

The Consumer Movement ?

ACHIEVEMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

by

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A well known marketing author, Theodore Levitt, in defining his subject, once compared it to politics and sex. All three are squishy topics which do not easily lend themselves to precise definitions, easy analysis or accurate predictions. A similar dilemma confronts the writer on the subject of the consumer movement. Definitions on what is meant by "consumerism" are at least as numerous as the number of human physical contortions outlined in *The Perfumed Garden*. However, one of the most common understandings of the consumer movement is in reference to the widening range of activities of government, consumer organizations and even business designed to protect individuals from practices which are a derogation of his rights. This however, is a negative perspective and does not lay sufficient emphasis on the more positive aspects of generally improving the welfare of consumers, an objective shared by consumer co-operatives. It is the purpose of this brief piece to outline what might be regarded as the consumer movement's overall aims, to review the factors which

will affect its future evolution and to suggest some possible developments in the movement in response to the changing environment.

It is ironic that at the time when the subject of marketing, its practice and espousment, were making most impact in western countries the consumer movement also was experiencing a rejuvenation in most countries and a birth in others. The irony arises from the fact that the basic philosophy underlying what is referred to as the "marketing concept" is one of satisfying consumer needs. The fact that the last two decades have witnessed the growth of a virulent consumer movement indicates that the marketing concept as a business philosophy was less pervasive than its promoters would have wished and that consumers, far from being satisfied, were actually experiencing not just less satisfaction than desired from their purchasing activities but a limitation and loss of control over their consuming behaviour which greatly restricted their potential for need satisfaction. It was thus necessary for consumer movements to actively seek the goals which business firms could have been expected to pursue had they taken the principles of marketing more seriously. In a real sense therefore it can be said that there is an identity of interest between the goals of marketing and those of the consumer movement. Indeed opinion surveys of various groups including business representatives point to a similarity of views on many consumer issues. The commonality of interest is perhaps best illustrated in businesses which are in direct contact with consumers such as supermarkets.

In this sector the more farsighted managements have seen the consumer movement as an opportunity rather than a constraint or a problem. Opportunities for better customer service which have been identified and publicised by consumer groups have been acted upon by the more alert business organizations.

Consumerism and Consumer Co-operatives

The consumer movement has over the years sought to have a variety of rights accepted either in practice or in legislation for the general protection of the public. Traditionally these rights have included:

1. The right to safety
This right is meant to ensure protection against the sale of goods which may be hazardous to health or life.
2. The right to choose
This is meant to assure access to a variety of products at competitive prices.
3. The right to be informed
This included protection against fraudulent, deceitful or grossly misleading information, advertising, labelling or other practices and to be given the facts to make an informed choice.
4. The right to influence
The consumer movement has sought to ensure that consumer interests will receive full and sympathetic consideration in the

formulation of government policy and fair and expeditious treatment in its administration.

In practice implementing these rights has led to legislation or prior action by some businesses to provide for such developments as stating the effective interest rates for loans, unit pricing, open dating, informative labeling including nutritional and ingredient listing, and advertising codes.

A comparison of these rights with the objectives of consumer Co-operatives reveals a similarity of elements covered but a contrast in emphasis. An example is a statement of the purposes of the Swedish consumer Co-operative movement.* The overall purpose of consumer societies is stated to be "to promote the members economy". To achieve this societies shall

- in the most effective way procure and supply goods and services suited to satisfy members' requirements.
- supply such information as assists the consumers in organising their economy, special importance to be attached to information regarding prices, character and use of goods and services.
- spread information among the members and the public about conditions relating to social and business economies which are important to households.

* Taken from an information booklet of the Swedish Co-operative Union and Wholesale Society, KF

- . protect consumers' interests in social development.

It can be seen from these statements that the consumer societies have sought positively to practice what the consumer movement has endeavoured to secure from business through legislation or sanction.

The Future Role of the Consumer Movement

Looking back at the development of the consumer movement one can see a number of factors which fostered its growth in recent years. On one side was the failure of business to practice the concept of marketing which focusses on consumer needs and their satisfaction. However, other changes were taking place in western society in particular, which made development of the consumer movement almost inevitable, especially in countries where the consumer co-operative movement was not established. These changes were basically sociological in nature but were facilitated and given impetus by technological developments also. They included factors like ecological awareness, a dislike of authoritarian structures, a discovery of freedom of speech, breaking of the boundaries of free speech which was facilitated by technological advances in the media opening up alternative forums for expression, a distaste for social rigidity, the birth of liberation movements and the application of

this concept to areas other than nationalism or racism, the focus on the present rather than the past or future, the desire for instant gratification and in general a change in life styles which affected consumption patterns and levels very significantly and was made possible by the phenomenon of mass middle class affluence.

The consumer movement of recent years has been a movement of protest and of defence against the onslaughts of an aggressive and sometimes deceptive marketplace. It has in many countries a record of remarkable achievement in providing the impetus for consumer legislation and a business response which seized on opportunities which it presented for progressive marketing practice. Having achieved the objective of a reasonable legislative framework of consumer protection the future role of the movement may see a shift in emphasis. In addition to the improved legal framework the movement will be influenced and experience new demands from other elements in the environment which are continually changing. These are

- . sociological or cultural changes
- . changes in education levels
- . technological changes
- . economic changes

Irrespective of inflation levels it is likely that in the future we will see a more affluent more educated population in most western countries with more leisure time to spend and a continuously

growing choice of activities, products and services from which to choose. The greatest need in this situation may not be for consumer protection and protest as we found in the 60's and 70's but rather more assistance in making choices and evaluating product suitability for individual needs. The technological advances and their widespread dispersion during the last decade in particular have left an increasingly bewildered consumer in their wake. This is particularly true in product categories such as consumer durables. For example, the range of choice and possible combinations in assembling an average priced stereo system for the home is beyond the comprehension of all but the dedicated enthusiast. Yet average consumers wish to make rational decisions in purchasing such a currently familiar item. The real need of consumers in future is likely to lie in objective assessment of products in relation to individual requirements. Compared to a less protective era for the consumer, products are likely to be relatively safe and to suffer less from quality defects within given quality/price ranges. The difficulty for the consumer lies in matching product to need. This is where the consumer movement is likely to play an increasingly important role. Such a role implies that the movement should be putting increasing effort into product evaluation and assessment, information dissemination and purchase advisory services. The mission of the movement would in this scenario be to emphasize assistance to consumers in making informed purchasing decisions.

The development envisaged above does not deny the continued need for a consumer watchdog role despite the existence of effective legislation in many countries. Such a role will continue to be necessary, not necessarily because of deliberate malpractice on the part of business but rather because inefficiency, carelessness, poor management and simple human error can never be eliminated completely in producing and marketing.