



# Consumer News & Views

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



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## Consumer confidence "falls further"

After falling sharply in August, consumer confidence fell even further in September, according to The Conference Board's **Consumer Confidence Index**®, which was just released Tuesday, September 28.

The index now stands at **103.9** (1985=100), down from 115.2 points in August, which was a downward revision of the originally published index, and followed a downward trend that started in July.

Last month saw the index's *lowest level since February* of this year, when the results—at the start of the new administration the availability of a COVID-19 vaccine—were just 95.2. In the months in between February and July, confidence had risen considerably before hitting the brakes.

The **Present Situation Index**—based on consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions—fell to **143.4**, from 148.9 points in August.

—See **CONFIDENCE, P4**

## Wooed on Facebook, Widow Loses \$39,000 in Romance Fraud

*She wants to be a voice, not a victim, after fake surgeon rips her off*

By Marie Rohde, AARP,  
September 28, 2021

For more than 10 years after Kate Kleinert lost her husband to cancer, she had ruled out dating, since “I still considered myself married.” The suburban Philadelphia woman had a change of heart in August 2020, though, when a handsome “surgeon” asked to be her Facebook friend. Soon he became romantic and began professing his love. “Since the time I fell in love with you, I can’t stop thinking about you,” he told her. “I can only see my future with you. I will never stop loving you. I pray that I will always wake up next to you and hold you in my arms forever.”

### Lost \$39,000

But there was no love and no forever. Kleinert, who is in her late 60s, ended up losing \$39,000 to the pseudo suitor. He took what was left of her late husband’s life insurance and her savings, Social Security and pension benefits. For a time, she said, she lived off credit cards. Sadly, her costly nightmare is not uncommon. Measured in dollars lost, romance scams led the top frauds impacting adults 60 and older in 2020, with \$139 million in losses to these older adults, the



Federal Trade Commission said.

### FBI warning

Con artists prowl most dating and social media sites, the FBI warns, noting: If you suspect an online relationship is a scam, stop all contact immediately.

When using dating sites and apps, you should not send money to someone you have only talked to online or by phone.

Today Kleinert wants to be a voice, not a victim. She talked about her ordeal on AARP’s *The Perfect Scam* podcast in two episodes (listen to [part 1](#) and [part 2](#)).

Last week, she detailed her ordeal before a U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging hearing on fraud.

### Surgeon in faraway land

Kleinert was married for 26

years. Kleinert quit her secretarial job to care for her husband during the last two years of his life.

Her no-dating approach to widowhood fell by the wayside after her new Facebook friend, “Tony,” entered her life. He said he was a Norwegian surgeon working for the United Nations in Iraq, had two children and shared Kleinert’s interest in dogs and gardening.

At his suggestion, they started communicating on Google Hangouts, and talking and texting many times a day. Tony said his kids were in an English boarding school and asked if they could call her “Mom.” Never having had children, she said that was the “Achilles heel” that made her vulnerable.

—See **BAD ROMANCE, P3**

## ***Bad Romance, cont'***

Later his “daughter” texted Kleinert to ask for funds to buy feminine products. Kleinert sent her a gift card, unwittingly opening the floodgates.

“From there, there was always some kind of an emergency or some urgent need for money,” she told the committee.

### **A red flag: never meeting in real life**

Though the two never met in person, Tony talked about marriage, said he purchased a ring and asked her to look for a house for them near where she lived. All the while, he kept prodding her for gift cards — and promising he’d repay her. He even provided her with a password for a purported bank account with a \$2 million balance.

The two were to meet for the first time last December after he flew to Philadelphia International Airport. She had had her hair and nails done and was waiting at home in her best dress for his call. A bottle of wine was chilling. Hours passed, without a word from him.

### **Tony lands “in jail”**

A day later, Kleinert got a call from a man who claimed to be a lawyer and said Tony had been arrested at the airport because someone planted drugs in his luggage. Tony was said to be confined to a Philadelphia jail and in

need of \$20,000 for bail — money she did not have.

Later, Tony called and messaged to urge her to get the money somehow, even if it meant lying to her family. She refused. But her reservations melted away when he complained about the “awful” food in jail and asked for small sums, which she sent. Then Tony’s story got even crazier. He called in January saying he was in Jordan; he said he’d been released so he could raise the bail money. She said that wasn’t the way it worked: You don’t get out of custody to raise bail.

Finally, she saw the romance for what it was — phonier than a \$3 bill.

### **Picking up the pieces**

Now employed again, Kleinert still feels the sting of her loss. “I can’t get things repaired at the house,” she told senators. “I’ve had no air conditioning this summer, my refrigerator is off and my stove is off.”

