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Similarly named LSAT preparation courses confuse students

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Students looking to improve their Law School Admission Test scores may be misled by two test preparation companies using the same name and offering similar student services.

The New York State Consumer Protection Board issued a warning Thursday that a company based in Texas operates under the same name as a California-based company. Though both offer LSAT preparation courses, the two are separate companies. The California-based TestMasters has offered courses since 1991, and the Texas company, Test Masters - with a space in its name - started offering LSAT preparation courses in 2003. The company started offering SAT preparation courses in 1991.

Nineteen students who mistakenly signed up for the Texas-based company's courses have filed complaints with the board, charging that the company did not disclose it was not the original, and what is considered the more reputable, TestMasters course. Each student paid \$1,099 for registering early - the price is regularly \$1,299 - for 20 three-hour classes. The California-based company charges \$1,250 for 20 four-hour classes. Many did not get their money back after they discovered they signed up for the wrong course and requested a refund.

All registrants also had to sign a refund waiver and

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confidentiality agreement that stated they understood other companies who may have similar names to Test Masters are not affiliated with the Texas company. One example listed was Robin Singh Educational Services, which runs the California-based TestMasters courses.

Reeha Sinha, a 2005 graduate of Rutgers University in New Jersey, was one of the students who filed a complaint with the Consumer Protection Board. She said she believed taking an LSAT preparation course would increase her score and had heard of TestMasters creator Robin Singh. Singh has received more perfect scores on the LSAT than anyone else in the world, according to the company.

But when Sinha typed "test masters" into Google, the first Web site listed was testmasters.com, the site for the Texas company. TestMaster's Web site is testmasters180.com or testmasters.net. The former URL is listed first when "testmasters" is typed as one word into the search engine. She registered for a course in New York City, thinking she was signing up with the Santa Monica-based company, which, like its rival, offers courses nationwide.

Sinha started doubting the credibility of the Texas company's course when she got in the classroom.

"It was really not what I expected it to be, but I thought they must know what they're doing; I'll give it a chance," she said. "They went over some techniques and gave us two huge books. But they just photocopied LSAT practice tests and bound them. They're all things you can buy online for \$300.

"If you asked (the instructor) a question, she didn't really know how to answer it. She threw it back to the class, so we were relying on each other for the right answer. And there's a good possibility we won't know the right answer," she said. "I don't think they had any formal training."

Calls to the Houston-based Test Masters were not returned.



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Another student announced in Sinha's second class that the course was not run by Singh's California company. Sinha and a handful of others walked out, upset and believing they were scammed.

"I spent my first two paychecks ever on this. I don't have the kind of money, especially living in New York, for fake classes and inadequate preparation," said Sinha, who hopes to still attend law school, but is taking a year off to work. Her credit card company has temporarily refunded her money while it investigates the matter, she said.

Some students, after receiving a refund, tried to enroll in a California-based TestMasters course, but were denied because they had signed the Texas company's refund waiver and confidentiality agreement, said Jon Sorensen, spokesman for the New York State Consumer Protection Board, which issued a warning about the confusion and said it does not make judgments or take sides. The company has since allowed all students to enroll in its courses.

Sharon Naim, in-house council for the California-based TestMasters, denounced the Texas company as "sorely taking advantage of students."

"They realized we have the same name and thought, 'Hey, we could really make some money off this,'" Naim said. "In 2003 they altered their Web site to look like ours and offered courses every location where we have classes."

TestMasters went to court to gain the rights to that Internet domain name, but the court ruled in favor of the Texas company, Sorensen said. Courts have also ruled that both companies have the legal right to their names.

The lesson, Sorensen said, is to research a company before buying a product or service. He recommended checking a company's reputation and reliability with the Better Business Bureau or the Federal Trade Commission, as well as a company's Web site.



The Better Business Bureau gave the Texas-based company an unsatisfactory record in its reliability report due to unanswered complaints. The bureau gave the California company a high rating in its company report.

"The company gave proper consideration to complaints presented by the bureau," the report stated.

In New York, the Texas-based Test Masters offers LSAT preparation courses in New York City, while the California-based TestMasters offers courses in New York City, Long Island and Ithaca.

The Syracuse University Pre-Law Advising Office does not recommend or endorse any one test preparation company.

"We have no research or information indicating that students who take these courses perform better than those who study on their own using one of the many LSAT prep book available at bookstores and online," said Teresa DiMagno, director of Career Exploration Services and Pre-Law Advising, in an e-mail.

DiMagno also said the office mistakenly put the Texas company's Web site address in its pre-law handbook when they meant to put the California company's Web address.



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