

THE HOUSEWIFE SPEAKS

by

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For more than 15 years, I have been talking and writing to, for and about consumers--mostly women consumers. In a small way I have been their guide, their wailing wall, their friend. In a large way they have been my "informers." They inform me about themselves--their hopes and fears, their joys and worries.

Several speakers at these meetings have said that they receive far too little mail. This is not my complaint! Every year I hear from thousands and thousands of women--and a few men. It is these consumers about whom I want to talk to you.

The woman I hear from is usually not in trouble with a credit agency, she has't signed away her soul in order to buy a television set. She is not leading a life of quiet desperation.

But she does have her peeves, her frustrations, things she wants to "blow off" about. These peeves may be packages that are hard to open ("Press Here" it says--but to do this requires a kitchen knife and the strength of 10)...or what bothers her may be thread that knots and breaks...or store clerks who are not helpful...or the difficulty of finding a good service man for an appliance...or prepacked meat so wrapped that you can't see the bottom (I have suggested transparent trays, since the butcher has not yet been born who is going to put the poor side up!).

My consumer is provoked because summer clothes are available in March but not in August, because the supermarket puts lemons in a package of three, but today she may only want one lemon...that belts on dresses she buys are short and fancy buttons fall off and can't be replaced and that a garment sold her as "no iron" is no such thing--in her opinion.

By and large, my customer does not feel that her worries are ones she should take to Government. She's glad, apparently, to take them to me and often ends her letters with some phrase such as, "Thanks for listening. Now I feel better and I hope you don't feel worse."

She doesn't turn to Government and regulatory agencies because (right or wrong) this isn't the way she thinks about these frustrations I've been reporting to you. She asks me about taking the article back to the store...about writing the manufacturer. I urge her to do these things--in that order. This action is usually effective.

One reason she doesn't turn to FTC and FDA and her Congressman, and so forth, is that she has a sweeping belief that, to a high degree, Government is on her side, does guard her interests, has her good in mind. She feels she is protected.

And we know that while she may misunderstand her role in this matter, it is true. There are people looking out for her.

Yesterday a speaker told about a woman in New York who was prey to a dishonest salesman of housewares. The implication seemed to be that this customer was unprotected. Now we all know that New York has a strong fraudulent practices law. No further law was needed in this case--what was needed was for that woman to be informed, to know, to have the facts.

I am all for consumer education in every form. Let's tell her the facts, the truth. Tell her in the press, tell her on the package, tell her in advertising, tell her in adult education, in home extension.

I find that women are eager for information: Take the field of fibers. She wants to know what is dacron--how much of it should be combined with cotton for best results? Are non-run stockings "for real?" What should she look for in upholstery when she buys furniture? What about metal versus plastic zippers? What are Spandex fibers?

She wants price comparisons between convenience foods and foods made from scratch.

She wants to know whether she's sensible or foolish to shop at Discount Houses. Incidentally, there's a field where she has exercised her vote. A good many discount houses have failed and are closing. She found that they were not for her in many instances and voted against the ones that didn't serve her needs.

Now, once she has the information she needs, she wants to exercise her own choice. The kind, the size, the color she wants. The electric fry-pan is a good illustration. Here's a small appliance that no woman needs if she has available the minimum of a one-burner stove--be it gas or electric--and one skillet. Yet thousands on thousands of women cook with electric fry-pans every day--on the counter alongside the complete range--because they want to.

Another instance: She voted for margarine. Voted for it in spite of many things pushing her the other way. In spite of tradition, in spite of lobbies, in spite of the fact it had the other-side-of-the-tracks low status, in spite of advertising of butter--she still voted for margarine. Always she wants her choice. If she chooses to serve butter, she may want it whipped or not, salted or not, in sticks or not! That, she feels, is her privilege.

Choice...variety...her way. A friend of mine told me this story. She was in Holland a few years ago and she was chatting with a man who is in the chocolate business. She said to him, "When you introduce a new product, do you do consumer testing? Set up taste panels? Do you take it out and ask questions of everyday housewives?" The Hollander drew himself up to his full handsome height and he said, "Madam--I know more about chocolate than any woman in Europe!" He didn't care if

his customers wanted a product, (say a pudding) sweeter or milder or blacker or whatever.

Incidentally, at that time, the average store in Holland sold one brand of chocolate (His!) in one size, one type of package, at one price. No choice. No variety. This is changing with the Common Market, of course. Consumers will gain--in variety of product, price, in wider fulfillment of personal preferences.

Now I don't say women always choose wisely. They will make mistakes along the way, but they won't make the same mistakes twice. And fortunately, most such buying mistakes are not major--are as much of a lesson and as soon forgotten as the bride's traditional burnt biscuits. The customer learns, as she must. Her body of buying knowledge grows with experience as well as with information.

I find my consumer quite smart, savvy, realistic. She is handling the family finances in most cases and usually handling them well. I think the girl who studied electronics can soon figure out whether lamb chops are cheaper per pound than a roast of lamb--even if she didn't study food buying per se. But knowing, she may decide to buy chops. Perhaps her family won't eat left-over lamb; perhaps she hasn't time to cook a roast.

I don't see how we can advise her whether or not to serve Convenience Foods! Maybe they are not gourmet food or not inexpensive. But perhaps they are as good as she can make. (All women aren't "church fair" cake bakers!) Or perhaps she is trading money for time--time to be with her children, time to hold a job, time to serve on the Board of Education. Or to do something that's creative and brings her more happiness than cooking.

Women have voted for many time-savers: Spray starch. Frozen orange juice. Instant Coffee. We may not agree on their choices, but they have a right to make them.

One thing I have been happy about in writing to women these 15 years is to discover on what high plane I could write. I don't mean erudite. I mean smart. Knowledgeable. How ready housewives are to learn to be good consumers--good purchasing agents for the home! And their interest and range rises every year.

My friends--I have high hopes! I feel we must protect customers where they can't protect themselves--from loan sharks, for example. But in their daily life give them tools and they won't be fools!