Some in law enforcement gave her the cold shoulder, she said, remembering being told: “Why did you call us? There’s no crime here. You gave this money to him willingly.”

Though Tony was fake, her heartbreak is real. What hurts most was “losing his love and losing the family I thought I was going to have and what my new future was going to be,” she said. “That is much harder to deal with than losing the money.”

She urged potential victims to trust their instincts, saying, “If your gut is telling you there’s something wrong here, listen to it.”

Sadder and wiser, Kleinert has learned her lesson and remarks: “God help the man who even asks me for a quarter.”

*Katherine Skiba covers scams and fraud for AARP. AARP’s Fraud Watch Network can help you spot and avoid scams. Sign up for free Watchdog Alerts, review our scam-tracking map, or call our toll-free fraud helpline at 877-908-3360 if you or a loved one suspect you’ve been a victim.*



Check out other details about dating-site fraud [here](#).

Read about the top scams of 2020 that hit those 60 and older [here](#).

Watch the hearing of the Senate Special Committee on Aging as they discuss "[Frauds, Scams and COVID-19: How Con Artists Have Targeted Older Americans During the Pandemic.](#)" ▲

## Don't let your dress code derail your brand

By Mark Arnold, On The Mark Strategies, September 17

*"The next time you are heading out the door, pause at the mirror and make sure that what you see reflects your purpose and value." – Amy Spiegel*

Nothing stirs up a good fight in [the office] like a discussion regarding the dress code. If you want to kill a meeting or talk endlessly about a topic, then all you have to say is "dress code."

But as we teach our clients: branding touches everything. Including your dress code. How your employees answer the phone matters. How your restrooms smell matters. And yes, how your employees dress matters as well.

Your dress code can absolutely derail your brand. Talk to any H.R. professional or a manager and more than likely they've had to have a conversation (or two or twenty) with an employee who pushes the envelope regarding what to wear to work. Think jeans, flip flops and all sorts of other options!

The best way to deal with the dress code? Tie it back to your brand.

Here are some dress code tips when it comes to your brand:

**Consider your niches**—Are your target consumers more like factory workers or office workers? One principle to keep in mind is that your dress code should mirror your members/customers. A blue



collar worker will more than likely feel uncomfortable (or even intimidated) talking about their financial situation with someone in a suit.

When one of our clients went through a rebranding process recently, they actually went "down" in their dress code.

Prior to their brand refresh, employees dressed in business attire. However, one of their main targets were rural farmers and workers who often came to the branch in faded and worn-out jeans. Thus, they went not just to business casual but nice jeans and logo wear. After the change many of their members commented about how much more relatable the credit union employees were.

**Consider your employees**—Your employees are your brand ambassadors. So it's important to seek their input regarding the dress code. Of course, you must balance their suggestions with your organization's sense of professionalism.

There is a huge difference between business casual and Home Depot casual!

Most employees will probably want to wear jeans.

If you don't feel comfortable with that approach, can you offer one jeans day or tie wearing jeans to some type of charity? As you are considering your employees, examine if there is a different dress code between executives and the rest of the financial institution. For example, at some organizations, the "C-Suite" wears suits while front-line staff are more casual. That actually can send the wrong message to staff and create a gap between management and everyone else.

**Consider your brand message**—What is your vision, what are your core values and what is your tagline? If you had to communicate those key elements with what you wear, how would you do that? Some financial institutions are now adopting logo wear as the standard requirement for all employees all the time.

—See **DRESS CODE, P6**



## Confidence, cont'

And the **Expectations Index**—based on consumers' short-term outlook for income, business, and labor market conditions—fell to **86.6** from 92.8 last month, which was adjusted down almost 10 points in the days after polling results were initially shared.

“Consumer confidence dropped in September as the spread of the Delta variant continued to dampen optimism,” said Lynn Franco, Senior Director of Economic Indicators at The Conference Board, in a press release.

“Concerns about the state of the economy and short-term growth prospects deepened, while spending intentions for homes, autos, and major appliances all retreated again. Short-term inflation concerns eased somewhat, but remain elevated. Consumer confidence is still high by historical levels—enough to support further growth in the near-term—but the Index has now fallen 19.6 points from the recent peak of 128.9 reached in June. These back-to-back declines suggest

consumers have grown more cautious and are likely to curtail spending going forward.”

