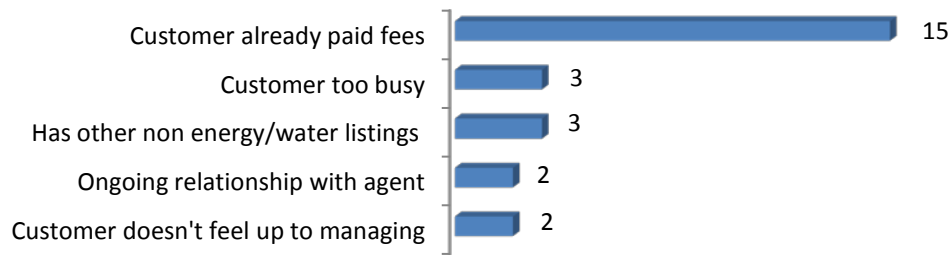


9. Are you from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background?



10. Has the customer decided to deal with the complaint directly through EWON?



10a. Reason given electing not to deal directly with EWON:**11. Other comments:**

Customer said he has finance background and knew about EWON but went to credit repair because he had other debts and the energy retailer refused to remove the listing on 'technical' grounds.

Customer has low level English language skills. Advocate's English is fine, and it appears he did most of the talking with the agency.

Customer has withdrawn her permission for advocate to deal with EWON on her behalf. Customer wishes EWON to contact her direct on this matter and provided her email for contact. Customer commented that the energy retailer suggested she contact a credit repair agency as a way to have credit listing lifted.

Customer said he was happy with the service of the credit repair agent.

Customer's mother is a mortgage broker and said she feels the agency works hard and she has used them for clients. Customer's mother said all mortgage brokers were notified of the existence of the credit repair agency by email they sent out and now all the brokers use them.

Customer said she wishes she knew about EWON before signing a contract with the credit repair agent.

Customer said he was given the number for the credit repair agent by his loan broker.

Customer's dispute has been with the credit repair agency for six months and they have yet to get the listing removed.

Customer was happy to deal with EWON directly suggesting that the credit repair agency was very, very slow in assisting (had their matter since January 2012). Credit listing will be removed within 3 months. Customer wanted an outcome before this time.

Fees sounded substantially higher than the fees of other companies but it is possible it is due to additional listings. Customer advised that he engaged this company specifically despite the price as they assured him they would get the listing removed. He is applying for a home loan.

Customer notes the \$550 could be from her lawyer or the credit repair agency, she is not 100% sure as she does not have the bill with her.

Customer is credit listed not as an electricity consumer but as an electrician. When he does electrical work at premises, if his work is not compliant, he is issued a reinspection fee by the network, which he must pay. As he has not paid these, the network has credit listed him.

Customer will discuss with his girlfriend whether he would like to deal with EWON directly.

Customer will contact the credit repair agent to advise he will deal with EWON directly.

Customer notes there is a \$300 fee per credit listing if she cancels the contract with the agency.

The credit repair agency has advised the customer that the energy retailer didn't want to remove the listing.

Customer notes he is recovering from personal circumstances with gambling/alcohol addiction and has chosen to use the advocate because he does not want extra stress in his life right now.

Addendum 2: Mystery shopper survey summary

Mystery shopper scenario

The caller says they have a friend with limited English they are phoning on behalf of. The friend has recently had an application for a personal loan rejected on the grounds of credit default listing. She is waiting to receive her credit report from Veda Advantage but thinks she may have a listing for a phone and/or gas bill. She moved out of the address where those accounts were held. The credit repair agents were asked:

- 1) If they could help the customer in her situation
- 2) What their fees are and how they are structured
- 3) What their process involves
- 4) What documents are required
- 5) Time frames for obtaining the listing removals
- 6) What options (other than engaging a credit repair agent) were available for someone like the friend, who is not in a good place financially and may not be able to afford the agent's fees?

