

REMARKS BEFORE THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON CONSUMER INTERESTS

David F. Peterson
Executive Director
Consumer Information Center

We're here today to talk with you about the Federal government's current activities in the area of consumer information and to highlight some of the materials and programs that we hope will be of special interest to you.

Within the Federal government, what may sometimes seem like a raft of agencies exists to protect consumers through regulation.

There's FCC, CAB, FDA, FTC, EPA, USDA, SEC, the Postal Service, and most recently, the Consumer Product Safety Commission. These agencies seek to protect us from deceptive advertisements, mislabeled drugs, unsafe foods, toys harmful to our children -- to mention just a few of their responsibilities.

In spite of the efforts to regulate in behalf of the consumer, we must inevitably face one fact: no amount of regulation will ever replace a consumer's common sense or be as valuable as the information he or she can acquire and use.

This is certainly not to say that information will erase the need for regulation, it won't, but ideally, the two should work together. Consumers should be able to assure that, through regulation, the most blatant deceptions and dangers have been eliminated from the marketplace. They should be equally confident that, as consumers, they either have or can quickly get the information needed to make sound judgements.

Although the Federal government has for many years been involved in regulation, only in recent years has it fully recognized the need to make factual information available directly to consumers. Historically, with the exception of the Department of Agriculture and scattered efforts by other Federal agencies, little was done to provide consumer information.

This problem was further magnified by the fact that American business had, to a large extent, failed to recognize its responsibility to furnish consumers with useful information on its products and services. Only recently has industry made strides in this regard. In recognition of the lack of information from either business or government, the Federal government recently initiated a concerted, full scale government-wide information program.

As many of you know, approximately three years ago, the Consumer Product Information Center was established to coordinate this effort to share consumer-oriented information. Its *raison d'etre* was based on a very simple premise: that government had acquired a vast amount of information as the bi-product of hundreds of billions of dollars spent for research, procurement, and program activities. For just a small additional expenditure, this information could be made available to consumers.

In coordinating the Federal program, the Center has two aims:

1. To encourage the various departments of government to develop and release practical and timely consumer information, and
2. To make that information not only available, but easily accessible, to the public.

At present, the Center works with more than two dozen Federal agencies to produce the information that consumers want and need. The Center conducts surveys and polls, reviews consumer complaints and seeks input from various consumer organizations to determine those needs. In other words, we use every objective means available to establish what consumers want, rather than have a group of Washington bureaucrats decide what they think consumer should need.

To let consumers know this information is available, the Center uses several methods, the main one being the free quarterly Consumer Information Index. The Index is a 16-page listing of more than 200 free and low cost Federal consumer publications. The booklets cover a wide range of topics including energy conservation, the environment, food and nutrition, health, safety, appliances, housing, cars, and of course, consumer protection.

Many of you have not only seen our Index and its listings, but have been instrumental in its distribution.

This fiscal year, over 17 million copies of the Index will be distributed -- enough for one in every four American households. Within this fiscal year, we project receiving more than six million requests for the publications listed in the Index.

As a start to meet the informational needs of the large number of Spanish-speaking consumers, late last year the Center published its first Index of Consumer Information booklets in Spanish. It lists some 60 publications -- the best of those currently available from the Federal government. Although it is too early to fully evaluate this project, initial response has been favorable. Therefore, we plan to publish an annual edition of the best Federal consumer publications in the Spanish language.

Before closing my discussion of the Center's current activities, just a few words about our media programs. To publicize the availability of consumer information, the Center has developed a feature release service which highlights new Federal consumer publications. Twice weekly 5,000 newspapers and magazines across the country receive these releases.

For radio and television stations, the Center produces eight sets of public service announcements each month. These scripts are made available in English and Spanish. All give hard, concise information to the growing number of people who basically rely on the broadcast media for information rather than on the printed word.

Finally, since the theme of this year's ACCI conference is "Future Dimensions," I would like to end with a word about the proposed Consumer Protection Agency. Despite the regulatory and informational efforts of the Federal government, nearly all informed observers must agree that the consumer viewpoint has not been sufficiently represented in the decision-making process within the Federal government. A Consumer Protection Agency can be, in my opinion, a giant step in this direction.

Candidly, I feel particularly strongly about the CPA since under the primary bill now being considered, the Center would become one of its important operational units. This cannot help but make the Center even more effective in providing meaningful information to consumers. But more importantly, I firmly believe that a strong Consumer Protection Agency will give the American consumer a heretofore unheard voice in Federal policy decisions which affect our everyday lives.