

# Consumer News & Views

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## In This Issue...

- **Consumer Confidence Shows Modest Rise in February.**
- **Alabama Consumer Council and Sarasota Consumer Council Work Offer Workshops on Telephone Scam Prevention.**
- **Financial Education Video Features "How to Ask Your Boss for a Raise!"**
- **ACC's "Friend of the Consumer" Award Recognizes Outstanding Businesses.**
- **Apply for the 2020 Green C<sup>SM</sup> Certification Program.**

**Consumer Confidence Shows Modest Rise in February.** Even though the Coronavirus continues to spread disease and fear around the globe, the Conference Board **Consumer Confidence Index**<sup>®</sup> improved slightly in February, following an increase in January. The Index now stands at 130.7 (1985=100), up from 130.4 in January. The Present Situation Index – based on consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions – decreased from 173.9 to 165.1. However, the Expectations Index – based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business and labor market conditions – increased from 101.4 last month to 107.8 this month.

"Consumer confidence improved slightly in February, following an increase in January," said Lynn Franco, Senior Director of Economic Indicators. "Despite the decline in the Present Situation Index, consumers continue to view current conditions quite favorably. Consumers' short-term expectations improved, and when coupled with solid employment growth, should be enough to continue to support spending and economic growth in the near term."

The monthly **Consumer Confidence Survey**<sup>®</sup>, based on a probability-design random sample, is conducted for The Conference Board by Nielsen, a leading global provider of information and analytics around what consumers buy and watch. The cutoff date for the preliminary results was February 13.

Consumers' assessment of current conditions was less favorable in February. Those claiming business conditions are "good" declined from 40.0 percent to 38.6 percent, while those claiming business conditions are "bad" increased from 10.4 percent to 11.9 percent. Consumers' assessment of the job market also moderated from last month. Those saying jobs are "plentiful" decreased from 47.2 percent to 44.6 percent, while those claiming jobs are "hard to get" increased from 11.9 percent to 14.8 percent.

Consumers were more optimistic about the short-term outlook. The percentage of consumers expecting business conditions will improve over the next six months increased from 18.4 percent to 20.4 percent, while those expecting business conditions will worsen declined, from 8.6 percent to 7.4 percent.

Consumers' outlook for the labor market was mixed. The proportion expecting more jobs declined slightly from 16.5 percent to 16.2 percent, but those anticipating fewer jobs in the months ahead also decreased, from 12.9 percent to 11.1 percent. Regarding their short-term income prospects, the percentage of consumers expecting an increase rose from 21.6 percent to 22.0 percent, while the proportion expecting a decrease declined from 8.0 percent to 6.7 percent.



"Consumer confidence increased in January, following a moderate advance in December, driven primarily by a more positive assessment of the current job market and increased optimism about future job prospects," said Lynn Franco, Senior Director, Economic Indicators, at The Conference Board. "Optimism about the labor market should continue to support confidence in the short-term and, as a result, consumers will continue driving growth and prevent the economy from slowing in early 2020."

## Alabama Consumer Council and Sun Coast (Sarasota Consumer Council Offer Workshops on Cell Phone Scams.



The Alabama Consumer Council and Sarasota Consumer Council have joined forces to combat cell phone scams that have victimized thousands of unsuspecting senior consumers during the past year. The two chapters launched a series of workshops in January and February to educate consumers on how to avoid being victimized by unscrupulous scammers.



Consumers learned about various types of cellular fraud. Cellular fraud is defined as the unauthorized use, tampering or manipulation of a cellular phone or service. Types of cellular fraud include SIM swapping, cloning and subscriber fraud.

### What is SIM Swapping or a Port-Out Scam?

Your mobile phone number may be the key to your most important financial accounts. Text messages are often used by banks, businesses and payment services to verify your identity when you request updates to your account.

Mobile phone numbers can legally be ported from one provider to another when you switch your mobile phone service and can also be ported from one mobile phone to another when you upgrade or change devices. But with enough of your

personal information, scammers can have your number ported to a device they possess.

When scammers initiate a porting request, they con the victim's mobile phone company into believing the request is from the authorized account holder. If the scam is successful, the phone number will be ported to a different mobile device controlled by the scammer.

Another way to perpetrate this scam is to physically steal the victim's SIM card, a removable device in some mobile phones that carries a unique ID and stores the consumer's personal data. The scammer can then use the stolen SIM card in their own mobile device.

In either case, the scammer can gain control over the victim's private texts and calls, and may then try to reset credentials for the victim's financial data and social media accounts. If successful, the scammer can drain the victim's bank accounts and sell or ransom their social media data.

Learn more about this scam and how to protect yourself.

