

## Company of the Month: *Which?*

### ***Which?* and the Consumers' Association**

You want to buy a vacuum cleaner, but which one should you buy? Are upright vacuum cleaners better than cylinder vacuum cleaners? What about the new bag-less vacuum cleaners I've heard about? Now we have robot-controlled vacuum cleaners which roam around your house whilst you are at work finding dust and cleaning it up. But what shall I buy? Are the most expensive vacuum cleaners better than the cheap ones? You need to read *Which?* magazine!

Every month the members of the Consumers' Association in Britain receive a colourful magazine called *Which?* Each issue of the magazine reports on tests of 9 or 10 ranges of products. The articles explain the differences between each product and the relative advantages and disadvantages of the products before selecting one or more 'best buy'.

The Consumers' Association started in 1957. Ten thousand members registered in the first month. Two years later the membership was 150,000. Now 700,000 members of the Consumers' Association subscribe to *Which?* magazine.

*Which?* exists to tackle the issues which that matter to all consumers. They are fiercely independent and don't take funding from government or manufacturers. There is no advertising in their magazines or on their website. Everything is paid for through the subscriptions to the magazines and the sales of books.

These publications help consumers to make the right choices when buying products and services. They tell consumers their rights and expose wrongdoing by companies. *Which?* also campaigns to stop businesses ripping off or endangering customers.

### **What has the Consumers' Association achieved?**

- encouraged consumers to switch their accounts away from the big high street banks towards on-line banking services and banks started by building societies.
- promoted the use of lead-free paints on children's toys.
- promoted the use of safer electric blankets.
- persuaded the government to introduce a law making seat belts obligatory in all vehicles carrying children.
- exposed the over-priced UK car market and campaigned for cheaper car prices.

- encouraged users to change their suppliers of gas and electricity to find cheaper prices.

But is the Consumers' Association really successful? In a country with a population of nearly 60 million people is a magazine with sales of less than a million really help consumers to make the right choice?

There are Consumers' Associations in many countries around the world. For example, the China Consumers' Association campaigned last year about the charges for bank debit cards. The Consumers' Association of Canada's magazine *Aware* reported on buying vegetables. The Australian Consumers' Association's magazine *Choice* reported on Barbecues, Digital Cameras, and Washing Machines. In Ireland, the Consumers' Association's magazine *Consumer Choice* reported on the impact of adopting the Euro.

Consumers' Associations are not restricted to the rich countries of the world. The Consumers' Association of Penang, Malaysia, states its objectives as: To ensure the right of every consumer to basic needs such as food, housing, health care, sanitation, public transport, education and a clean environment. They organise many educational programmes in schools and rural areas, teaching children and adult consumers about their rights and helping them to spend their money wisely.

There is a global association of Consumers' Associations called Consumers International. It has more than 250 member associations in 115 countries. It was founded in 1960 as the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (IOCU). It's head office is in London and it has regional offices in Malaysia, Chile, and Zimbabwe.

Consumers International campaigns to protect consumers' rights at an international level. They define consumers' rights as:

- the right to satisfaction of basic needs
- the right to safety
- the right to be informed
- the right to choose
- the right to be heard
- the right to redress
- the right to consumer education
- the right to a healthy environment

They recognise that consumers also have responsibilities. Consumers should use their power in the market to drive out abuses, to encourage ethical practices and support sustainable consumption and production.

## Websites

Australian Consumers' Association: <http://www.choice.com.au/>  
Consumers' Association of Canada: <http://www.consumer.ca/>  
Consumers' Association of Ireland: <http://www.consumerassociation.ie/>  
Consumers' Association of Iceland: <http://www.ns.is/ns/english/>  
Finnish Consumers' Association: <http://www.kuluttajaliitto.fi/english.htm>  
Consumers Association of Penang:  
[http://www.jeef.or.jp/EAST\\_ASIA/malasia/CAP.htm](http://www.jeef.or.jp/EAST_ASIA/malasia/CAP.htm)  
Consumers International: <http://www.consumersinternational.org/>  
Consumers Association in Britain: <http://www.which.net/>

## Activities

### Check your understanding

*Are the following statements true or false? Find evidence in the article.*

1. *Which?* magazine started in 1957.
2. Advertising in *Which?* magazine is very expensive.
3. You can buy *Which?* magazine in newspaper shops.
4. The Consumers' Association campaigned against the introduction of seat belts in vehicles carrying children.
5. The Australian Consumers' Association has a magazine called *Aware*.
6. The head office of Consumers International is in London.

*Check you understand the meaning of the underlined words and phrases in these sentences. Use your dictionary and your teacher to help you.*

1. Now we have robot-controlled vacuum cleaners which roam around your house whilst you are at work finding dust and cleaning it up.
2. *Which?* also campaigns to stop businesses ripping off or endangering customers.
3. promoted the use of lead-free paints on children's toys.
4. the right to redress
5. Consumers should use their power in the market to drive out abuses, to encourage ethical practices and support sustainable consumption and production.

### ***Discussion***

1. Have you got a Consumers' Association in your country?
2. What does it do?
3. Is it effective?
4. Are consumers' rights good for business or bad for business?
5. Consumers International say consumers have the responsibility 'to encourage ethical practices'. What does this mean?

### ***Read and discuss***

It is ridiculous to say that businesses have responsibilities. Their only responsibility is to make money for their owners and investors. Businesses have no responsibility to their consumers or even their employees.

***If you disagree with this statement, write a short statement saying what you think are the responsibilities of business.***