

THE VOICE OF THE CONSUMER

Henry C. Fleisher

Public Relations Consultant for Consumers Union

I'm not sure I know why I'm here. I am not a professional "consumer". My principal experience as a consumer is in my role as head of a household...a role which both my wife and my children frequently and rather effectively dispute. In my household my wife very early took over the position of purchasing agent, on the accurate basis that I was aware neither of quality nor style nor price. A year ago I bought a secondhand 1952 Chevrolet on the spur of the moment, and in doing so ignored all the 28 tests that Consumers Union recommends to purchasers of used cars. CU was right; I was wrong...and I had to get rid of that delightful car at a loss, before the steering apparatus gave both my wife and myself a case of arthritis in the arms.

But if my personal function as a consumer is a minor part of my activity, I have nevertheless been watching the American consumer, with a capital "c", during the past several years...and I am encouraged by what I see. What I see is fairly steady progress in a direction of a more assertive voice on the part of the American consumer, a greater sophistication on the part of the consumer in the market place, and the beginnings of better legislative protection for the consumer. It may very well be that I am by nature too optimistic, and that the people working most actively and professionally in the field of consumer activity are able to see in sharper focus the booby traps, the discouraging obstacles, or signs of retrogression.

What is the voice of the consumer in the United States?

To read some of the speeches and interviews of advertising agency heads and merchandising experts, the consumer is king. He is a majestic potentate, whose every whim brings about immediate and responsive quivers on Madison Avenue, in headquarters' offices on Park Avenue and out in the hustings where the products are made. Does the consumer want a change in style? According to this view, he gets it, pronto, on the double. Does he want new products? They go into production immediately. Does he want quality in his merchandise? He'll get nothing but quality from now on.

An amazingly large number of people believe, or at least profess they believe, that this automatic response to the desire of the consumer is widespread and constitutes the normal order of the day.

On the other side it is equally easy to picture the consumer as a real exploited class in America. He is piled high with goods

he doesn't want, goods that are shoddy, goods that are unhealthy, goods that are fantastically expensive in relation to their true value. He is surrounded, day and night...unless he closes his eyes and ears to the rivet hammer sound of hysterical advertising, designed to convince him to buy more things he doesn't need at prices he can't afford, in order to keep our national economy from falling into a permanent state of depression. In this view the safeguards and barriers that have been erected to safeguard the consumer interests are meager and ineffective and they offer little protection.

Personally I find difficulty in accepting either extreme.

The American consumer appears to me increasingly sophisticated, increasingly determined to provide legislative safeguards against the worst type of exploitation of the consumer market, increasingly determined to do a little thinking before he buys. His voice is not as effective as the advertising and merchandising people would claim, nor as lost in the great American babble as others would have us believe.

Let me cite a few examples.

If advertising were as completely effective as its staunchest supporters and most consistent critics maintain, its vast volume would have robbed us all of buying initiative. But what has happened? We were assaulted by advertising that emphasized more and more automotive horse power...and while the ads emphasized power and speed, the almost unadvertised Volkswagon and its assorted European relatives took over a substantial portion of the American automotive market. Now, after three or four years, the Big Three automobile manufacturers are getting into small car production. The growth of sales of European cars is a reminder that consumers are not without ideas of their own, and that at least some buying judgments are made on the basis of careful thinking about the consumer's specific needs. Detroit's delay in adjusting to new market tests raised some questions about the thesis that the consumer is an all powerful monarch of the market place.

We cannot easily escape repeated cigarette advertising, ranging from the suggestion that a particular type of filter is the favorite of thinking men (obviously Viceroy doesn't put much stock in the power of thinking women)...to the theme that to live modern in the mid-twentieth century means to smoke another brand. Yet more and more people, with an eye cocked to the findings of medical research, have decided they may live longer without a cigarette.

It seems to me that we are seeing greater resistance to exaggerated and meretricious advertising claims. Writing in "Sponsor Magazine", Mr. Alfred Edelson, a former advertising

executive, suggests that "a little soul searching is long overdue" among advertising executives. He laments the exaggeration, the unsupported claims, the blind belief that all advertising is economically beneficial to the nation. He is concerned that there is "real substance to the criticism" of advertising...not just to the phony vacuum cleaner bait ads but to the big spenders in the drug, chemical, tobacco, automobile sales. As Mr. Edelson points out: "Whatever some advertising men may think, this country was not built on shoddy merchandise at ever increasing prices supported by exaggerated promotion."

