

## CONSUMER EDUCATION

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#### A. June Bricker

In preparation for this meeting and for our panel today, I have tried to sort out from the many consumer education activities of the American Home Economics Association a few that would be unique to home economists and that might not be carried out in the same way by my colleagues on this panel. I know also that in the past few years our Association has had the very welcome honor of being included in several of your conferences and that on those occasions our representatives have very well covered our historical activities. Today -- with our friends from organized labor, from credit unions, and from education covering other areas of consumer education -- I will concentrate on the role of the home economist and the Association as a catalyst in consumer education. This is a function once attributed to us by a representative of the Food Industries Committee in a speech at our annual meeting during the 50th Anniversary Year of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic laws. Parenthetically, I might add that we have always felt a very proprietary interest in these laws from our concentrated support for their enactment and our continuing cooperation in making them effective. Also, as the executive secretary of the AHEA, I am currently a member of the new advisory committee on the Food and Drug Administration.

As Siert Riepma, the speaker said at that Food and Drug Anniversary,

"A fascinating book could be written about the way the pure food laws have brought industry closer to the consumer. But in this process a middle agency has been needed -- a catalyst, if you please. And this, I think, is where your profession fills so important a role. Since before 1906, the home economists have sought to define the consumer's true needs and interests. One of the most practical ways in which this has been accomplished is by the counsel you have given the Food and Drug Administration from time to time on food standards and other phases of its work. Another is the way in which you have developed contacts with, and leadership within, industry itself. Another is the improvement of teaching techniques so that home economics is no longer visualized as a fairly narrow range of duties in the kitchen but a training for many different types of things men and women have to do today to be capable of the many different arts of living which make our world seem too complicated and yet so much simpler."

#### Catalyst and Free Choice

All of us here subscribe wholeheartedly, I am sure, to the philosophy of free choice in the market place -- if we did not there

would be no need for consumer education at all. But free choice, like democracy itself, requires education if its exercise serves the public good. Our function as catalysts is to provide the force that brings together the best combination of product and consumer want or need. This can be a very simple function, but in most instances today it is not simple. Consumer needs and wants for most of our families are highly sophisticated and complex. An unusual degree of self-analysis, a great deal of self-understanding, and great competence in understanding family relationships are required if the family is to arrive at even a crude outline of needs and wants. I say that this is the case for most families today, since the economic situation is maneuverable for the great majority. Even families of minimum resources are constantly exposed to very much the same promotional appeals as everyone else. The family on a marginal income must also be allowed the dignity of free choice. As educators, we can adjust our programs to help each family achieve as much ability as possible for self-appraisal.

It seems to me that one of the great shifts in consumer education in the past decade or so has been greater concern with the total resources of the family -- time, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities, as well as money and other tangible resources. Management has become the key to homemaking and to consumer programs. In some instances, I suppose that this broader concept has led to a certain amount of neglect of the traditional areas of consumer education as they were known in the twenties and thirties. At least in our Association, we are beginning to recognize this neglect, and, I hope, to repair it. I do believe, however, that we will be able to do a better job because of our greater understanding of the effect of human relationships on consumer choices and vice versa.

Thus, family needs, wants, and goals, make up one of the reactive elements in consumer choices. They are a more complex array than they used to be. But so are the goods and services with which they must be matched.

Our history is a long one in the study and investigation of products for the consumer. One of the favorite "family anecdotes" in the AHEA is the tale of the silk petticoats worn by our members to test out beliefs about quality in fabrics. Later, in the 1940's, the Association sponsored a nation-wide study of several important everyday products and collected more than 111,000 opinions from consumers in 4,600 groups. Many of the opinions were passed back to industry; others formed the basis for articles in our own official journal and other dissemination of information to consumers or to our members working with consumers. A great deal of research and study in home economics is devoted to acquiring information which we can make available to families so that they may choose products more wisely -- for their needs as well as for the intrinsic qualities of the products. We have also extended this kind of study to services as well as products -- for example to studies on consumer credit and journal articles on this topic.

Thus in the direct meeting of consumer needs, we have a very clear objective of seeking out and making available information on goods and services, of developing self-understanding and self-appraisal by families in the area of consumption of these goods and services and -- as educators -- helping to provide opportunities for individuals and families to gain experience and competence in fulfillment of needs.

