

Introduction

This program of the Council on Consumer Information is devoted to what I like to call "new frontiers in consumer economics." In the minds of many, consumer information and consumer economics have been too closely linked to problems of food and drugs. It was my aim in this Conference to expose to consumer attention the wide spectrum of issues in which even the educated and informed consumer needs assistance and protection.

Running through the whole Conference, also, is the general theme of governmental action, both on the legislative and administrative fronts, to protect consumer rights. For that reason, we hear Mrs. Esther Peterson open the Conference, Public Utility regulators discuss their function as protectors of the consuming public, and a panel of members of the U.S. House of Representatives appraise the position of the consumer in the Eighty-ninth Congress.

One section attempts to explore the relationships between the consumer movement as presently constituted and one of the oldest self-help movements in history, the cooperative movement. All are in agreement that closer relationships between co-op groups and consumers are long overdue.

Two sessions deal with areas directly impinging upon the purchaser. One, the quality of the products he is offered; and, two, the quality of the services he is provided. Too few consumers or consumer spokesmen are sufficiently aware of the technical problems involved in testing the quality of consumer products, nor are they sufficiently aware of the contributions the legal profession is making in the fast-developing field of products liability and in the new interpretations being given to the obligations of manufacturers and sellers under guaranties and warranties.

On the service industry front, grave problems are coming to the fore with respect to the services provided by a host of new and old occupations. There is great need to alert consumers to question the efficacy of current systems of regulating industries and professions allegedly in the public interest. Too often this turns out to be a device for putting an industry in a straight jacket that stifles competition and prevents innovation.

Finally, we have touched in this program on two areas that promise much for the future. One is the role of consumer education in the fast-developing programs in the Office of Economic Opportunity. The other has to do with a stimulation of consumer research in the universities. It is our hope that the regular conference inclusion of an opportunity for discussion of university research projects in the field of consumer economics will greatly expand and stimulate much-needed economic research.

I have attempted to present the highlights of this 11th Annual Conference as far as we could from the prepared texts and tape-recorded discussions. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to numerous collaborators in this task, including Mr. David Hern, Mr. Jack Ryder, Mrs. Ruth Nelson, Miss Joan Garry, and Miss Mary Ann Bonafede and Miss Elizabeth Rzasa.

ROBERT J. McEWEN, S.J.
Boston College

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