In a nation so thoroughly grounded in free enterprise traditions, in the effectiveness of the hard sell, it is difficult to visualize truly effective government regulation of advertising. It is equally difficult to visualize more than minimal self regulation of advertising.

Of course there is advertising that I believe is socially useful. It brings the product honestly and tastefully to the attention of the consumer. It presents an honest, non-hysterical story of the product. Sometimes it amuses. For instance: The one-eyed man in the Hathaway Shirt; the man with the whiskers who sells tonic; some television shows of high quality in both program and commercial. Certainly good advertising can take credit for widespread dissemination of news about new products and worthwhile improvements in old products. Good advertising recognizes that at least some people are older than 14 years of age. It should: My own 14 year old son has long since learned the hard way that the words like "free" and "bonus" are susceptible to broad interpretation.

The voice of the consumer, I suggest, is louder than the consumers sometime suspect. We read a book like "The Hidden Persuaders" and cannot help but be impressed by the serious, even ferocious, effort to plumb our sub-conscious in search of greater sales. But should we not take a good many of the examples in that book with a grain of salt? I suspect that a number of the "successes" appear, on close examination, to be claims aimed by advertising men at their clients, rather than tangible accomplishments. We consumers are not as easily manipulated as some people would like us to be.

Mr. Edelson, whom I quoted earlier, voiced suspicion that the young man in the mailing room of an advertising agency is apt to do this personal buying after consultation with Consumer Reports magazine rather than with the agency list of clients. It is certainly significant that Consumer Reports has reached a total circulation of about 800,000 copies a month, with a readership per copy that must certainly be among the highest of any American magazine. A number of "commercial" publications reflect greater concern with the consumers' problems than one might have expected to find a decade or two ago. Mr. Kiplinger's "Changing Times"

has grown successful with a reading formula clearly addressed to the consumer needs of the middle income white collar family. "Better Homes & Gardens" shows a distinct interest in many problems which face the average consumer. The Labor Press gives a warm reception to weekly consumer columns by Sidney Margolius.

In a country filled with discussion, the consumer problem is getting greater attention than it has in many years. Thus, Consumers Union has been noticeably successful with a number of summer institutes, both for professional people and trade unionists. The Community Service Activities Department of the AFL-CIO has embarked on a program of consumer education, and its director, Leo Perlis, has announced that consumer clinics will be conducted in union headquarters and elsewhere throughout the country. The list of topics is wide, ranging from discussion of the union label on products to the operation of family budget plans, advice on buying appliances and new and used cars, the more efficient planning of meals and the more inexpensive borrowing of money or buying on the installment plan.

High schools and colleges home economics classes are, so far as I can find out, performing an increasingly effective service for future homemakers. Indeed, there is reason to believe that some part of the success of Consumer Reports magazine may well be attributed to the existence of a big corps of home economics graduates who have been trained to look behind the label.

Manufacturers who once denounced Consumers Union as subversive of their "right" to be free of criticism or analysis, now seem more interested in boasting of favorable product ratings from CU. Indeed, Consumer Reports has received a substantial number of letters from manufacturers who thank Consumers Union for pointing out design deficiencies in their product. Yes, times have changed.

This whole trend is perhaps epitomized by Senator Kefauver's interest in a bill to create a U.S. Department of Consumers -- recognition, it seems to me, that there are measurable overtones of political value in the voice of the consumer.

A greater articulation of consumer needs by various citizens' groups has produced agitation for consumer departments in state governments. It is quite possible that a new Administration in Washington may some day recognize that a consumers' pressure group has a valid part to play in a society as responsive as ours to a host of other pressure groups.

Let me make the record clear: I am no Pollyana. The Federal Trade Commission still has plenty of cases. The Food and Drug Administration can still find rot and poison in the products we're supposed to eat. The radio commercials still make plenty of noise. But the fact remains: America is a better educated country of consumers today than it was a generation ago. The consumer as a

group is making a greater impact on our economic society than he has ever done before. The consumer's utopia is not here; it's not "just around the corner." But we are making some progress. Let us not be disappointed at the prospect of plenty of work ahead.