

## **Rules to Prevent Unfair or Deceptive Trade Practices in the Sale and Purchase of Horses in Florida - HB 1427 (Florida Stat. 535.16)**

Considered by some to be the Horse Capitol of the World, Florida is home to 900 horse farms and boasts more than 245,000 horse owners, service providers and employees. For years, fraudulent activity in horse trading has gripped the industry throughout Florida and the nation. Dual agency, where an agent works for the buyer and the seller to inflate the price, steroid use or other medical injections to make a horse appear better than it is in the auction ring and back-room deals have all brought indignity to the noble sport. The illicit dealings of unscrupulous horse dealers threatened Florida's horse industry which produces \$7 billion annually. In order to create sales transparency and fully protect Florida's horse industry, government-backed rules needed to be developed.

During the 2007 legislative session, state leaders unanimously supported consumer protection legislation to regulate sales and ensure integrity in Florida's horse sales industry. The legislative mandate, HB1427, directed the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DOACS) to create rules that would *"prevent unfair or deceptive trade practices."*

In order to gain momentum in the rule-making process and push for reform and regulation in horse trading, CoreMessage aggressively pitched to reporters and editorial boards across the state to bolster support of strong rules. Specific regions of Florida have citizens who are highly involved with the equestrian community such as Ocala, Tampa, Gainesville and Palm Beach. To maximize exposure to these populations, CoreMessage targeted media outlets in those regions to ensure they understood the issue and how it could potentially affect its readership.

The bill also mandated DOACS hold public hearings for Floridians to voice their opinion on what should be included in the rules. CoreMessage reached out to local Tallahassee media to cover the multiple hearings and provided news kits and background sheets for reporters. In addition, CoreMessage drafted talking points and statements for witnesses who supported full sales transparency to ensure their testimony was consistent with our overall messaging.

To initiate a grassroots movement, CoreMessage worked with the largest organization of thoroughbred owners, Thoroughbred Owners of California (TOC), in efforts to reach their 150 Florida members. CoreMessage drafted personal letters to all the TOC Florida members encouraging them to write their legislators, attend public hearings and speak out to DOACS about their personal experiences with fraudulent horse sales.

Following each hearing, CoreMessage drafted letters for our client to submit to DOACS. Every letter encouraged the department to create rules which disclosed the ownership and medical history of the horse, as well as outlaw any fraudulent sales activities and provides a bill of sale with the purchase. To create additional public interest, CoreMessage posted messages and created an e-mail account on online horse community forums to encourage participation in the rule-making process.

After three public hearings, two sets of draft rules and major collaboration with Florida's horse sellers and buyers, DOACS released draft rules which provided the sales transparency our client desired. Overall, the campaign reached over one million readers and formed public perception through media outreach and grassroots efforts to reinforce the necessity of the final rules to deter fraudulent activities in horse sales.