

Buyer Beware by Captain Michael Madsen

We've all done it. We're buying a couch, joining a gym, or renting a new apartment. The salesperson hands us a stack of papers and a pen and we start signing our name on the dotted line. We think to ourselves, "I'm sure everyone that has bought a couch has signed the very same contract and none of them have had any problems" or "if something happens, I'm sure I can get out of this" or maybe even "who cares about the paperwork, just give me my new living room set!"

Unfortunately, the next time we think about that contract is when we discover we paid \$1,500 for a \$150 piece-of-junk couch, when we haven't been to the gym in months but we're still paying \$80 a month, or when there's a hole in the roof and the landlord expects us to stay in the apartment and keep paying rent.

Generally speaking, when it comes to contracts, a deal is a deal. When you sign your name to a contract, the law assumes that you have read it and that you agree to its terms. Almost invariably, the law will hold you to that contract whether it cuts in your favor or not.

The following pointers may help you to avoid some contracting pitfalls in the future:

1. Read the contract! It may seem like a hassle to read through the entire contract, but believe me, once a dispute arises, you will become intimately familiar with the terms of that contract and you will wish you had read it before you signed it.
2. Shop around. You might feel like you have found the only person, store, or landlord that can offer you what you really want. That's the way they want you to feel. After you have read the contract, if it contains terms you are not comfortable with, take the time to shop around. Chances are you will be able to find a similar offering with more favorable terms. If not, there's a pretty good chance that the deal you found that seems "too good to be true" actually is "too good to be true." You're better off doing business with someone you can trust.
3. Visit the Legal Assistance Office. The Legal Assistance Office in the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate exists to help service members, military retirees, and their dependants with their legal issues. If you are preparing for a large purchase and you're not comfortable with the terms of your contract, make an appointment to see a Judge Advocate. Tell the seller/vendor that you would like to discuss the matter with an attorney. If they put more pressure on you to sign right away, that is a pretty good sign that you should visit Legal Assistance. Try to plan ahead as it can take some time to get an appointment with a JAG.
4. Don't use credit if at all possible. Many of the contract problems people have stem from the financing agreement. Some businesses make nearly all of their money not from the sale but from financing your purchase. If you can avoid using credit cards or financing consumer purchases, you can avoid many contract issues and save thousands of dollars in fees and interest charges.

Contracts can offer us great protection. They keep parties honest and provide a means to assert our rights. However, an unread or unwise contract can literally turn our lives upside down. So before you sign a contract, buyer beware.