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Oprah sues Alberta entrepreneur

By CBC News

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An Alberta internet entrepreneur's company is named in a lawsuit launched by Oprah Winfrey's production company for allegedly using the entertainer's image and endorsements to sell weight-loss products online.

JDW Media, a company run by Sherwood Park's Jesse Willms, is one of 40 named in the lawsuit filed in August by Harpo Productions.

The lawsuit also alleges he used the endorsements and image of Dr. Mehmet Oz to market his products. Oz is a former Oprah contributor who now has his own television show, which is co-produced by Harpo Productions.

In a statement of defence filed in October, Willms denied all the allegations contained in the lawsuit. None of the allegations have been proven in court.

Attempts by CBC News to contact Willms by phone, at his office and his home were not successful.

The Better Business Bureau has received about 1,000 complaints from all over North America about Willms's business practices, and has given the company an "F" rating, which means there are questions about the company's reliability.

A common complaint is that consumers who thought they had signed up for a free trial suddenly found themselves billed for monthly charges, according to Rayn Fraess from the BBB's Edmonton office

"People didn't realize they're into a ? negative-option subscription where if they don't cancel, then they automatically get renewing charges at a much greater rate than they expected," Fraess said.

"And a few [of the complaints] have to do with the fact that they're not receiving the product at all that they're being charged for."

Willms has faced other legal troubles.

A federal lawsuit launched in Utah in November by two companies named dazzlesmile llc and Optimal Health Science LLC accuses Willms and his companies of deceptive marketing, trademark and tradename infringement and counterfeiting. Other companies are also named in the suite.

Neither Willms nor any of his companies have yet to file a response to that complaint.

Willms has also reached three out-of-court settlements, including one with Microsoft Corp. over charges of software piracy and violation of trademark laws.