

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA
CASE NO.

00-00596

FILED BY
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CLARENCE MAGDOX
CLERK U.S. DISTRICT COURT
S.D. OF FLORIDA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

PLAINTIFF,

v.

CIV-MORENO

VENDING COMMUNICATIONS, INC.,
a Florida corporation;
INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS SERVICES, INC.,
a Florida corporation; and
ALBERTO J. SUSI, individually, and as an
officer of the corporations,

MAGISTRATE JUDGE
LUBÉ

DEFENDANTS.

**COMPLAINT FOR CIVIL PENALTIES, CONSUMER REDRESS,
PERMANENT INJUNCTION AND OTHER EQUITABLE RELIEF**

Plaintiff, the United States of America, acting upon notification and authorization to the Attorney General by the Federal Trade Commission ("FTC" or "the Commission"), pursuant to Section 16(a)(1) of the Federal Trade Commission Act ("FTC Act"), 15 U.S.C. § 56(a)(1), for its complaint alleges:

1. Plaintiff brings this action under Sections 5(a), 5(m)(1)(A), 13(b), 16(a) and 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(a), 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b), 56(a) and 57b, to secure civil penalties, consumer redress, a permanent injunction and other equitable relief for defendants' violations of the FTC's Trade Regulation Rule entitled "Disclosure Requirements and Prohibitions Concerning

Franchising and Business Opportunity Ventures" (the "Franchise Rule" or the "Rule"), 16 C.F.R. Part 436, and Section 5(a) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

2. This Court has subject matter jurisdiction over this action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331, 1337(a), 1345, and 1355, and 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b), 56(a) and 57b. This action arises under 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

3. Venue in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida is proper under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1391(b)-(c) and 1395(a), and 15 U.S.C. § 53(b).

DEFENDANTS

4. Defendant Vending Communications, Inc. ("VCI"), a Florida corporation with its principal place of business at 16371 N.W. 57th Avenue, Miami, Florida 33014, promotes and sells payphone business ventures. VCI transacts or has transacted business in the Southern District of Florida.

5. Defendant Interactive Communications Services, Inc. ("ICS"), a Florida corporation with its principal place of business at 16371 N.W. 57th Avenue, Miami, Florida 33014, promotes and sells vending machine business ventures. ICS transacts or has transacted business in the Southern District of Florida.

6. Defendant Alberto J. Susi is the President of VCI and ICS. In connection with the matters alleged herein, he transacts or has transacted business in the Southern District of Florida. At all times material to this complaint, acting alone or in concert with others, he has formulated, directed, controlled or participated in the acts and practices of the corporate defendants, including the acts and practices set forth in this complaint.

COMMERCE

7. At all times relevant to this complaint, defendant VCI has maintained a substantial course of trade in the offering for sale and sale of payphone business ventures, and defendant ICS has maintained a substantial course of trade in the offering for sale and sale of vending machine business ventures, in or affecting commerce, as "commerce" is defined in Section 4 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 44.

DEFENDANTS' BUSINESS ACTIVITIES

8. The defendants offer and sell payphone and vending machine business ventures to prospective purchasers. The defendants promote their business ventures through classified ads in newspapers.

9. In their advertisements, defendants VCI and Susi make representations about the earnings potential of their business ventures, and urge consumers to call defendants' toll-free telephone number to learn more about the opportunity. For example, defendant VCI's classified newspaper advertisements have stated:

"AREA PAYPHONE RTE
45 Est SWBELL locations
Earn 165K/yr. (800) 519-3201"

10. Consumers who call the defendants' toll-free telephone numbers are ultimately connected to defendants, or their employees or agents, who make representations about the earnings potential of the business venture and the actual earnings of prior purchasers, without giving prospective purchasers access to the information they need to evaluate the claims. For example, defendant VCI, or its employees or agents, has represented that six of its payphones typically generate a profit of \$1,650 - \$2,280 per month, and defendant ICS, or its employees or

agents, has represented that three of its combo snack and soda vending machines typically generate a profit of \$400 - \$500 per week.

THE FRANCHISE RULE

11. The business ventures sold by the defendants are franchises, as "franchise" is defined in Section 436.2(a)(1)(ii), (a)(2) and (a)(5) of the Franchise Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a)(1)(ii), (a)(2) and (a)(5).

12. The Franchise Rule requires a franchisor to provide prospective franchisees with a complete and accurate basic disclosure document containing twenty categories of information, including information about the litigation and bankruptcy history of the franchisor and its principals, the terms and conditions under which the franchise operates, and information identifying existing franchisees. 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(a)(1) - (a)(20). The pre-sale disclosure of this information required by the Rule enables a prospective franchisee to contact prior purchasers and take other steps to assess the potential risks involved in the purchase of the franchise.

