



Aquarium Professionals Group

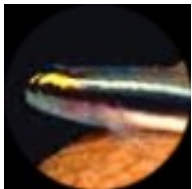
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Saltwater Fish Guarantees - What's Fair?



There's no question that the issue of fish and aquarium livestock guarantees is a sore point with hobbyists and aquarium stores alike. Should a store guarantee their fish? If so, for how long?

When this writer worked in aquarium retail several years ago, the store that employed me did not guarantee freshwater or saltwater livestock. Their guarantee was simply that all fish were healthy, quarantined, and eating commercial fish food before being sold. To the owners of that store, that was sufficient. They felt they had done their part for the fish and the rest should be up to the hobbyist. If the fish died, the customer must have done something wrong.

To their credit, they sold no fish unless it ate frozen or flake food (in front of the customer), with the exception of carnivores who would only eat live food (Seahorses, Ribbon Eels, etc.). They also insisted that their salespeople ask lots of questions of every prospective fish buyer about their aquariums, and they'd refuse to sell a fish if there was even a remote chance the specimen would be incompatible or grow too large for a tank. They encouraged their customers to read books and learn more about their hobby. There were always situations, however, which required some soul-searching or investigation before saying no to replacing a fish.

The following examples are taken from actual events at the large aquarium store I worked in for several years. Some seem obvious at first glance. For example, a customer returned an hour after leaving the store with a fish that died in the bag on its way home, and the bag had clearly never been opened. Clear cut? The fish had a heart attack? No! Upon handling the bag, it was discovered that the water was freezing cold! The customer had put the fish in the trunk of their car on a winter day when the temperature outside was below freezing!

Not to say that a fish couldn't have a heart attack on the way home, but it could also be possible that the heart attack was caused by a customer's three-year old child holding the bag of fish up and tapping on it for the half hour ride home from the aquarium store (we've seen that one too!). Where does the responsibility for educating a customer end and the customer's responsibility begin? What do you say when the customer says: "But you didn't tell me I shouldn't put the fish in my car trunk in cold weather!" or "We had no idea that tapping on the bag for a half hour would kill the fish. You should have told us!" How far does a store need to go to educate a customer and what situations should be left up to plain old fashioned common sense?

Some cases are simply a matter of the aquarium store owners being honest with themselves. A customer comes in with a marine fish they bought the day before which is literally covered with saltwater "Ich" (*Cryptocaryon irritans*). Now folks, for those of you that don't already know, there is no way a fish can develop a bad case of parasites overnight! A staff member obviously made a mistake. The store did replace the fish, and made sure there were no problems in their display system with any other fish. We have, however, heard of similar cases in other stores where the store still insisted the customer had done something wrong and refused to replace the fish.

Some situations require careful analysis, and in some cases, no solution may be found. Here's an example: A customer walked in with a (very expensive) dead fish they purchased the day before that had appeared healthy and had been living in the store's tanks for weeks. The customer and their aquarium was well-known to the store staff. We knew the customer was very knowledgeable and was good about taking care of their tank. Every water test imaginable was performed. Tons of questions were asked, and no answer could be found. It was a mystery! The store owners decided to "split" the cost with the customer and offered 50% of the fish selling price in credit. The customer was still unhappy with this decision.

The bottom line is that hobbyists don't like losing money when a fish dies immediately after they bought it and aquarium stores don't like losing money by replacing fish they believed was healthy at the time of sale.