



ICE Seizes Hundreds of Websites Peddling Counterfeit Pharmaceuticals

Shopping online is ubiquitous. In our personal lives and as business owners, knowing and engaging the e-market is important, convenient, and a fact of modern life. But while the Internet is chock-full of great businesses, it is also a magnet for bad actors – often organized criminals – who steal intellectual property (IP), undermining the reputations of legitimate businesses, and diminishing well-respected brands – and often while putting consumer health at risk. These are all reasons why we need robust enforcement of IP rights.

The stakes are high, both for our businesses and for our health. Take the headlines from earlier this year: In a sweeping operation managed by the National Intellectual Property Rights Center, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) recently shut down 686 websites run by criminals involved in illegally selling counterfeit pharmaceuticals to American consumers. The effort, dubbed “Bitter Pill,” began in late September and is the latest operation under ICE’s two year-long “Operation in Our Sights” effort, which has now closed 1,525 sites trafficking in counterfeit goods.

And it’s clear that this is a worldwide problem. The Bitter Pill operation was launched as part of simultaneous, INTERPOL-led effort, which involved more than 100 countries and ultimately took down an incredible 18,000 websites selling counterfeit drugs. Worldwide, ICE and their international partners prevented 3.7 million doses of potentially lethal counterfeit medication from reaching consumers.

“These international partnerships are essential in the global fight against the trafficking of counterfeit drugs,” said ICE Director John Morton. “Instead of taking potentially life-saving medicines, customers are duped into purchasing drugs that are fake or untested and could ultimately do them more harm than good.” Operation Bitter Pill involved undercover agents from ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) directorate posing as online shoppers and making purchases from multiple online pharmacies. The results were staggering: the agents received counterfeit anti-cancer medications, antibiotics, weight loss pills, and food supplements – products used every day by women across America.

Intellectual property advocates are busy making these issues a priority in Washington, and around the world. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has become a global resource for businesses and governments struggling to identify a proper solution to these issues, because raids and seizures alone will not solve the problem. It requires a framework of law and cooperation in the business

community on how to protect, not simply profits, but lives. As a new Congress prepares to begin its tenure in Washington, businesses should hope to see IP as a key issue.

Women Impacting Public Policy touches millions of women and women-owned businesses across the country. As such, WIPP recognizes the fact that between career demands and family obligations, America's women have a lot on their plates these days. For many of us, the Internet offers a convenient opportunity to save time and money through purchasing medications online. Unfortunately that convenience can leave innocent customers vulnerable to organized criminals distributing potentially deadly fakes. In fact, over 97% of online pharmacies are operated illegally. We need to be aware of this danger to protect our businesses, our families and ourselves.