

## Dear Anna

The Guardian's consumer champion



### Bubbly? No, I'll have printer ink please

If millionaires toast their fortune with Dom Perignon, billionaires should toast down a magnum of printer ink. That is because it is the most expensive liquid in the world, with the finest brands costing up to £4 per millilitre.

Sam Arnold-Foster feels aggrieved. "When I went to buy a refill cartridge for my Canon machine the price had gone up to £80," he says. Actually, Arnold-Foster had found a bargain, because the recommended retail price for that type of cartridge is £99.

In fact, it's perfectly normal for an ink cartridge to cost more than the printer itself. Canon explains that its prices are perfectly reasonable – cheap even – because of the astonishing technology sheathed in those bits of plastic, but the International Standards Organisation is not convinced. It is currently reviewing recommendations drawn up by the Office of Fair Trading that manufacturers should make the cost and yield of cartridges clearer and that there should be an industry benchmark to enable consumers to make comparisons. It also wants to stop clauses that invalidate manufacturers' warranties if customers use non-branded cartridges.

The Consumers' Association, which publishes a report on the issue tomorrow, recommends that punters buy these cheaper, non-branded versions which, despite dire warnings from the big boys, are usually as good as any other.

### Beware bogus charities

Stop! Think before you discard your deceased aunt's lavender water collection. It could bring new hope to the starving. A bit of lipstick, nicely packaged body creams, old handbags and even those old frilled gingham

curtains could help those suffering from hunger, according to the flyers posted through our doors asking us to bag up our cast-offs for collection.

In the past, it was usually the well-known charities that left their branded sacks for householders to fill with old clothing and bric-a-brac; lately, though, Catherine Mitchell has noticed that many of the appeals are from unknown organisations. "Some don't even bother with an explanation of why they need the donations," she says. "Others try to present themselves like a charity, which might dupe people into thinking they are giving to a good cause."

A company called Orellana is the latest to beseech her for leftovers, including perfumes and cosmetics. "The leaflet says the company provides people in the third world with affordable clothing and with jobs, that it provides business for UK export and employment in UK factories where clothes are graded," she says. "But I can only think that it's itself Orellana is providing for."

Mitchell's suspicions may be correct. Tempting as it is to deposit your rejects on the doorstep rather than lugging them down to Oxfam, you should be wary of any unfamiliar organisation that appeals for your goodwill. They may sell your donations on for profit, thus siphoning off an important source of income for genuine charities. Should one of their flyers land on your doormat, check it for a registered charity number. If the appeal is for a charity, it should name the charity and state how much of your donation will go towards the appeal. Blurb that promises to help good causes without explaining how should be reported to the Advertising Standards Association.

"We want to raise public awareness to stop bogus collectors at source," says a spokeswoman for the Charity Commission. "It's notoriously difficult to prosecute this type of scam as contact details often lead nowhere, but if the public don't donate to them they go out of business."

As for Orellana, it appears to be based in east London, but when the local trading standards officer visits the registered address at the Guardian's behest it turns out to be a private house. Companies House has begun proceedings to strike it off its register because of non-compliance.

**Anna Tims**

Write to Shopping at  
119 Farringdon Road,  
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# Shopping

## Best place to buy online Valentine's gifts

[www.find-me-a-gift.co.uk](http://www.find-me-a-gift.co.uk)

If you want to buy a Pink Tool Box (£29.90), with pink hammer, pliers, spirit level and so on for girls who want their DIY to be an act of love. Valentine's Day is no time to be PC.

[www.figlieaves.com](http://www.figlieaves.com)

For the most cliched Valentine's gifts in the sexiest styles: Elle Macpherson Intimates from around £30, Frost French Splash Silk bra for £47.50, Rigby & Peller Opulence basque a rather pricier £130, and Love Kylie bras from £17.50 to £35

[www.venice-rentals.com](http://www.venice-rentals.com)

Now you're talking. From cosy studios to Grand Canal palazzos from £567 to £2,265 a week.

[www.crocus.co.uk](http://www.crocus.co.uk)

Roses to plant from £6.95 plus £5.95 delivery, or in bouquets from £19.95, including delivery.

**Sally Kinnes**

## Flying off the shelves at ... [datingdirect.com](http://datingdirect.com)

**What and why?** Membership varies in cost from £4.99 for three days to £59.99 for six months. The post-new year singleton who has detoxed, de-stressed, dieted and been to the gym wants to share his or her fabulous new self with someone else. That might make you sound like a commodity, but romantic success apparently depends on how you position yourself. In any event, women get more replies than men, and those who put up a picture will get four times as many responses as those who don't. It's a big pool. One fifth of the UK's 15 million-plus singletons (that's more than 3 million) are signed up here, and looking for love.

**How many sold?** Everyone thinks love is in the air at this time of year. Signings in January peak at the rate of 5,000 a day (though actual relationships are reported at a more modest 10 per day). Most of the hopefuls are in their late-20s to mid-30s (or so they say), though a couple aged 83 and 86 recently got it together.  
**SK**

