

Consumer Organizations: What Do They Do and How Do They Do It?

Consumers Union – Publisher of Consumer Reports Magazine and Consumer Reports Online

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Consumers Union--Then

- ❖ 1926: Frederick Schlink organizes Consumers Research-- a “consumer club” to identify products consumers should avoid.
- ❖ 1933: Schlink and Arthur Kallet publish a book titled “100,000,000 guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics.
- ❖ 1936: Strikers from Consumers’ Research start their own organization called Consumers Union. Their charter was to provide consumers with information and counsel on goods and services.
- ❖ The first issue of Consumers Union Reports in may 1936 deals with health and safety issues including Grade A versus Grade B Milk and Lead in Toys

Consumers Union -- Now

- ❖ More than 50 testing labs, a 327-acre auto test facility, more than 140 highly trained researchers and technicians, and more than 60 experienced reporters and editors.
- ❖ Consumer Reports magazine has about 4 million subscribers and Consumer Reports Online has nearly 1-1/2 million subscribers.
- ❖ Our mission is to Test, Inform, and Protect.

How is Consumers Union different from other test and publishing organizations?

- ❖ Consumers Union accepts no paid advertising.
- ❖ Consumers Union accepts no free samples of the products we review, no free trips, no free lodging, no freebies at all.
- ❖ Consumers Union is an independent, non-profit research and testing organization. We are impartial, unbiased, expert and answer only to consumers.

Beyond Product Testing

- ❖ Consumers Union has three advocacy offices—one in Washington DC, one in Texas, and one in California. Each working on legislation to protect the consumer.

Examples of work being done at Advocacy Offices

- ❖ Texas Office: Spearheading a national campaign to get states to disclose to the public their hospital infection rates. This is a very serious public safety issue that claims approximately 90,000 lives in the U.S. annually. For a quick summary of what the campaign is all about -- as well as more detailed info. -- you can visit www.StopHospitalInfections.org.
- ❖ California Office: [Building a Healthy Future: Sustaining School-Based Enrollment in Health Insurance Programs \(May 2003\)](#)
The report describes several approaches to increasing children's enrollment in health insurance programs. The report also provides suggestions for obtaining funding, including leveraging federal and other dollars, to sustain school-based enrollment programs in tight budget times.
- ❖ Washington DC Office: **Mad Cow** -- Asking government to approve quick tests for BSE on cows over 20 months of age; track all cows from birth to slaughter; ensure no central nervous system material is present in meat products; and give the USDA recall authority to remove hazardous meat from the shelves (currently recalls are voluntary).
Dietary Supplements -- Even though Ephedra has been banned, there are many similar supplements out there that can cause the same problems. We are asking that the FDA require companies that produce these supplements report "adverse events" -- injury or death -- caused by these products so they know whether they are safe (currently, no reporting required) and also to require the manufacturers to conduct safety tests showing the products are safe before put on market (currently no pre-market safety testing required).

Back to Testing

- ❖ As the Director of Testing of the Recreation and Home Improvement Test Department, I have a more focused job at Consumers Union and I will give some insight to how we test.
- ❖ CU tests a vast range of products including cars, appliances, electronics, foods, baby and child, health and fitness, home improvement, and outdoor power equipment.
- ❖ As my title suggests I'm responsible for running the test programs for recreation products such as bikes, bike and ski helmets, exercise equipment, shoe products, outdoor power equipment, paints and coatings, roofing, siding, windows, vacuums, and even toilets. I'm also responsible for testing automotive aftermarket products such as auto batteries, Navigations systems, polishes and waxes to name a few.

Choosing Products to Test

- ❖ Involves many people including market analysts, engineers, editors, and reporters. We also have to make choices based on priority and resources. A typical test project can easily cost \$100,000 to complete.
- ❖ Once product is chosen, our market research department, contacts major manufactures to find out about best selling products and currency, they also track the industry through trade shows and publications, and look at what is being sold at retail.

Buying Samples

- ❖ Staff of anonymous shoppers who buy products at retail as any consumer would.
- ❖ Main staff in Yonkers but have a nationwide network of shoppers (for foods and other items).