Responses

Name	Can they help this customer?	Fees	Process	Documents required	Time frames for removals	Other options?	Additional comments
Agency 1 ⁴	Depends on circumstances. Factors that help are: - Financial hardship - Attempt at advising of change of details or have not received letters notifying of imminent default etc - Debt being unpaid (gives creditor incentive to lift listing)	\$2,412 upfront for 2 listings (whether or not removed) OR \$550 upfront payment plus weekly installments for 52 weeks of: \$63.87 for 2 listings \$85 for 3 listings \$107 for 4 listings (To track listings: check online for free or pay small fee to speak with someone)	1) Submit application to the agency 2) Review by the agency to see if they can help – response within around 2 days.	- Credit file - Application form "letters of Ombudsmen, privacy etc" - Driver's license and Medicare card	Telco listings: 12-40 days is average Energy: 45-60 days is average	"Can do it yourself but it's extremely difficult. There's some info on the website about it. I wouldn't recommend it."	[Not verbatim] "If your friend is in a situation with people chasing her for debts etc, there's lots of assistance available. Legally I can't name names, but if this is an issue, that sort of assistance is there and we can help."

⁴ Repair agency names removed for reporting purposes.
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Name	Can they help this customer?	Fees	Process	Documents required	Time frames for removals	Other options?	Additional comments
Agency 2	Depends on circumstances. Factors that help are: - Financial hardship - Attempt at advising of change of details of have not received letters notifying of imminent default etc - Debt being unpaid (gives creditor incentive to lift listing)	These vary – there are several listed on their website, however the only one the representative mentioned was the \$880 one off total fee, with payment plans available. (“The customer will need to make payment of debts too, but we can probably negotiate down the amount.”) Note that there is a DIY offer for \$275 – this was not mentioned in the phone conversation when I asked what other alternatives there might be.	Submit application and documentation to the agency. Review by agency to check they can help.	- Credit file - Application form “letters of Ombudsmen, privacy etc” - Statutory declaration re circumstances - Driver’s license and Medicare card	About 30 days, but not guaranteed	“We are about the cheapest we are aware of, so the customer can’t really go to other business if cost is the issue. “We also have other personal loan business that will lend to people with defaults, so that is an option. There’s not really any other option except to wait out the 5 year listing.”	
Agency 3	Depends on circumstances. They only take on cases they are confident they can be successful with.	Stage One - Application and Investigation - \$600 (per client/file) Stage Two - Negotiation and Documentation - \$500 (per default or judgment) Stage Three - Success stage with the removal of VEDA default listing - \$200 (per default or judgment) Payment plans can be negotiated.	Submit credit report and application form to agency. Application form is basically designed to reveal what happened and when from the client’s point of view. Stage 1: Initial assessment of the case (completed within 5 days). If it is deemed too difficult or likely to take too long to get listings removed, they won’t	- Credit file - Application form “letters of Ombudsmen, privacy etc” - Driver’s license and Medicare card		There are no other alternatives that “they” know of. There’s no body for this. If there was a body they could go to, “they’d” go to them. You’ve got to be tenacious and rigorous in getting these matters redressed .	There was no mention made of use of Ombudsmen in their Stage 2 process nor as a DIY alternative, however the follow-up email from the representative included the following info: “We do not proceed to stage two without your permission and unless we believe there is a good chance of success. We will report our thoughts within 5 days, after viewing this application, giving you our recommendations and asking for permission to proceed to Stage 2. We will ask for more information if needed and

