

WHAT THE EDUCATOR CAN DO TO HELP
THE CONSUMER HELP HIMSELF

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In these two days we have conceded that the consumer is in orbit and the eyes of the world are upon him. His tracking stations include researchers, the marketeers, producers, businessmen, government, educators and all others in-between. He is counted, courted, consulted, cajoled and even conscripted.¹ In these final few minutes we ask, "What can we do to help them to help themselves?"

I imagine David Rockefeller was speaking to the agricultural and home economists as well as all other economists when he said, "Economists are famous for worrying hardest about a problem just after it has ceased to exist."²

I believe the time is long past when the educators can bring consumer information on specific products or services regardless of the fact that the homemaker still wants to know which is the best refrigerator on the market and economists believe everyone should have a special lesson in the wise use of credit.

In the 1962 Journal of Home Economics, Dr. Given J. Bymes attempted to explain the economist and home economists. She contends that the economist's interest is impersonal and the home economists are concerned with individuals.³ In reviewing five years of issues of the Journal of Home Economics, I found an increasing interest in theory of consumption rather than research on specific product information for the consumer.

¹Jane Armstrong, "Consumer Education from Dilemma to Decision," Extension Service Review, USDA, Vol. 35, July 1964, pp. 124-127.

²Wm. D. Patterson, "Public Dialogue, Private Voices," Saturday Review, April 10, 1965, p. 9.

³Given J. Bymes, "Economics Theory and the Home Economists," Journal of Home Economics, Vol. 54, No. 4, April 1962, pp. 281 to 285.

I believe all economists interested in consumer education should get together on basic concepts of economics important to the consumer whether they are buying soup bones with food stamps or Cadillacs for their sons' graduation. I am going to attempt to tell you what I believe these concepts should be.

1. The consumers need to understand themselves as consumers.
2. Consumers should understand the basic principles of price structure in our American economy.
3. Consumers must know how to best use their rights as consumers if they are to receive maximum satisfactions.

In helping consumers to understand themselves my first reaction is, let us be honest with them. Let them know they are in a very important position--they and all their associates control the destiny of our economy. Help them to know that in a democracy we produce for consumption. In our honesty, let us also warn them that in a free enterprise system they are in a vulnerable position; that the wooing they receive can be to their detriment as well as to their welfare; that in this world of choices there are strong negatives as well as positives which can destroy the very goals they may have for themselves and their families. Let us put a real emphasis on the need for education. In today's world consumers must have an inquiring mind and be willing to seek out information for their decision-making.

What I am saying was put in better form in the January 8th Time magazine, "The individual consumer is not apt to think of himself as an economic power. When he thinks about it, he is more likely to feel himself at the mercy of governmental and business trends beyond his kin or control; when he goes to the store he sometimes feels himself the victim of surly salespeople and shoddy goods."⁴

Last but not least, in helping them to understand themselves, they need to understand their own behavior as consumers and the forces that motivate their behavior. For example, do they know that Madison Avenue spent \$13.9 billions of dollars⁵ last year to woo or to change? Do they know age is no longer a factor because there are sufficient goods to make

⁴Bernhard M. Auer, "A Letter from the Publisher," Time, Vol. 85, No. 2, January 8, 1965, p. 11.

⁵Ibid., Patterson, p. 74.

the very young older and the older to remain young? Do they realize that despite pockets of poverty in Appalachia and city slums, the United States has become the first country in the world in which people spend less for needs than for wants? The average urban family now spends 48 percent of its after-tax income on food, shelter and clothing that it needs; it has 52 percent left over to spend or not to spend as they please.⁶ Whether they spend or save this "left-over" will depend on their goals and values.

The second concept of price structure should be taught in simplified form so that consumers could apply their knowledge in their search for desirable consumer goods and services. Many educators say that consumers could not care less about price structure. My question is, "What have we done to motivate them to care?" When the application of such theory is simplified, I believe it should be gotten into all channels of communications. Maybe we need some "economics according to Peanuts." In all seriousness, I believe there is a readiness to sell such theory through "ideas" in advertising, for example.

Norman H. Strouse, chairman of J. Walter Thompson, the world's largest advertising agency, has said, "The object of advertising is to sell goods and ideas. In its ability to sell ideas and shorten the time lag between the exposure to and acceptance of ideas, and acting upon them, therein lies the opportunity for advertising to continue to make singular contributions to the growth of our economy."⁷ His company developed the American Cancer Society, Saturday Review prize advertisement. It conveyed the idea of "strengthening the nation's religious faith as a means of making us better citizens." International Paper Company also won a prize on the idea of "library promotion" in the elementary schools of our nation. Imagine a Kraft Cheese ad selling the idea of price structure of dairy products.

The third concept would be an educational program on the four basic rights of the consumer as outlined by President Kennedy's consumer advisory council. Within their framework could be four pertinent objectives for consumer education. The first would be to motivate consumers to seek information they need to make an informed choice in goods and services. I asked the executive of the Kentucky Chain Stores Council what would be the first concept he would teach in consumer information. Mr. Jett's quick reply was, the concept of "use"--how

⁶Bernhard M. Auer, "The Economy," Time, Vol. 85, No. 2, January 8, 1965, p. 58.

⁷Ibid.

is this goods or service to be used? I wrote Dr. Bob Tootell, Governor of Farm Credit Administration, as to what he would consider the first concept to teach in the wise use of credit. He replied, the concept of purpose for which to borrow money. Whether it is use, purpose, intention, and/or function, consumers need information to make a good choice of goods or services.

