

ATTN: FTC officials considering this rebuttal of Direct Selling Association (DSA) comments:

Thank you for this opportunity to debunk some of the many deceptions put forth by the DSA. This forum could have long term beneficial effects, assuming FTC personnel finally forge ahead with meaningful disclosure.

Below is my rebuttal of comments by Direct Selling Association (DSA), comments numbered 522418-12055 through 522418-12096 by Joseph Mariano.

Qualifications of this analyst, Dr. Jon M. Taylor (and request for a hearing)

Consumer Awareness Institute was initially set up by Jon M. Taylor, Ph.D., in the late 1970's to do research and to educate on consumer issues. However, in 1997, the focus changed to one problematic issue that absorbed all our resources – the phenomenon of multi-level marketing (MLM), a unique marketing model that makes use of numerous deceptive marketing practices that were doing incalculable damage to consumers. These schemes promoted participation in what amounted to endless chains of recruitment of participants as primary (sometimes only) customers.

Dr. Taylor has presented, testified, and/or presented papers before legal teams at the Federal Trade Commission, National White Collar Crime Center, Economic Crime Summit Conferences (2002 and 2004), Senior Fraud Summit Conference. As a director of Pyramid Scheme Alert, Dr. Taylor organized the first conference on product-based pyramid schemes for federal and state regulators in Washington, D.C., on June 1, 2001. He has consulted on numerous state and private legal actions against MLM firms, some of them members of the Direct Selling Association (DSA), and has performed extensive comparative and statistical research to help regulators and consumers clearly identify which schemes cause the most consumer losses in terms of loss rates, aggregate losses, and number of victims world-wide. Dr. Taylor has evaluated the compensation plans of over 200 MLM firms, most of them past or present members of the DSA. Much of this research and resultant consumer guides are posted on the web site – www.mlm-thetruth.com.

Addressing FTC officials personally, I, Jon M. Taylor, personally request a hearing or opportunity to present summaries of my research to aid the process of developing meaningful disclosure to protect consumers – something which all qualified experts (not funded by the DSA/MLM lobby) agree is sorely needed. For my unique qualifications to address these issues, read my bio at - <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/JonTaylorsStory.htm> and vita at - <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/JMTaylorVITA6-6.pdf>

The Direct Selling Association (DSA), recently taken over by chain sellers, now promotes chain selling (pyramid marketing) – even more than legitimate direct selling.

First and foremost, consider the source of this voluminous series of comments (522418-12055 through 12096 – from the DSA). What is today known as the Direct Selling Association was formed in Binghamton, New York in 1910 as the Agents Credit Association, which evolved over time to become the Direct Selling Association in 1968. For several decades, the organization consisted of legitimate agents or direct sellers to bone fide markets; no chain selling or pyramid marketing schemes were included. However, in the 1960's MLM companies (MLM's) began to make their appearance, though still less than 5% of the membership in 1970.

In the 1990's officers of MLM's began to see the advantage of joining this organization. Apparently they reasoned that if an MLM is a member of the Direct Selling Association, it must be doing legitimate direct selling. This could be compared to a farmer seeking a greater price for his pigs by selling them as horses. So he places horsehairs on their rumps, herds them into the horse corral, and declares, "There, you can see that the pigs are in the horse corral and no longer in the pig pens. This proves that they are horses."

The DSA is correct in at least part of their definition of what constitutes direct selling: "Direct Selling is the sale of a consumer product or service, person-to-person, away from a fixed retail location. These products and services are marketed to customers by independent salespeople."

The problem with the DSA definition is that it fails noticeably to exclude what legitimate direct selling is NOT; i.e., the recruitment of an endless chain of participants as primary (or only) customers. In fact, using definitional guidelines in FTC cases, such as Equinox and Trek Alliance, as well as in most state statutes against pyramid schemes, the key element of a pyramid scheme is compensation obtained primarily from recruitment activities, rather than from actual sales to end users who are not in the network of participants in the sales device or scheme. This distinction can best be determined by careful examination of the compensation plan of an MLM program. If the rewards or income from building a downline is the primary motivator and if retail sales to non-participants is secondary or only nominal, it should be considered an illegal pyramid scheme.

Using the "5 Red Flags" analysis of compensation plans, the harm in chain selling, or pyramid marketing schemes, can now be identified, and such schemes (many of them DSA members) can finally be clearly differentiated from legitimate business opportunities.