Consumers' optimism about the **short-term business conditions outlook** eroded further in September:

- 19.3% of consumers said business conditions are “good,” down from 20.2%.
- 25.4% of consumers said business conditions are “bad,” up from 24.1%.
- Consumers' assessment of the labor market was mixed.
- 55.9% of consumers said jobs are “plentiful,” up from 55.6%.
- Conversely, 13.4% of consumers said jobs are “hard to get,” up from 11.2%.

The monthly Consumer Confidence Survey®, based on an online sample, is conducted for The Conference Board by Toluna, a technology company that delivers real-time consumer insights and market research through its innovative technology, expertise, and panel of over 36 million consumers. The cutoff date for the preliminary results was September 28.

Additional metrics are available here.

### About The Conference Board

The Conference Board is the member-driven think tank that delivers trusted insights for what's ahead. Founded in 1916, they are a non-partisan, not-for-profit entity holding 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the United States.

The Conference Board publishes the Consumer Confidence Index® at 10 a.m. ET on the last Tuesday of every month. Subscription information and the technical notes to this series are available on The Conference Board [website](#).

To learn more or become a member, visit [conference-board.org/us](https://www.conference-board.org/us).

The next Consumer Confidence Survey report is due Tuesday, October 26, at 10 a.m. (ET). ▲



## Dress Code, cont'

There are pros and cons with this approach. The pro is that the “uniform” approach means everyone is always “on brand”; the con is that it takes away some individuality (think robots and everyone looks the same).

If you do go with logo wear as a dress code requirement, then also be prepared for the added expense of providing attire for your employees.

There is no right or wrong way to do your dress code. You can take an all business approach with coats, ties and dresses. You can take a business casual approach with khakis, slacks and dress shirts. You can even take a casual approach with jeans.

So what should your dress code be? It should match your brand. ▲



## Make a monthly budget that works for your family

*By Members Plus  
Credit Union, August 2021*

Americans today exist in precarious financial situations. CNBC Money reports that 49% of Americans live paycheck-to-paycheck, meaning they spend every dime of their monthly income with little left for saving. In fact, Americans save so little that 61% of us have not saved enough in an emergency fund to cover at least six months of necessary expenses. Learning how to make a monthly budget and taking advantage of these five budgeting tools will help you avoid financial stress and save for emergencies.

**Monthly Budget Using Spreadsheets** – Although there are many more automated budgeting tools available today than there were even just a handful of years ago, the old-fashioned spreadsheet still works wonders. It gives you complete control of tracking expenses and setting spending limits and savings goals. Both Microsoft Excel and Google Doc monthly budget templates are a good place to start.

**Use Calendar Alerts to Stay on Your Monthly Budget** – With everything daily life brings work, meetings, soccer practices, social events, and packing lunches, remembering to pay all the bills can sometimes seem impossible. Make sure you never waste another cent on a late fee by asking an electronic calendar (this one from Google works well) to remind you. Set an alarm for your bills by scheduling alerts for payments you make regularly.

**Bill Pay** – Whether you are short on stamps or do not like writing checks, is a great asset to your budget. Make sure you never miss a payment again by using bill pay through our online banking website to stick to your monthly budget. Through bill pay you can schedule and authorize your monthly payments to be sent automatically. For bills which might change month to month, simply enter the amount you wish to pay and authorize the transaction.

**MPCU offers Money Management™** – an easy to use financial management tool that keeps all your account information, even accounts

at other financial institutions, at your fingertips, allowing you to track spending, create budgets, see your spending and saving habits, and more. Read more about this monthly budgeting tool here.

Even if you are savvy to the scam, don't attempt to out scam the scammer. In many cases, even if you deposit the check and do not send funds back, it's likely that the check will bounce, causing you a fee and a negative mark on your record.

Always do your research and try to contact the companies name being used (do not use any numbers listed on the possible scam letter). The company will be able to tell you if the payment is legitimate, and if it isn't, they will be made aware their name is being used to steal from their customers.

If the check you have received is legitimate, the good news is that many credit unions offer mobile deposits, making that rare check you receive easy and convenient to post into your account.

**Online Software and Apps** – With a simple search, you can find numerous budgeting tools on the internet. Some come with a high price tag, but there are several free options which provide a more than adequate selection of tools and functions such as integrating your existing account information, scheduling monthly payments, and automatically tracking expenses.

**Additional Tools and Resources** – Whether you are just learning how to make a monthly budget or already have a solid household budget established, making use of budgeting tools will help you keep yourself accountable and meet your goals. In addition to online tools for budgeting, a debt consolidation loan can help you get out of debt more quickly while saving money on higher rates.