### **What is cell phone or SIM cloning fraud?**

Every cell phone should have a unique factory-set electronic serial number (ESN) and a mobile identification number (MIN). A cloned cell phone is one that has been reprogrammed to transmit the ESN and MIN belonging to another cell phone. Scammers can steal ESN/MIN combinations by illegally monitoring the radio wave transmissions from the cell phones of legitimate subscribers. After cloning, both the legitimate and the fraudulent cell phones have the same ESN/MIN combination and cellular providers cannot distinguish the cloned cell phone from the legitimate one. Scammers can then run up expensive toll charges and the legitimate phone user gets billed for the cloned phone's calls. Alert your service provider if you see unauthorized calls or charges on your account.

### **What is subscriber fraud?**

Subscriber fraud occurs when a scammer signs up for cellular service with fraudulently obtained customer information or false identification. Criminals can obtain your personal information and use it to set up a cell phone account in your name. It may take time to discover that subscriber fraud has occurred, and even more time to prove that you did not incur the debts. Millions of dollars are lost each year due to subscriber fraud.

If you think you have been a victim of subscriber fraud:

- Contact local law enforcement and file a police report. You can also file an identity theft report with the FTC.
- Notify your current service provider as well as the service provider for the fraudulent account.
- Place a fraud alert on any of the three major credit reporting bureaus -- Equifax, Experian, or TransUnion. The one you notify will share the alert with the other two.

Continue to monitor your credit report at each credit bureau at least once a year. Consider checking a different credit bureau report every four months for free at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).

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### **Financial Education Series:**

#### **ACC Video Focuses on "How to Ask Your Boss for A Raise!"**

The American Consumer Council has released a new video as part of its financial education series. The latest video, which targets Millennials and Gen Z'ers, is entitled, "[How to Ask Your Boss for a Raise!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjkREP03-GU)" Members can view it at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjkREP03-GU>



ACC also released three other videos as part of its series to help Millennials feel more condiment about their financial dealings. Those videos are: "[How to Have a Great Vacation...on the Cheap!](#)", "[Money Topics Every Couple Must Discuss](#)" and "[What Consumers Should Know About Time Shares Before Signing on the Dotted Line.](#)"

ACC's financial education video series is designed to help consumers, especially Millennials, better manage their finances and get access to financial services. The free series is available online at <http://www.americanconsumercouncil.org/videos.asp> and features certified financial planner and author, Kimberly Curtis, who is a popular author, speaker and the CEO of The Wealth Legacy Institute in Denver, Colorado.

The video series has been well received by Millennials (18-30 year old) and has encouraged over 6,000 Millennials to join credit unions since September 1, 2016.

The other video topics include: [Paying for the Cost of College](#); [Paying Off Debt While Building Wealth](#); [Home-Buying Mistakes to Avoid](#); [Goals to Reach by Age 30](#); [Money Mistakes Everyone Makes](#); and, "[How to Prevent Identity Theft.](#)"

Click on any of the links to watch these videos.

The American Consumer Council's president Thomas Hinton, stated "Millennials (ages 18-30) want timely information delivered through short videos to help them better manage their money and debts. This series answers many of their questions and encourages Millennials to seek out the services of credit unions that are skilled at providing a broad range of financial services at very competitive rates."

According to ACC's research, there are over 75 million Millennials in the United States and nearly 42% have not established any financial services relationship with an insured financial institution.

The American Consumer Council is currently promoting a series of financial education videos for Millennials that will be continue into 2020. ACC expects a strong response to the video series given the number of inquiries ACC has received from its 243,000+ members.

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## **ACC's Friend of the Consumer Award Recognizes Outstanding Businesses.**

Is your business consumer-friendly? Does your business deserve greater recognition for its service to consumers? If so, you should apply for the American Consumer Council's Friend of the Consumer Award. Now is the time to apply!

Throughout the year, ACC presents its "Friend of the Consumer" Awards. This prestigious award recognizes manufacturers, retailers, and other businesses that produce or sell products in the United States that meet or exceed federally-mandated standards and are touted by consumers as "consumer friendly."

Each year, ACC awards numerous "Friend of the Consumer" Awards to deserving companies and organizations because they have "demonstrated a commitment to American consumers by providing a specific product or service that fosters consumer confidence and market acceptance."



To apply for the "Friend of the Consumer" Award, complete the online application and return it to ACC with the application fee. Applicants will be notified within 5 days of receipt of their application. Thereafter, a panel of independent judges will review your application and make a formal recommendation within 20 days of receipt of your award application.

For more information, visit: <http://www.americanconsumercouncil.org/awards.asp>

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### Green C<sup>SM</sup> Certification Accepting Applications for Spring 2020 Cycle:

If your company or organization would like to increase its credibility with consumers, you should consider applying for the **Green C<sup>SM</sup> Certification**. Applications for the spring 2020 cycle are now being accepted through April 3, 2020.

It's a proven fact that consumers want to do business with companies that are eco-friendly and practice Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The process is straight-forward and all applicants are recognized by ACC and the Green USA Institute.



All applicants complete the criteria and submit their responses to ACC's Green Consumer Council for review, assessment and feedback. Program details and the **Green C<sup>SM</sup> Certification** criteria can be viewed at ACC's website located at: <http://americanconsumercouncil.org/greenc.asp>