Years of careful study comparing no-product pyramid schemes and MLM's to a variety of legitimate marketing models led to a paper I wrote, which was summarized as a white paper for the 2002 White Collar Crime Conference. "[The 5 Red Flags: Five Causal and Defining Characteristics of Product-based Pyramid Schemes, or Recruiting MLM's](#)" has since been expanded and updated, including testing the "5 Red Flags" against financial reports of actual MLM companies. Where the data was available, and after debunking deceptions in reporting by the MLM's, the percentage of participants in these schemes that lose money is approximately 99.9% – far worse than for clearly illegal no-product pyramid schemes. The "5 Red Flags" and related research reports is discussed in my July 17 comments (#522418-12585). Or it can be obtained from the research page of our web site at – http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/mlm_research.htm.

DEFINITIONAL NOTE: In my reporting, I use the term "recruiting MLM" to refer to an MLM that is dependent on recruitment of a revolving door of new recruits as customers, rather than on legitimate sales to end users. Using this definition, nearly all MLM's are recruiting MLM's. An equivalent term used in the report is "product-base pyramid scheme," which the FTC refers to as a "pyramid marketing scheme." Another appropriate term is "chain selling," denoting endless chain recruitment of participants as primary customers.

Without any effort at debunking the reports of the MLM's, Robert Fitzpatrick of Pyramid Scheme Alert arrived at a similar conclusion – approximately 99% of participants are paid less than \$14 dollars a week by their sponsors, actually losing money, after subtracting purchases of products and services from the company. Varying amounts of purchases are required in order to qualify for any commissions or to advance in the scheme.

It should be noted that even in the worst of the chain selling schemes found on the DSA membership roster, one can find participants who are making a lot of money – at or near the top of their respective pyramids. I refer to these persons as TOPP's, for "top of the pyramid promoters." A survey of tax preparers I performed in 2002 in Utah (a haven for many of these schemes) confirms that it is extremely rare for participants to report a profit on their returns – except for the TOPP's. For this revealing and very instructive report, read "Who profits from Multi-level Marketing (MLM)? Preparers of Utah Tax Returns Have the Answer," which is discussed in my July17 comments to the FTC (tracking number 522418-12684) Or go to our web site at – http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/tax_study.htm

The odds can be substantially improved by willingness of participants to embrace and promote the deceptions that become the official company line. From twelve years research, I conclude that to be successful in climbing the hierarchical ladder (pyramid) of a "recruiting MLM" (see "5 Red Flags" report), one must go through three stages:

1. Be deceived.
2. Maintain a high level of self-deception.
3. Go about aggressively deceiving others.

Then – and only then – can the hard work pay off in a highly leveraged chain selling (pyramid marketing) scheme, such as Amway/Quixtar, Nu Skin, or Melaleuca. For a list of typical deceptions used in MLM recruiting, go to – <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/Misrepresentations-RecruitingMLMs.pdf>

The DSA lumps together legitimate direct selling with chain (pyramid) selling, which meets the technical definition of an illegal pyramid scheme in most jurisdictions.

It should be noted by FTC officials considering their comments that the DSA has essentially been taken over by MLM's over the past 15 or 20 years. From less than 5% of membership made up of MLM's in 1970, over 28% of DSA membership today are MLM companies. Financial resources and resultant influence represent a far greater percentage – certainly the majority of revenues from DSA firms comes from MLM's. Please also note that my analyses of their compensation plans reveals all “5 Red Flags” in nearly all of the DSA's MLM's.

In other words, most of the revenue from MLM members of the DSA is from highly leveraged chain selling schemes, or (to use the FTC term) pyramid marketing schemes. They are not legitimate direct sellers at all. So lumping chain sellers with legitimate direct sellers in its extensive collection of statistics is highly misleading. If the standards used to identify illegal pyramid schemes in other cases (such as Equinox) were used by the FTC and the states, nearly all of these chain selling or pyramid marketing schemes would be found to be illegal pyramid schemes. This would include most MLM's in the DSA membership roster. Indeed, some DSA members have recently been shut down by the FTC or other law enforcement agencies for conducting illegal pyramid schemes.

Using deceptive tactics, the DSA lobbies to legalize blatant chain (pyramid) selling.

As further proof of the motivation of DSA officials to protect chain selling more than legitimate direct selling, DSA lobbyists have been aggressively lobbying state legislatures to weaken their statutes against pyramid schemes. Using highly deceptive lobbying techniques, they have been successful in duping legislators (and even some in law enforcement who testify for the bills) in getting such bills passed in several states.