#### Catalyst in the Domain of Production

As one of our AHEA pioneers in consumer education once pointed out: from the time when foods appeared in cans and packages and qualities such as colorfastness or shrinkage became incorporated into fabrics, the consumer began to be unable to judge the quality of merchandise. He could not tell by looking at the can, package, or the fabric whether the product would meet his needs. The producer's statement of quality then became all-important and the availability and reliability of these statements became of great concern to consumers. Labeling then became one of our first concerns in consumer education. In the 1920's the AHEA set up a committee, now called our consumer interests committee, to help to improve the position of families as purchasers of food, clothing, and household items. This has involved not only the education of consumers as family purchasing agents but also the furtherance of local and national grading, labeling, and similar programs which enable consumers to find and recognize the specific articles of merchandise on the retail market that meet their needs and incomes. I believe that we can feel very good about the work that we have done in helping to inspire the consumer to obtain informative labeling and in helping him understand its value and to make use of it.

To some extent, the Association has had a hand in development of products through work on standards. We have been members of the American Standards Association since 1929 and still are, I believe, the only consumer body in that organization. The person who now heads the consumer standards work at ASA is a home economist. With the standards of the ASA that relate to consumer needs -- cooking and baking utensils, standards for end-uses of textile products, and recently standards for making buildings and facilities usable by the handicapped, for example -- the Association has helped to disseminate the content of the standards. We have sponsored one ASA standard and helped to develop others. Our members are wholeheartedly involved in this effort as they carry on their individual programs in teaching, in Extension, in business, or in homemaking. Our contribution to the development of standards has been stronger through the ASA and through the food grades of the Department of Agriculture and the standards of the Food and Drug Administration than through the few standards that we issued on our own ten years or so ago. -- This is another case of joint effort being more successful than the work -- however good -- of an individual group.

Through such publications as our Handbook of Food Preparation -- which is widely used on colleges as well as by writers and others engaged in food information programs -- we help to make information on grades and standards available to consumers.

#### Catalyst in the Public Domain

Almost from the beginning of our organization, we have recognized a relationship between families as consumers and what we might call the public domain -- the necessary regulative and legislative activities for large-scale group living. When families no longer raised all their own food, the community soon found it necessary to establish regulations that would safeguard the wholesomeness of food offered for sale. As industrialization created an increasing number of new fibers usable for consumer clothes and household uses and increased the number of processes that could be used to transform the characteristics of textiles and fibers, individual consumers could no longer hope to judge quality in this area. Nor could producers protect themselves and assure the reliability of all products offered in the area. Public regulation was the answer. Again, I am happy to say, the Association not only supported the passage of legislation such as the recent Textile Fiber Products Identification Act, but we have always considered it our function to undertake educational programs based on this and similar acts. From what we have been told by officials in both government and industry, our Textile Handbook has been an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the various acts of federal legislation concerned with textiles.

Over the years, our members have given very generously of their professional knowledge at dozens of Congressional hearings on proposals affecting the well-being of consumers. In the past few years our members have provided professional information to Congressional or agency hearings on such diverse topics as meat grading, consumer credit, and food additives and environmental health. After the famous cranberry incident in 1960, our legislative committee chairman told a hearing before the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, that a situation which is a public health problem "can only be solved as other public health problems have been solved -- through wise legislation by well-informed representatives of the people, through adequate governmental regulatory enforcement agencies to carry out the provisions of the law and to advise industry, through an unswerving compliance with regulations by every segment of the producing, processing, and marketing industry together with the intelligent support of consumers." We have considered it a very important part of our role to inspire this kind of support by consumers.

As regards legislation, the Association maintains a policy of accepting invitations to appear at hearings only when a person of technical competence is available to speak on the matter. This is a necessary policy if our activity is to have real meaning. Naturally, much of our testimony is concerned with food protection and other traditional areas, but I have felt especially gratified during my

first year with the Association to see such items as consumer credit, the Children's Bureau and other so-called welfare topics, the Peace Corps and other international programs, as well as education and re-training proposals, appearing among our legislative, public relations, and consumer interests activities. I believe they reflect the greater opportunities that come with our broader concept of service to consumers. I hope that in the future, we will find increasingly effective ways to serve as the catalyst between the goods and services available and the needs of families in the broad areas of human relationships and management of total resources. I look forward to the time when procedures will match our opportunities.