A consolidation loan puts all of your existing high interest debt into one loan with a lower rate. Consolidation loans also simplifies making payments by combining all into a single, affordable monthly amount. Taking advantage of budgeting tools helps you get your spending on track, while freeing yourself from debt. ▲



## ***GIVE BACK TO ACC***

### ***American Airlines Consumer Flight Benefits***

Now you can help ACC accrue travel miles for the organization, which they can eventually use when staff must travel to area affiliates or voting members need to attend annual meetings. All you need to do is include ACC's "Business ExtrAA" number: **878585** whenever you travel with American Airlines and or any of their One World airline, hotel and rental car partners.

*While this program allows you to contribute air miles to ACC, please note that you will not lose any of your own frequent flyer miles. It's a WIN WIN TO PARTICIPATE!*

There are a few different ways you can accomplish making sure our Business ExtrAA number gets on your travel documents:

**Phone:** Call American Airlines at 1-800-433-1790 and ask the agent to add the ACC Business ExtrAA account number (878585) to each eligible ticket.

**Online:** While logged into your American Airlines account on [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com), input ACC's Business ExtrAA account number (878585) in the spot on the Passenger Details page during your booking process.

**Ticket Counter:** Just provide ACC's Business ExtrAA account number (878676) to the AA agent at the ticket counter when purchasing your ticket or even when checking in.

Thank you for supporting ACC with these consumer flight discount benefits. ▲



### ***Amazon SMILE Program Benefits***



As an eligible nonprofit, ACC recently registered with Amazon's SMILE program, which donates 0.5% of the price of eligible purchases to the charities selected by Amazon customers.

There are no fees or extra costs involved.

When customers like you go to Amazon on any given day to shop, you can select from over a million registered charities, but we hope you will pick ours as your charity of choice. As a result, we want to make it even easier for you, by providing the link you need to donate to us.

Here is the link:  
<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/33-0718596>.

Since starting the program in 2013, Amazon's Foundation has seen donations of \$266 million through the SMILE program. These donations from Amazon are at *no cost* to you, so please consider ACC the next time you go shopping. online.

To learn more, visit [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com). ▲

# Welcome our credit union partner!

As a nonprofit consumer education organization, ACC has developed partnerships with credit unions across the country. These partnerships allow ACC members eligibility with our credit unions. If approved, our members gain access to a member-owned financial institution, with products and services designed to make banking more affordable, simple and convenient, and to offer additional resources that can help our members identify and achieve their financial dreams.



**BLUE**  
**Federal Credit Union**  
**2401 E. Pershing Blvd.**  
**Cheyenne, WY 82001**  
**(800) 368-9328**  
**bluefcu.org**



**Go Blue.** While that is a common sports-related rally, it is also very appropriate for a particular financial institution, one that makes you want to stand up and cheer: Blue Federal Credit Union, headquartered in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Credit Unions have always been member based, but some go well above and beyond, like Blue FCU.

Started by a team of civilian DoD personnel at F. E. Warren Air Force Base in 1951, Warren Federal Credit Union’s founders knew the power of collaboration for a common goal. For the next 65 years, they established roots and the trust of the local community, expanding to five branches and winning numerous awards along the way.

In 2015, Warren FCU looked south to neighboring Colorado with eyes for expansion and eventually acquired Community Financial Credit Union, chartered half a century before to serve the needs of employees at Rocky Flats Environmental Technology, which had previously merged with Boulder Municipal Employees Credit Union.

The decision was easy, since both credit unions were strong, but faced even stronger competition in their regions and the power of

collaboration with a common goal emerged once again.

It was at this time the institution rebranded to Blue Federal Credit Union – a mixture of its roots with Air Force blue, the blue and open skies and waters of Colorado and its Rocky Mountain Range, and giving a message to their members that the sky was truly the limit.

It’s important to note that two women have been the driving force behind this credit union since the mid-2000’s: CEO and President Stephanie Teubner since 2005; and Kim Alexander, who first joined in 2006 as CFO, is now Blue’s Chief Strategy and Growth Officer.

In 2019, they must have hired a genius of a Chief Marketing Officer, because their branding is one of the best in the business; their website alone—with its smooth, dream-like navigation and subtle/not-so-subtle affirmations—makes you want to “belong” and become a member of this thriving culture of positivity and growth.

Even their recruiting message is welcoming: “Banking with Blue certainly has its benefits, but so does working here. If you’re passionate about helping others build happy, balanced

—See **CREDIT UNION, P9**

### Credit Union, cont'

lives—including yourself—then we invite you to consider a career at Blue.” *Who could turn that down?!*

Today, Blue Federal Credit Union boasts 70 years in business; 18 physical locations (8 in Wyoming, 11 in Colorado) with their new world headquarters in their original community of Cheyenne; 100,000 members around the world; and over \$1.4 billion in assets.

