

INTRODUCTION

Overview

For consumers, leasing is an alternative to buying either with cash or on credit. A lease is a contract between a lessor (the property owner) and a lessee (the property user) for the use of property subject to stated terms and limitations for a specified period and at a specified payment.

The Consumer Leasing Act (15 USC 1667 *et. seq.*) (CLA) was passed in 1976 to assure that meaningful and accurate disclosure of lease terms is provided to consumers before entering into a contract. It applies to consumer leases of personal property. With this information, consumers can more easily compare one lease with another, as well as compare the cost of leasing with the cost of buying on credit or the opportunity cost of paying cash. In addition, the CLA puts limits on balloon payments sometimes due at the end of a lease, and regulates advertising.

Originally, the CLA was part of the Truth in Lending Act, and was implemented by Regulation Z. When Regulation Z was revised in 1981, Regulation M was issued, and contained those provisions that govern consumer leases.

Today a relatively small number of banks engage in consumer leasing. The trend seems to be for leasing to be carried out through specialized bank subsidiaries, vehicle finance companies, other finance companies, or directly by retailers.

Key Definitions

The definition of certain terms is necessary to understand the requirements imposed by the CLA. These terms include lease, lessor, lessee, consumer lease, open-end lease, closed-end lease, realized value, residual value, gross capitalized cost, capitalized cost reduction, and adjusted capitalized cost.

Lessee

A lessee is a natural person who enters in to or is offered a consumer lease.

Lessor

A lessor is a natural person or organization who regularly leases, offers to lease, or arranges for the lease of personal property under a consumer lease. A person who leases or offers to lease more than five times in the preceding or current calendar year meets this definition.

Consumer Lease

A consumer lease is a contract between a lessor and a lessee:

- ♦ for the use of personal property by an individual (natural person),
- ♦ to be used primarily for personal, family, or household purposes,
- ♦ for a period of more than 4 months (week-to-week and month-to-month leases do not meet this criterion, even though they may be extended beyond 4 months), and

- ♦ with a total contractual cost of no more than \$25,000.

Specifically *excluded* from coverage are leases that are:

- ♦ for business, agricultural or made to an organization or government,
- ♦ for real property,
- ♦ for personal property which are incidental to the lease of real property, subject to certain conditions, and
- ♦ for credit sales, as defined in Regulation Z. §226.2(a)(16).

A lease meeting all of these criteria is covered by the CLA and the Federal Reserve Board's Regulation M. If any one of these criteria is not met, for example, if the leased property is used primarily for business purposes or if the total contractual cost exceeds \$25,000, the CLA and Regulation M do not apply.

Consumer leases fall into one of two categories: closed end and open end. Since the information required to be disclosed to the consumer will vary with the kind of lease, it is important to note the difference between them. However, to properly understand the difference, realized value and residual value must first be defined.

Realized Value

The realized value is the price received by the lessor of the leased property at disposition, the highest offer for disposition of the leased property, or the fair market value of the leased property at the end of the lease term.

Residual Value

The residual value is the value of the leased property at the end of the lease, as estimated or assigned at consummation of the lease by the lessor.

Open-end Lease

An open-end lease is a lease in which the amount owed at the end of the lease term is based on the difference between the residual value of the leased property and its realized value. The consumer may pay all or part of the difference if the realized value is less than the residual value or he may get a refund if the realized value is greater than the residual value at scheduled termination.

Closed-end Lease

A closed-end lease is a lease other than an open-end lease. This type of lease allows the consumer to "walk away" at the end of the contract period, with no further payment obligation- unless the property has been damaged or has sustained abnormal wear and tear.

Gross Capitalized Cost

The gross capitalized cost is the amount agreed upon by the lessor and lessee as the value of the leased property, plus any items that are capitalized or amortized during the lease term. These items may include taxes, insurance, service agreements, and any outstanding prior credit or lease balance.

Capitalized Cost Reduction

This term means the total amount of any rebate, cash payment, net trade-in allowance, and noncash credit that reduces the gross capitalized cost.

Adjusted Capitalized Cost

This is the gross capitalized cost less the capitalized cost reduction and the amount used by the lessor in calculating the base periodic payment.

General Disclosure Requirements

Lessors are required by federal law to provide the consumer with leasing cost information and other disclosures in a format similar to the model disclosure forms found in Appendix A to the regulation. Certain pieces of this information must be kept together and must be segregated from other lease information. All of the information stated must be accurate, clear and conspicuous, and provided in writing in a form that the consumer may keep.¹ Disclosures are to be provided in the following circumstances.

Prior to or Due at Lease Signing

A dated disclosure must be given to the consumer before signing the lease and must contain all of the information detailed in Section 4 of the regulation.

Renegotiations and Extensions

New disclosures also must be provided when a consumer renegotiates, or extends a lease, subject to certain exceptions.

Multiple Lessors/Lessees

In the event of multiple lessors, one lessor on behalf of all the lessors may make the required disclosures. If the lease involves more than one lessee, the required disclosures should be given to any lessee who is primarily liable.

¹ Alternatively, the information may be provided electronically, where agreed to by the consumer. The provisions to provide disclosures electronically are currently not mandatory. (7/2002)

Advertising

Advertisements concerning consumer leases must also comply with certain disclosure requirements. All advertisements must be accurate. If a printed ad includes any reference to certain “trigger terms” -- the amount of any payment, statement of a capitalized cost reduction (i.e., down payment), or other payment required prior to or at lease signing or delivery, or that no such payment is required -- then the ad must also state the following:

- that the transaction is for a lease
- the total amount due prior to or at lease signing or delivery
- the number, amounts and due dates or periods of the scheduled payments
- a statement of whether or not a security deposit is required.

An advertisement for an open-end lease also must include a statement that extra charges may be imposed at the end of the lease based on the difference between the residual value and the realized value at the end of the lease term.

If lessors give a percentage rate in an advertisement, the rate cannot be more prominent than any of the other required disclosures. They must also include a statement that “this percentage may not measure the overall cost of financing this lease.” The lessor cannot use the term “annual percentage rate,” “annual lease rate,” or any equivalent term.

Some fees (license, registration, taxes, and inspection fees) may vary by state or locality. An advertisement may exclude these third-party fees from the disclosure of a periodic payment or total amount due at lease signing or delivery, provided the ad states that these have been excluded. Otherwise, an ad may include these fees in the periodic payment or total amount due, provided it states that the fees are based on a particular state or locality and indicates that the fees may vary.

Limits on Balloon Payments

In order to limit balloon payments that may be required of the consumer, certain sections of the regulation call for reasonable calculations and estimates. These provisions protect the consumer at early termination of a lease, at the end of the lease term, or in delinquency, default, or late payment status. The provisions limit the lessee’s liability at the end of the lease term and set reasonableness standards for wear and use charges, early termination charges, and penalties or fees for delinquency.

Penalties and Liability

Criminal and civil liability provisions of the Truth in Lending Act also apply to the CLA. Actions alleging failure to disclose the required information, or otherwise comply with the CLA, must be brought within one year of the termination of the lease agreement.

Record Retention

Lessors are required to maintain evidence of compliance with the requirements imposed by Regulation M, other than the advertising requirements under Section 7 of the regulation, for a period of not less than two years after the date of the disclosures are required to be made or an action is required to be taken.