

Communicating with Consumers Presents Real Challenge

Jane P. Martin

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Abstract

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JANE P. MARTIN

CONSUMERS ARE BIG BUSINESS. The average American family has about half its income after taxes to spend on consumer goods and services beyond food, shelter, and clothing.

Being a consumer isn't easy. His problems are Paul Bunyan sized: live within an income, determine best buys, understand the market place, understand credit, evaluate consumer information.

- U.S. consumers spend more than \$1 billion each day.
- Eighty per cent of families use consumer credit. Main users of installment credit are young couples with children whose income is in the \$4,000 to \$7,000 bracket.
- Personal bankruptcies jumped 350 per cent in the last 10 years.
- The market is geared to the young consumer. Twelve million teens will spend an estimated \$20 billion this year.
- Growing numbers of senior citizens face special consumer problems, such as lowered incomes, lack of transportation to market, and rising medical costs. They offer a \$45 million market to today's businessmen.

Consumers Need Information

These show a definite need for consumer education, according to the University of Missouri's Dr. Gordon Bivens in a *Journal of Home Economics* report. Shoppers need to know how to shop, how to make comparisons, and whether to include convenience foods in shopping.

In "People and a Spirit," the joint extension study committee

agrees. It recommends first to help individuals and families make good decisions—to stress consumer competence. Priority clientele: the disadvantaged and young marrieds.

To compound the problem, former President Lyndon Johnson's Committee on Consumer Interest noted lack of communication between industry and the consumer. It said about consumers:

1. They are unable to judge quality, chiefly because of rapidly changing products and the increasing variety of products and services. More than 2,000 new food products alone are added to the market each year.

2. They lack information about how to complain if a product or service is unsatisfactory.

3. They are concerned about quality deterioration.

4. They lack knowledge about how industry determines prices, about what consumer services are provided to them, and about how to buy.

Some Help From Industry

Industry cares and is responding. For example, the Celanese fibers marketing company reported on the committee's list of consumer concerns in their company newsletter. Celanese has taken action through special care labels on garments. They also are setting up, with the help of other groups, local organizations to help consumer's interests be expressed effectively.

Increased concern for the needs of the consumer on the part of government and business should result in increased demand for home economics in education, business, and the extension service, says the company.

In a conference of National Home Appliance Manufacturers, Maytag's Max Fuller said manufacturers have the responsibility for providing the consumer with accurate and adequate point-of-sale information. But, he said, educators must help the consumer get the most for his money and show him how to buy.

"You are the objective third party," he said.

So all these knowledgeable educators, recognized needs, books and bulletins, and new legislation to protect the consumer are gathered together. So—.

Dr. Helen Canoyer, first chairman of the Consumer Advisory Council created by President Kennedy in 1962, said information

was a step. She called for new and more effective methods of dissemination.

Those are the shoulders of information people onto which the load is placed.

A special research study in El Paso, Texas, took a good look at extending cooperative extension education to Mexican-American families. Researchers were trying to find the most effective method for reaching Latin families with extension educational programs. They found that mass media was most effective in reaching more consumers.

One area in the study used mass media only. There television was the most informative media; newspaper and radio were next.

In the other area, programs worked directly with the public. Here newsletters were most informative with television second and group meetings or classes third.

Americans live in a consumer society. They need to be well-informed and capable of managing and spending the family income.

It's a challenge. Can they do it without us?