

Co-operation and the ConsumerA CONSUMER POLICY?

by

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"The Co-operative Movement in this country is predominantly a consumers' movement" - these words or something similar invariably form part of any introduction to the many visitors we receive in Holyoake House. It is a factual statement in relation to the Co-operative Union's membership - but how does such a statement bear up under scrutiny?

"A consumers' co-operative society is one which has been organised and is controlled by consumers for the purpose of supplying their needs as consumers" - so wrote Hall & Watkins in their book 'Co-operation' and went on to describe such societies technically as "retail distributive co-operatives". There can be no doubt therefore that technically our Movement is a consumers movement, but can we claim to be part of the 'Consumer Movement' which is the subject of a great deal of attention paid by Government, the media etc? Can we claim to be a genuine movement of active consumers, coming together to educate and inform, to gain mutual benefit in both economic and social terms, by co-operating? If we are honest with ourselves, the answer must be no - somewhere along the road we have lost our way. I do not propose to attempt to analyse why, how and when. What is more important is to find our way, and to find it quickly. Our Movement is unique; we are represented in most towns and in many villages throughout the country, the 'Co-op' is known but perhaps not understood, even by many of our 10 million members but that is our potential.

Co-operatives are of the community, they are distinctive. But increasingly we are seen as just another High Street retailer, because we have not demonstrated that this is not the case, by the way in which we act and by the way in which we present ourselves.

If our Movement is to develop as a consumers' movement we must embark upon a programme, to emphasise and take advantage of the unique features of an organisation which is owned and directed by consumers, and therefore differs fundamentally from other retailers. A policy for the next decade must be formulated and adopted, which will take into account issues which come to the fore as being of importance to the future well being of our members and the community at large. Co-operatives are part of the local community and should therefore contribute to its development in its widest sense. However any policy must be relevant to the needs of our members, and therefore they must be involved in defining the issues. It is apparent now that a number of issues will be of importance to, and have implications for consumers in the years immediately ahead. I have in mind the increasing pressure on energy resources, and its impact both for the production of food, clothing and durables, and upon the type of product; the developments in computer and associated technology of which we are only just seeing the beginning; and increasing concern about pollution, the environment and such things as food additives. There will be many others, but these are the kind of problems that consumers will be able to influence solutions to, if they are organised.

However, as has been said many times before if we are to be effective, and if we are to be taken notice of, we must first and foremost be successful as a business organisation - not any business organisation, but a distinctive co-operative business. Therefore top of the list in a Consumer Policy for the future would be:-

1. Co-operative Trading, - followed by
2. Consumer Influence and Information
3. Cultural Activities and Information

Taking each aspect in turn, the following are the kind of points which could form part of a programme to be pursued in support of the CONSUMER POLICY.

#### 1. Co-operative Trading

##### Objectives

- (a) to adapt and develop the network of shops to enable the Movement to give an improved service to members, and increase its market share.
- (b) to develop the range of commodities to meet the requirements of members and customers having regard to quality and fitness for purpose, good design, and the setting of standards in support of these objectives - reliability and simplicity should be the key-note.
- (c) to offer goods at competitive prices, consistent with good quality, and advertising the advantages of 'Co-operative shopping' with emphasis on the value and standards of 'own brand' products.

##### Programme

#### (i) Stores

- provision of in store information to the consumer regarding location and pricing of merchandise to a uniform high standard.

- facilities for the handicapped.
- no smoking in all stores.
- efforts to reduce energy consumption.

(ii) Commodities

- development of "own brands" with emphasis on quality and purity i.e. absence of harmful additives etc.
- improvement of assortment of clothing, household goods, durables, toys and leisure goods, with emphasis on good design, safety and reliability.
- increased attention to and use of pollution free and resource-saving packaging, which is re-usable or can be easily disposed of.

(iii) Pricing and Advertising

- clarity in pricing of goods, with comparative information when offers are being made e.g. sale times etc.
- supply of information to assist consumer to assess value where packaging is not standardised.
- consistency of advertising practices to aid the consumer in coming to a purchase decision.

2. Consumer Influence and Information

Objectives

- (a) to enable as many members as possible to participate in, and be encouraged to participate in the affairs of

the co-operative and thereby to exert consumer influence.

- (b) to provide information for the benefit of members and consumers to enable them to judge and to act in their own best interests.

### Programme

- (i)- to take a fresh look at participation, particularly approaches that could be made to members to become involved outside the formalities of the existing rules and members meetings requirements.
- utilisation of modern methods of communications particularly in the more widely spread regional societies
  - the appointment of staff to specialise in member contact/reasons activities.
- (ii)- the provision of general information on matters affecting the consumers' own interest - health, security etc.
- provision of much more information to increase the consumers' knowledge of commodities including quality, contents labelling, use of additives, nutrients, energy consumption etc.
  - information for special consumer groups - children, teenagers, parents, pensioners, disabled etc.
  - continued development of informative labelling.
  - provision of consumer information for schools.

### 3. Cultural Activities and Information

#### Objectives

To use the resources of a commercial organisation with a social purpose, to enable and encourage consumers to develop their interests in cultural matters, by attention to the opportunities provided through the retail stores, and also within the community.

#### Programme

- to develop turnover of books, records and tapes, periodicals, books, paintings, posters etc.
- support local cultural events, and initiate such where appropriate, provide opportunities for local cultural events to advertise in, or use co-operative premises.
- extended usage of packaging posters etc. for dissemination of information concerning the Co-operative Movement.

Much of the above outline may seem self evident, but it seems important to be able to move forward in a positive direction. A Consumer Policy/Programme needs to be set out and made known throughout the Movement both for the benefit of consumers themselves in the widest sense, and also that societies can see quite clearly the direction in which they are going.

Such a three point policy, which I have only sketched in outline could form the basis of a determined attempt to re-establish the Co-operative Movement as a consumers' organisation. It could be extended of course; it could cover such matters as environment and resources, developing technology, international collaboration etc. However what is

important is that a Policy/Programme cannot be imposed - it must be very much the outcome of discussion and debate at Society level, coupled with a determination to look forward, rather than backwards. It must also be relevant and related to our operations as retail distributive (consumers) co-operative societies.

The future of our Movement depends upon our success in attracting and holding the interest of the younger generations - something which up to now we have singularly failed to do. That interest will only be forthcoming if we have a relevance to today and to tomorrow. We are all consumers in one way or another - a policy for consumers with that relevance will, I believe, create that interest, and lead to involvement - particularly if it is a Co-operative policy.