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Lumos Labs, the company that produces the popular “brain-training” program Lumosity, yesterday agreed to pay a $2 million settlement to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for running deceptive advertisements. Lumos had claimed that its online games can help users perform better at work and in school and stave off cognitive deficits associated with serious diseases such as Alzheimer’s, traumatic brain injury, and post-traumatic stress.

The $2 million settlement will be used to compensate Lumosity consumers who were misled by false advertising, says Michelle Rusk, a spokesperson with FTC in Washington, D.C. The company will also be required to provide an easy way to cancel autorenewal billing for the service, which includes online and mobile app subscriptions, with payments ranging from $14.95 monthly to lifetime memberships for $299.95. Before consumers can access the games, a pop-up screen will alert them to FTC’s order and allow them to avoid future billing, Rusk says.

The action is part of a larger crackdown on companies selling products that purportedly enhance memory or provide some other cognitive benefit, Rusk says. For some time now, FTC has been “concerned about some of the claims we’re seeing out there,” particularly those from companies like Lumos that suggest their games can reduce the effects of conditions such as dementia, she says. After evaluating the literature on Lumos's products, and the broader research on the benefits of brain-training games, “our assessment was they didn’t have adequate science for the claims that they’re making,” she says.

As evidence of their product’s value, Lumos Labs cites a recent study in the journal PLOS ONE showing that participants who trained with Lumosity for 10 weeks improved on an aggregate assessment of cognition. “Neither the action nor the settlement pertains to the rigor of our research or the quality of the products—it is a reflection of marketing language that has been discontinued,” the company said in a statement. It also noted its “strong contributions” to the scientific community, including its work with the Human Cognition Project, an online, collaborative research platform, and said those efforts will continue.

FTC’s finding is consistent with two scientific consensus statements organized by researchers at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, as well as a large NIH-funded study of brain-training games, Rusk says. “Basically, we think the most that they have shown is that with enough practice you get better on these games, or on similar cognitive tasks,” she says. “There’s no evidence that training transfers to any real world setting.” FTC has penalized several other companies for similarly misleading advertisements, including Focus Education, which is geared towards children, and Carrot Neurotechnology Inc. a training program aimed at improving eyesight, and more are likely to follow, she says.

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