Testing

- ❖ **Performance and Safety:** We develop tests based on how consumers use the product. All relevant industry and government standards are considered. Many of our test methods are long-established and are refined with each new project.
- ❖ **Ease of Use:** Even the best performing product must integrate well with the user. Some of the items evaluated are instructions, assembly, controls, layout, ergonomics, labeling, and handling.
- ❖ **Reliability:** For many major product categories we send out an annual questionnaire to our subscribers on real life feedback on how the particular product performed. For example, our latest Questionnaire drew responses for 675,000 subscriber owned vehicles that allowed us to provide 14 potential trouble spots.

Example of Testing—Lawn Mowers

- ❖ New model mowers are introduced at the outdoor power equipment show in October and become available in late January.
- ❖ In order to buy the product and test in time to present the data in spring, we maintain a mower test site in Florida to accommodate testing in late January and February.
- ❖ When testing products such as window air conditioners and barbecue grills, we often have to purchase the test samples in the south where the products are first introduced in order to have results in a timely manner.

Surprising Results

- ❖ We sometimes test products with unbelievable claims or find surprising results. Some examples:
 - ❖ Prolong (Oct '98): Claim: Can run your engine without motor oil for hundreds of miles.
Test Results: Tested in two engines and both failed after 13 minutes and 5 miles.
 - ❖ Auto Starter (Oct '98): Claim: Can boost a dead battery in a car.
Test Results: Could not boost a dead battery, in addition, it was composed of ordinary alkaline batteries and was being charged by the cars battery—something the label on batteries warns against because of possible leakage or explosion.
 - ❖ Cordless Drills: One cordless drill had a trigger that would stick in the “on” position. If the user let go of the trigger the drill would keep turning. During testing the drill slipped out of the users hands and kept spinning in the work. To make matters worse, the battery pack would than fly off. Two companies were marketing the same drill one acknowledged the problem and made a fix, the other claimed it was a feature.

Product Safety

- ❖ Most products claim to meet government or voluntary industry standards. For the most part, products that claim to meet the standards generally do. If we feel that a standard is inadequate or a hazard is not covered—we develop our own test protocol. We use a variety of sources: surveys of readers for use patterns, outside injury databases, trade associations, university research, technical literature, tests from other consumer magazines, outside consultants, outside labs, and nearly 70 years of testing and publishing experience.
- ❖ If we find something we think is particularly dangerous, we notify the consumer as soon as we have fully analyzed the data and surrounding issues. That is usually done in our magazine and on our web site. We also petition the government to investigate and consider the need for a recall. In special circumstances, we have held a press conference.
- ❖ Consumer Reports also prints a monthly recall column and posts it for free on our web site. Readership scores of what our subscribers read, continually show that the recall section ranks among the most widely read columns enforcing the idea that people are concerned about the safety of the products they use.

Ski / Snowboard Helmet Testing

- ❖ There are three industry standards that dictate safety performance of these products—ASTM International, SNELL Memorial Foundation, and the European Committee for Standardization. All mandate tests for impact absorption, retention-system strength, stability, and a minimum head area the helmet must protect.
- ❖ Our tests incorporate elements of those tests but go beyond them to see just how much impact protection each helmet can provide.

Standards Might Not Account for Everything

- ❖ Only one of the ski helmet standards discusses broken shells but even that standard allows a helmet that met the energy absorption limits to pass despite a broken shell.
- ❖ In our tests, we had a helmet that passed the energy absorption limits, but whose shell broke into large sharp fragments that could cut the wearers face and render the retention system useless—a potential problem in a multiple impact accident. We Rated the helmet Not Acceptable.
- ❖ The challenge for our editors was to tell the story of what we found in our tests but not discourage people from using a helmet. Almost any helmet is better than none. A similar challenge to when we rate child safety seats where some are better than others. We need to make it clear that any child safety seat is better than none. Our job is to push manufacturers to make the best product possible and not discourage consumers from using them.

Standards Should be Real World

- ❖ We tested an automatic no-spill fuel can used for fueling outdoor power equipment. It's estimated that traditional portable fuel containers create millions of tons each day of smog forming pollution due to spilled fuel and escaped vapors. No-spill cans are designed to stop the flow of fuel when it reaches the top of the gas tank and automatically seal to prevent vapors from escaping
- ❖ Any portable gas can sold in California must be certified to meet the California Air Resources Board specifications for these cans. Other states have or are in the process of adopting this same standard.
- ❖ We tested several of these cans a few years back and they performed as claimed in the test standards laboratory bench testing. When used in the field, one caused a significant amount of gas to spill.