Examples of deceptive lobbying include the testimony of DSA President Neil H. Offen, who claimed in hearings before a 2005 Utah legislative committee that the DSA represents “90,000 direct sellers” in Utah who depend on direct selling for income. While it is possible that 90,000 Utahans may have joined various MLM's, they are primarily buyers of MLM products who join in the hope of some day recruiting enough people to get enough in commissions to recoup their investments. As the aforementioned tax study demonstrated, except for TOPP's,

few ever report an income on their taxes, and few sell to end users in any volume.

The thing these DSA-initiated bills have in common is not the promotion of legitimate direct selling, but technically illegal chain selling or product-based pyramid schemes. For more information, go to the DSA page on our web site at - <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/dsa.htm>. The information on the Pyramid Scheme Alert web site is also helpful. Go to – <http://www.pyramidschemealert.org/PSAMain/news/FLSB2648.html>

Such deceptive legislation at the state level underscores the urgency of a rule requiring meaningful disclosure by MLM companies, since it may be one of the only real protective measures available to protect consumers.

In legislative hearings, The DSA has blatantly misrepresented the stance of the FTC.

At the 2006 Utah legislative hearings, several blatant falsehoods were given to the committee by the bill's DSA/MLM proponents, with no opportunity for me to refute them, since I had already spoken. One of the most blatant falsehoods was that by Misty Fallick, legal representative for the DSA, who misquoted the position of the FTC – the exact opposite of their long-standing position, which is that unless the majority of sales were made to non-participants, it was a pyramid scheme. (As an example, review Equinox case.) For details on what happened in the Utah legislative hearings, go to – <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/Utah-PyramidSchemesNowLegal.htm>

The DSA appears willing to engage in any deception to further its ends – including the web version of ID theft.

The DSA has engaged in deceptive and unethical web practices, including “stealing” the identity of one of its top critics – Pyramid Scheme Alert (PSA) – by directing web surfers seeking the PSA site to the DSA site, by registering domain names that rightfully should belong to PSA and then referring them to a page on the DSA site explaining a deceptive DSA definition of what is a pyramid scheme. For details, go to – <http://www.mlm-thetruth.com/dsa.htm>.

This DSA action was not surprising to those who have observed the pattern of deception used by DSA/MLM member firms, who thrive on deception, as mentioned above.

The DSA and DSA member firms have mobilized their massive lists to get participants to write in their “concerns” and objections to the proposed business opportunity disclosure rule – based on templates or form letters supplied by the DSA or member firms or consultants.

Sampling the first 200 comments posted on the FTC web site in response to the invitation for the public to comment on the business opportunity rule, it appears that the vast majority (as many as 90%) are opposed to the proposed rule – or want it modified so as not to disclose meaningful information. These follow a clear pattern, and we know that most are filling out a form letter or template to which they are attaching their names. One of the objections, as voiced by these submitters (and by the DSA and its member MLM firms), is that it could negatively affect their income. However, it is clear from the above-mentioned tax survey and other research that few participants other than TOPP's ever show a profit on their taxes (though they may seek a deduction for some expenses). Therefore, of the 17,000 respondents, most of whom are MLM participants, the vast majority are not likely earning a profit, but are merely hoping to some day profit from what has been proven to be uneconomic for all but the TOPP's. Hopefully, meaningful disclosure will discourage many from participating at all, as they would be much better off doing something else.

DSA data and arguments are so highly questionable that most of their input should be discounted in developing a meaningful business opportunity disclosure rule.

Considering all of the above, I urge FTC officials to disregard or consider invalid the data and arguments put forth by the DSA to justify and extol their mission and practices, including the “DSA Code of Ethics.” Nearly all of their statistics combine chain selling with direct selling, hugely skewing and contaminating the results. And the DSA code of ethics does not go nearly far enough; e.g., it does not prohibit endless chain recruitment of participants as primary customers.

Please also discount DSA arguments against meaningful disclosure. On careful analysis, using the “5 Red Flags” research report cited above, as well as other corroborative studies, it appears that the motivation to resist such disclosure comes more from fear of revealing the truth to prospects than from legitimate objections. After all, if prospects had clearly disclosed to them that their odds of profiting from an MLM were less than 1 in 100, even with their best efforts, few would participate.

In summary, it is my personal belief that DSA input should be discounted because DSA objections to honest disclosure reflect the fact that FTC interests in protecting consumers and fair trade are diametrically opposed to the interests of the DSA in concealing the truth. Still, I will offer some rebuttals to points raised in the “Executive Summary” on page 4, which is expanded on in later parts of the series of DSA submittals.

Specific rebuttals of DSA points

[NOTE: DSA comments below are in italics, followed by my rebuttals in regular type.]

