



*Rochester Committee
for Scientific Information
Rochester, NY*

*RCSI Bulletin 105
Consumer Protection Statement*

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October 1970*

THE ROCHESTER COMMITTEE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
P. O. Box 5236, River Campus Station
Rochester, New York 14627

Note to Members #105 (E)
Environmental Economics

Original Date October 1970
Corrected Issue November 1970

CONSUMER PROTECTION

A Perspective of Scientific Information

Prepared by George G. Berg and Herman S. Forest, Edited
and approved by Board of Directors, Rochester Committee
for Scientific Information, on October 12, 1970.

Submitted to Betty Furness, Chairman, State Consumer Protection
Board in response to invitation for recommendations sent
to R.C.S.I. on October 6, 1970.

Scientists can make a contribution to consumer protection by testing products independently and providing the public with accurate information. Their greatest contribution, however, would be in the more general acceptance of the scientist's standard of truth. Specifically, we offer these guides for action in the field of consumer protection.

1. One of the most powerful ideas of modern science is regulatory feedback or self-regulation. In effect, any biological unit - cell or society - maintains and restores health by correcting errors.

Traditional market regulation depends on supply-demand, modified by subsidy on one hand and quality standards on the other. Modern regulation must involve more than this narrow segment of the total system: consumer protection is correctly seen as a part of environmental protection.

2. The scientific standard of truth should apply without compromise to the buying-selling relationship. Both the scientist and his special community expect to be informed fully and accurately. Deception is unequivocally judged to be a serious act against the community, and a serious personal flaw in the deceiver.

The present market system encourages deception and penalizes accuracy in the buying-selling relationship. Deception is acceptable and profitable. This is no way to correct errors. In effect, the use of deception or secrecy is destructive-feedback. An accumulation of secret errors causes increasingly serious troubles for society in the long run.

3. The standard of truth must be enforced when it cannot be taught. In relation to the system it is expected to regulate, the control machinery for consumer protection is so limited that it would not have been effective even 100 years ago. A much greater portion of our common effort must be devoted to achieving effective control.

4. Control machinery must include an adequate resource of skilled scientists. Scientists must be able to speak freely because secrecy has no business in the modern scientific laboratory nor in the information a scientist furnishes the public.
5. Can citizens be educated to make self-correcting decisions? Yes. The experience of the R.C.S.I. in the field of pollution demonstrated that a large metropolitan community, Rochester and Monroe County, became educated to hard, abstract scientific truths, and consequently, it acted to correct the neglect of the past - at a considerable cost in dollars.
6. The R.C.S.I. emphasizes the necessity of AVAILABLE information to the consumer. When the truth is in fine print and deception in bold letters and over loud speakers, information is NOT available.
7. There is a direct relationship between the amount of seller deception and the degradation of environment. Deception produces waste. Thoughtless forced consumption robs resources which are exhaustible and piles up useless material.
8. Because the regulatory task ahead is so great, we suggest that the State of New York seek an active partnership with the scientific community and with citizen organizations, and develop mechanisms which will incorporate scientific standards and bring healthy self-regulation to the buyer-seller relationship.