The second educational objective would be to teach the consumer the basic steps of decision-making in order that they can use "their right to choose selectively." By understanding the steps involved in decision-making, consumers are in a better position to conscientiously evaluate a range of alternatives which help them to more clearly approximate maximum satisfaction.⁸

The third educational objective would be to assure consumers that their rights and interests will receive full and sympathetic consideration in the formulation of government policy but they will have to study these laws in order to understand them. I would go one step further to teach the consumers how to use their rights to be heard in the market place. We have all heard people say, "I did not take it back because I did not want to argue with the manager." If the goods are unsatisfactory, there should be no argument.

The fourth educational objective is to teach the consumers to exercise their right to be protected against the marketing of goods or services which are hazardous to health or life.⁹ How many of you test frozen food packages in the stores to see if they are partially or completely frozen? If the package is partially thawed, how many have informed the manager and questioned the safety of the foods? Do you investigate the safety records of airlines you travel?

The consumer educational program discussed so far has been a concern mostly of individual and family consumption. With the increased population and the complexities of living, is it not time we study some of the needs for goods and services which can only be provided through group participation such as government, cooperatives and/or associations. One example that comes to mind is education which seems to be the Utopia toward which all nations are striving. Yet we see story after story in the

⁸J. Gartner, Lee Kolmer and Ethel B. Jones, I. Consumer Decision Making, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, November 1960, p. 10.

⁹Consumer Advisory Council First Report Executive Office of President, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., Oct. 1963, p. 6.

papers about defeated bond issues for education. Is it not time to take our four educational objectives for consumers and apply them to a concentrated program on the needs for better financing of education in our affluent society? Recalling what David Rockefeller said about our being behind, let us be ahead of the game by determining alternatives for adequately financing of public services of which education is only one cooperative effort for mass consumption. As you journey home today, list all goods or services that would not be possible if it were not for some form of group efforts.

I would be remiss in our day and time not to say something about consumer education for the poor. Frankly, I would like to start with a few legal structures that would stop the marketeer who takes undue advantage of the ignorance of the majority of the poor. One example is the door-to-door salesmen with their dollar down, dollar a week for anything from refrigerator dishes to secondhand automobiles.

I have not discussed a single concept here that the people in the low-socio sector of our society could not comprehend if we, economists and educators, would interpret them in their language and within their realm of experience. They already have some concepts of applied consumer information. For example, in a recent Louisville Courier-Journal there appeared an article, "A Year After the Big Day" by John Fetterman, a staff writer. He describes the Fletcher family whom President Johnson visited near Inez in Martin County, Kentucky. The writer goes to the neighborhood store with Mrs. Fletcher and her two sons. "She bought fifty cents worth of bologna, a package of cookies, a dozen bananas, a carton of soft drinks and a package of cinnamon rolls. She explained to the clerk that the extravagance was because of company." The key to understanding herself and her need is the acknowledgement of the "extravagance."¹⁰

He does not describe the lunch but adds, "By 5:00 p.m. the oldest girls had the kitchen table set and Mrs. Fletcher explained that this would be 'just a regular meal, but plenty of it for everybody.'"

He says, "She produced a big bowl of pinto beans, huge slabs of cornbread made by Ella, a boiled chicken, fried potatoes and the cinnamon rolls."¹¹

¹⁰ John Fetterman, "A Year After the Big Day," Courier Journal Magazine, Louisville, Kentucky, April 25, 1965, p. 21.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 22.

I asked our nutrition specialists to analyze these menus. Here is Mrs. Evelyn Johnson's reply: "Miss Helton and I became intrigued and have thought through carefully the situation. We reached these conclusions: Mrs. Fletcher managed both time and money well, considering the presence of a guest and possible lack of serving dishes.

"Lunch and supper were high in protein. She could have substituted canned soup (vegetable, cheese) and crackers for the bologna sandwiches if she had soup dishes or extra cups. Apples might have been cheaper and would have added something raw and fresh to the day's menus. The drinks no doubt cost 56 to 63 cents and did not provide the nutrition nor satiety that milk in any form would have provided if available at the store--one-half gallon fresh milk, 49 cents, or powdered milk made with ice water at time of serving for about 17 cents.

"If cake mix was available, a few cents undoubtedly would have been saved as substitute for the rolls. Eggs added in mixing would have increased the nutrient value but the preparation time of meal would have been increased. The two menus given indicate possible deficiencies in Vitamin A and C and calcium for the day." What percent of our poor would do this well, we do not know. Too often we do not give them credit for the good judgement they do use.

I believe there is a real flag that needs to be raised. We have, for several years, tried to persuade educators to set up panels of experts in nutrition, management, economics, psychology and other fields as needs arise, to develop literacy materials. These would include concepts of basic nutrition, child development, health and sanitation and economics that could be used to teach the poorly educated the joy of gaining knowledge that can help them to be better parents, neighbors and citizens as well as to increase their competencies for a gainful employment.

In conclusion, the orientation of the consumer educator should be toward man as man, not toward man as a money-maker. I believe if we teach consumers the three basic concepts of understanding themselves, understanding the price structure and how to use their rights as consumers as well, we will have helped them to have a more satisfying life.

I would be the first to admit that it would be easier to develop purse-size consumer guides of so-called "unbiased information" that could be handed to the consumers than to teach them price structure, the decision-making process, and the importance of information. As

J. K. Galbraith puts it, "It is a far, far better thing for us to have a firm anchor in nonsense than to put out on the troubled seas of thought."¹²

¹²J. K. Galbraith, The Affluent Society, Houghton, Mifflin Co., Boston, 1958, p. 160.