

Consumer Group, Consumer Friendly Media, and Consumer Complaints: Helping Limited-English-Speaking Population

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Ethnicity is an important aspect of consumer complaining behavior research. This poster focuses on Chinese new immigrants. The purpose of this poster is to describe an emerging informal community network in San Francisco area that helps Chinese new immigrants in consumer complaints. The network includes Consumer Action, a consumer advocacy group that is the first institution accepting consumer complaints in Chinese, and several Chinese newspapers and radio programs that pay special attention to consumer issues and rights.

Consumer Action and Consumer Friendly Media

Consumer Action (CA) is a nationwide famous, California-based consumer advocacy group. In 1989, CA launched bilingual services in Chinese and Spanish, which drew an immediate attention from the Chinese community where consumer education is scarce but needed very much. In addition to outreach and telephone hotline services in Chinese and Spanish, CA provided educational publications in five languages: Chinese, Cambodian, English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. As part of its outreach effort, CA worked closely with minority media, particularly Chinese, as Chinese is the major immigrant population in California.

Since CA started to provide bilingual services through its hotline and publications, the demand from Asian immigrant consumers, especially Chinese, for informed decisions has grown fast. Chinese media has started to play a vital role to empower consumer rights. In 1993, a column named "A Window for Consumers" began in Sing Tao Weekly, which later was expanded to a full page once a week. A Cantonese live radio show discussing consumer rights, "Sino Cast", was also developed in a cable radio station. Two live radio programs on consumer rights were developed first in Cantonese in 1996, then in Mandarin in 1997. Meanwhile, several major Chinese newspapers published in the States, such as Sing Tao, World Journal, and Chinese Daily News have begun to cover consumer interest issues and work with Consumer Action's staff to provide consumer alerts to the community. The media outlets also started to receive readers' complaints regarding their consumer problems and sometimes got involved in resolving the disputes. Although there is no official section set up in the newspapers to accept complaints and provide mediation, the news reporters' roles have slightly changed from merely covering news to investigating complaints.

Consumer Issues and Complaints

According to the staff working at Consumer Action hotline, the complaining subjects and percentages from Chinese-speaking consumers, based on 315 complaints called in between December 1996 and August 1997, were estimated as follows: automotive 30%, travel 19%, insurance 19%, long distance slamming 16%, credit card fraud 14%, and other 2%. It is interesting to compare the complaints called to the same hotline by English-speaking consumers in the similar time period. Among 567 English complaint calls between August 1996 and August 1997, the complaining subjects and percentages were as follows: credit and finance 30%, automotive 10%, product and retail 8%, utility and telephone 38%, and other 14%. Compared to English-speaking consumers, Chinese-speaking consumers were more likely to report automotive related problems and less likely to complain telephone and credit card related problems. A unique consumer problem among Chinese and other Asian new immigrants is "affinity scam." When such incidents occur, minority media usually is in a better position to help handle the complaints because they speak the same language, and their involvement often creates concerns for businesses about their reputation or practices. In some way, the minority media has actually stimulated the consumer movement in the Asian immigrant community through its coverage, investigation, and networking with consumer advocacy groups.

Endnotes

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