



BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR SOZIALE SICHERHEIT
GENERATIONEN UND KONSUMENTENSCHUTZ



European Economic and Social Committee

EUROPEAN CONSUMER DAY

"Consumer Education"

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Vienna, 15 March 2006

INTERVENTION

of

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European Economic and Social Committee**

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Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be closing this European Consumer Day, which, under the title of "Consumer Education", has been held in the magnificent Urania building. Just like this impressive building in its day, the European Economic and Social Committee's Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption has tried to situate itself on the cutting edge of the study of a topic that affects us all today.

Perhaps the unique and beautiful city of Vienna knew that the secret to its beauty lay in accommodating different cultures and diverse approaches to shared problems, within a climate of tolerance that was and is perhaps its greatest attraction.

Here, in addressing the topic "Consumer Education", we have tried to follow the example of such historical and eternal principles.

The importance of consumer education is clearly enshrined in Article 153 of the EU Treaty, which calls on the Community to promote consumers' rights to information and education. Of course, the subsidiarity principle means that a large share of the responsibility in the area of education falls on national, regional and local authorities. However, this does not mean that the issue cannot or should not be debated at Community level so that specific actions can be proposed to improve consumer education.

From the point of view of content, consumer education must endeavour to give consumers a proper understanding of the various social, technical, legal and regulatory concepts associated with consumer protection, i.e.:

- a proper understanding of the composition of goods and services, the safety and quality criteria that apply to each product, the way products are used, consumed and maintained, and the associated costs;
- a proper understanding of commercial communication, in particular when distinguishing product information from the "hype" of advertising or promotional material;
- a proper understanding of contract terms, many of which are increasingly complicated owing to the variety of options associated with increasingly personalised products;
- a proper understanding of consumer rights when bringing complaints through the various administrative, legal and out-of-court channels.

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From the technical point of view, it is important to develop educational tools and materials that are clearly designed to equip consumers with the knowledge and skills needed for action.

Consumer organisations could, with the appropriate support, do more than provide advice, or merely disseminate and distribute training materials and tools designed by experts or within the EU institutions. They could also play a fundamental role as active training providers for consumers in general. Their high level of credibility and contact with the public make them a very effective channel for disseminating and raising awareness of Commission initiatives and this must also be used and taken into account in the area of consumer education.

It can be concluded that now would be a good time to develop the following actions at Community level:

Give impetus to the work of a group of permanent experts, comprising education professionals with an in-depth knowledge of consumer affairs, who can systematise on an ongoing basis the work carried out in each country and draw up the reports needed to further apply the Treaty of Amsterdam with regard to consumer education.

Present a plan to consolidate European networks that promote consumer education, through significant and ongoing projects.

Study the possibility of setting up a virtual school of consumer education, drawing on new technologies and the experience already gained by different countries in this area. Commission proposals should be developed that:

- help make consumer education widely available so that all European citizens can be educated and trained as consumers, as is their right and duty;
- enable educational actions to be coordinated more effectively and proper educational material to be drawn up, including the use of the Internet, so as to take account of the different characteristics of European consumers;
- provide training for trainers, adult consumers and vulnerable groups;
- ensure that the members of consumer organisations and other consumer bodies and institutions are given high-quality ongoing training.

I would like to finish by thanking the Austrian authorities, the president of the European Economic and Social Committee, those who have taken part in the debates and all those present who helped to make this 8th Consumer Day one of the most successful.

It has indeed given us the opportunity to appreciate once again the eternal beauty of the city of Vienna.

Thank you very much.