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Name	Can they help this customer?	Fees	Process	Documents required	Time frames for removals	Other options?	Additional comments
Agency 3 Cont.			advise proceeding. Stage 2: Negotiation and documentation to obtain creditor's agreement to remove listing. Stage 3: Submission to VEDA to remove default listing.				may also require an authority for the Ombudsman office." 30% of their work comes from people who "didn't understand what they were into".
Agency 4	Depends on circumstances. Can only help if their investigation shows they can demonstrate an error was made in ordering the listing.	Upfront payment (once creditor has agreed to remove listing – no fee unless successful). No payment plan available. \$1,430 upfront for first listings \$990 for each thereafter	1) Email credit report to agency; they then send application forms etc. 2) Once application is lodged, the case is investigated – approx 4 weeks. 3) If the creditor confirms they agree to remove the listing, the client must then pay the fees upfront for the agency to proceed with getting listing removed. No charge if the agency is not successful in gaining creditor's agreement to remove.	• Credit file (prior to application) • Application forms (issued on receipt of credit report)	4 weeks investigation then listings will generally be removed 10-15 days from receipt of fees.	No. Can only wait out the 5 year credit listing. [Even when pushed as to whether there's any other avenue for assistance in having listings removed open to someone who is in difficult financial circumstances, the representative maintained the position that there is no other option for having credit listing removed.]	

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Name	Can they help this customer?	Fees	Process	Documents required	Time frames for removals	Other options?	Additional comments
Agency 5	It depends on the circumstances. The customer will need to get a copy of her credit report to see how many default listings she has. Factors that help are: • Debt being paid • How long ago the customer was credit listed • The circumstances in which the customer was listed	Upfront payment of \$550 plus \$990 for each listing removed. They do not offer any payment plans. I was informed that if my friend could not afford this, the she should “save a bit of money first before contacting them”.	Submit application to agency. Review by agency to see if they can assist.	• Credit file • Application form No mention of any authority/privacy forms.	Average time for listing removal: Telco – 2 to 3 weeks Energy – 4 weeks	[Not verbatim] “Not that I know of. She can try to sort it out herself, but they won’t remove it (the credit listing). People who try to do it themselves are not normally successful. We have direct access to their Resolution teams that normal people don’t get access to. If your friend doesn’t have the money, my suggestion is that she wait a bit to save for the fees. We are the best at doing this”.	
Agency 6	Will depend on: • If they can find a fault or error in the listing in the first place • What caused the credit listing • What company credit listed the customer. He notes that 70% of their customers are either telco or energy and they have good relationships with most companies. He notes for example that they have “never failed” to remove a listing with [major telco] or with [major energy retailer], and this has everything to do with “who you know” and the relationship.	Upfront fee of \$395 to cover research and the investigation \$990 for every successful listing removed. If the customer has multiple listings (more than 5), then they will consider a reduction in the fees. The agency offers payment plans	First step is to speak to the customer to get a better understanding if the agency can assist them.	• Credit file • Application form • Authority to Act forms	Telco and Energy listings take 4 to 6 weeks Banks – 8 weeks	[Not verbatim] “Unfortunately there are not many options out there for the customer. A customer may be able to approach a company themselves, but this is only for cases of extreme hardship, death in the family, or severe illness. They can try, but even so majority of customers are unsuccessful because they do not know how to present themselves in the right way. We deal with these people on a daily basis. It is who you know, rather than what you know”. No mention of the use of an Ombudsman at all in the discussion.	

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Name	Can they help this customer?	Fees	Process	Documents required	Time frames for removals	Other options?	Additional comments
Agency 7	It depends on the customer's situation. Would not explain how a listing could be removed.	Would not provide any information on pricing, or give any indication on what some prices could be. She kept advising that the customer would have to sit down with a consultant and discuss her situation (free of charge), and then they could assess fees. Despite my repeated attempts to get some kind of estimate, she would not comment. She said that "the first consultation is free, until the consultant asks your friend for bank details, that is when you've agreed to be with us".	A short questionnaire must be filled in with the consultant to get an understanding of the situation. They will then check to see if they can help her. She would not give any information on how long the process takes for the consultant to assess this.	• All details such as name, D.O.B, address and permission to obtain her credit file • Drivers license and Medicare card		She would not comment on this apart from advising that their service would be the easiest, convenient, and most successful way to remove a credit listing.	