13. The Franchise Rule additionally requires: (1) that the franchisor have a reasonable basis for any oral, written, or visual earnings or profit representations ("earnings claims") it makes to a prospective franchisee, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)(2), (c)(2) and (e)(1); (2) that the franchisor provide to prospective franchisees an earnings claim document containing information substantiating any earnings claims it makes, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(e); and (3) that the franchisor, in immediate conjunction with any generally disseminated earnings claim, disclose additional information including the number and percentage of prior purchasers known by the franchisor to have achieved the same or better results, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(e)(3)-(4).

14. Pursuant to Section 18(d)(3) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. 57a(d)(3), and 16 C.F.R. § 436.1, violations of the Franchise Rule constitute unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce, in violation of Section 5(a) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(a).

VIOLATIONS OF THE FRANCHISE RULE

COUNT ONE

15. Paragraphs 1 through 14 are incorporated herein by reference.

16. In connection with the offering of franchises, as "franchise" is defined in the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a), defendants have failed to provide prospective franchisees with accurate and complete basic disclosure documents within the time period required by the Franchise Rule, thereby violating Section 436.1(a) of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(a), and Section 5 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45.

COUNT TWO

17. Paragraphs 1 through 14 are incorporated herein by reference.

18. In connection with the offering of franchises, as "franchise" is defined in the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a), defendants or their employees or agents have made earnings claims within the meaning of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(d), but have failed to provide prospective franchisees with earnings claim documents within the time period required by the Franchise Rule, have failed to have a reasonable basis for such claims at the times they were made, or have failed to disclose the information required by the Rule in immediate conjunction with such claims, thereby violating Sections 436.1(b)-(d) of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(b)-(d), and Section 5 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45.

COUNT THREE

19. Paragraphs 1 through 14 are incorporated herein by reference.

20. In connection with the offering of franchises, as "franchise" is defined in the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.2(a), defendants VCI and Susi have made generally disseminated earnings claims within the meaning of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(e), but have failed to disclose information required by the Franchise Rule in immediate conjunction with such claims, including the number and percentage of prior purchasers known by the defendants to have achieved the same or better results, have failed to have a reasonable basis for such claims at the times they were made, or have failed to provide prospective franchisees with earnings claim disclosures at the times required by the Rule whenever such claims are made, thereby violating Section 436.1(e) of the Rule, 16 C.F.R. § 436.1(e), and Section 5 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45.

CONSUMER INJURY

21. Consumers in the United States have suffered and will suffer substantial monetary loss as a result of defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act. Absent injunctive relief by this Court, defendants are likely to continue to injure consumers and harm the public interest.

THIS COURT'S POWER TO GRANT RELIEF

22. Section 13(b) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 53(b), empowers this Court to grant injunctive and other ancillary relief, including consumer redress, disgorgement and restitution, to prevent and remedy any violations of any provision of law enforced by the Federal Trade Commission.

23. Section 5(m)(1)(A) of the FTC Act, § 45(m)(1)(A), as modified by Section 4 of the Federal Civil Penalties Inflation Adjustment Act of 1990, 28 U.S.C. § 2461, as amended, and as implemented by 16 C.F.R. § 1.98(d) (1997), authorizes this Court to award civil penalties of not more than \$11,000 for each violation of the Franchise Rule occurring after November 20, 1996. The defendants' violations of the Rule were committed after that date and with the knowledge required by Section 5(m)(1)(A) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 45(m)(1)(A).

24. Section 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. § 57b, authorizes this Court to grant such relief as the Court finds necessary to redress injury to consumers or other persons resulting from defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule, including the rescission and reformation of contracts, and the refund of money.

25. This Court, in the exercise of its equitable jurisdiction, may award ancillary relief to remedy injury caused by the defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, plaintiff requests that this Court, as authorized by Sections 5(a), 5(m)(1)(A), 13(b) and 19 of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. §§ 45(a), 45(m)(1)(A), 53(b) and 57b, and pursuant to its own equitable powers:

1. Enter judgment against the defendants and in favor of the plaintiff for each violation alleged in this complaint;
2. Permanently enjoin the defendants from violating the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act;
3. Award plaintiff monetary civil penalties from each defendant for every violation of the Franchise Rule;

4. Award such relief as the Court finds necessary to redress injury to consumers resulting from the defendants' violations of the Franchise Rule and the FTC Act, including but not limited to, rescission of contracts, the refund of monies paid, and the disgorgement of ill-gotten gains; and

5. Award plaintiff the costs of bringing this action, as well as such other and additional relief as the Court may determine to be just and proper.

DATED: 2/11/00

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