With “Do Good” as their motto, and the Blue Foundation as their philanthropic outlet, Blue continues its mission to enhance all the communities it lives in, with a focus on supporting local organizations and financial literacy, and sponsor youth sport teams and tournaments. "Doing good is the fabric of who we are!" states their website.

Still deeply involved with Warren AFB and veterans, both staff and members eagerly volunteer each year with base activities, and they are currently involved with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for local veterans.

The foundation matches every dollar donated up to 80% and just last year, they gave \$235,000 back to their communities. Last month they held their 20th annual golf tournament and wanting to do something to celebrate the milestone, they expanded to two separate weekends of golf. No final tally was available at press time, but we are sure they generated much more than the \$31,000 raised in 2020!

Blue says they have a commitment to building lifelong partnerships with every one of their members. One of their turn phrases is "You're ready, let's blue it!"

They also have a huge social media presence, with accounts for members to follow on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, and they even a YouTube channel.



To learn more about Blue Federal Credit Union, check out their engaging website at [bluefcu.org](http://bluefcu.org). To find out how to volunteer or become a member of their foundation, visit [bluefoundation.blue](http://bluefoundation.blue). And finally, to see their 2020 annual report, visit [here](#).



**We are proud to share ACC's consumer council affiliates in the states of Colorado & Wyoming.**

**Colorado Consumer Council**  
1600 Broadway, Suite 1600  
Denver, CO 80202

**Denver Consumer Council**  
1600 Broadway, Suite 1600  
Denver, CO 80202

**Boulder Consumer Council**  
4770 Baseline Road, Suite 200  
Boulder, CO 80303

**Colorado Springs Consumer Council**  
102 S. Tejon Street, Suite 1100  
Colorado Springs, CO 80903

**Wyoming Consumer Council**  
109 E. 17th Street, Suite 5633  
Cheyenne, WY 82001

**Cheyenne WY Consumer Council**  
109 E. 17th Street, Suite 5633  
Cheyenne, WY 82001

**Laramie (WY) Consumer Council**  
2020 Grand Avenue, Suite A  
Laramie, WY 82072



# ACC Wrap Up

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



## Green C Certification

If your company or organization would like to increase its credibility with consumers, you should consider applying for ACC's **"Green C" Certification**.

Applications for the **Winter** cycle are now being accepted through **Dec 15**.

It's a proven fact that consumers prefer to do business with companies that are eco-friendly, implement green initiatives and that practice Corporate Social Responsibility. The process is straight-forward and all applicants are recognized by the ACC and the Green USA Institute.

All applicants should review the criteria, then complete and submit their applications to ACC's Green Consumer Council for review, assessment and feedback. Program details and the Green C Certification criteria can be viewed online at [bit.ly/3d45Con](http://bit.ly/3d45Con).

For more information, call 1-800-544-0414 or visit ACC's website [here](#). ▲

## Friend of the Consumer

Is your business consumer-friendly?

Does your business deserve greater recognition for its service to consumers?

If so, you should apply for the American Consumer Council's Friend of the Consumer Award.



Each year, ACC awards numerous "Friend of the Consumer" awards to deserving manufacturers, retailers, and other businesses that produce or sell products in the United States, and which meet or exceed federally-mandated standards, and have "demonstrated a commitment to American consumers by providing products or services that foster consumer confidence and market acceptance."

To apply, complete the online application found here [bit.ly/3w6jE1N](http://bit.ly/3w6jE1N) and return it to ACC with the application fee.

Applicants will be notified within five days of receipt of their application. Thereafter, a panel of independent judges will review your application and make a formal recommendation within 20 days of your submission. ▲



## Financial Education

ACC is honored to have a partnership with Kim Curtis – author, speaker, and CEO of The Wealth Legacy Institute in Denver, Colorado – who produces, writes and hosts our financial education video series.

This free video series is designed to help consumers, including Millennials and Gen Y individuals, to better manage their finances, feel more confident about their financial dealings, and get access to financial services.

Video topics include, "How to Have a Great Vacation on the Cheap," "Paying the Cost of College," "Money Topics Every Couple Must Discuss," "Home-Buying Mistakes to Avoid," "Goals to Reach by Age 30," and others with advice about timeshares, paying off debt, identify theft, and more.

To peruse and view Kim's many resourceful videos, visit [bit.ly/3snW661](http://bit.ly/3snW661). ▲

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