

Building Linkages in the Consumer Interest (Conference Wrap-up Summary)

The strength of the American Council on Consumer Interests and the consumer movement comes not from a mind set of competitive advantage. Rather, consumer affairs professionals and others benefit mutually when they forge linkages among consumer research, education, and policy focuses.

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The Issue

Through the years of rampant citizen unrest with the imbalance of power in the marketplace and the subsequent increase in regulatory action, the consumer movement gained great strength. Today, as many consumer affairs professionals have become comfortable in their jobs in consumer research, education, or policy analysis, many find themselves struggling for viability.

The 1995 ACCI Conference team (i.e., the authors of this summary) believes the answer to strengthening our work in the consumer interest lies in greatly improving connections with others involved in consumer research, education, or policy, particularly in the public and consumer interest sectors. An appropriate metaphor is three sticks, easily broken when separated, but stronger than their sum when held together.

The Response

This theme, "Linking Consumer Education, Policy, and Research," guided the planning for the 1995 ACCI Conference. A conference highlight, the ACCI Showcase, connected about 30 representatives from consumer organizations with ACCI membership. The informal session resulted in sharing information, strengthening linkages, and forging new partnerships. Joint sessions with Consumer Assembly 1995, a conference sponsored by the Consumer Federation of America, put ACCI academics and educators in the same room with grassroots consumer activists and nationally-known policy analysts. The team approach to planning demonstrated the synergy that results from a partnership mind set.

In ACCI and many of our employing organizations, we face a non-typical environment. Today's workplace is characterized by rightsizing, reinventing, reorganizing, and uncontrollable change. As a result, this is a time for bold new approaches, a time to revel in hidden opportunities--a time to "un-quo the status."

For example, for the consumer economics researcher, try putting yourself in the shoes of businesses, trade associations and public interest organizations when examining potential research questions. Ask, "What's relevant?" Then research the pertinent questions in a brief three months, not three years, because timeliness is often of the essence. After preparing a brief report with specific policy implications and sharing it with appropriate organizations, consider speaking out on the issue. Or, at the least, give the information to those who use it to change public policy.

What is required is that you take your favorite area of interest in consumer economics and narrow your focus to the policy questions that have or should be posed. Then ask yourself what kind of data would throw light on the problem areas that would point toward a solution. Ask yourself which leading corporations, trade associations, or consumer groups might fund such a study. Remember, too, that public policy is set by businesses and consumer groups, as well as governments.

And, write up consumer education articles, perhaps as "op ed" pieces, for your local newspapers and for a ACCI's "Advancing the Consumer Interest." Teachers use such articles as part of their lecture notes or as handouts. Textbooks authors include the materials in their books.

Three Charges for the Future

1995 ACCI conference participants are encouraged to:

1. Continue the networking established during the ACCI Showcase. Contact at least one organization represented and share your work.
2. Embrace the theme of "Linking Consumer Education, Policy and Research" by making it a foundation for your work for consumers.
3. Celebrate the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of others by including input from consumers, policy analysts, researchers, and educators in your next project.

Sharing a common vision for advancing the consumer interest is not enough. It is time for action. It is time for building bridges among consumer research, education, and policy.

Each is so intricately intertwined with the other that it is fruitless to do research without first asking policy makers about its relevance. It is futile to educate consumers without first analyzing consumer wants and needs. Moreover, it is inappropriate to recommend policy without researching its consequences and determining educational parallels.

As we move into the 21st century, "building linkages" is the new paradigm. As consumer economists, this will be the entree for us to not only survive but to thrive!

Endnotes

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