
UNIT 10 CONSUMER EDUCATION

All of us are consumers in one way or the other. In order to make the right use of our hard earned money, we should know our rights and duties in the market place.

In this Unit, information is given about the various agencies which protect consumers from getting duped by sellers or manufacturers and educate consumers regarding their rights.

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- describe the importance of consumer education,
- discuss the role of different agencies imparting consumer education, and
- list the limitation of such institutions.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

In the present days when the consumers are being exploited by the sellers in one way or the other, it is important for the consumers to be aware of their rights and duties. In their own interest, they should know what they have to do in those circumstances when they are put to a disadvantage. They might have paid a high price for a commodity or might have bought a poor quality product without their knowledge. Many times such consumers resignedly say that it was due to their ill-luck and the seller will have the last laugh. Such an attitude leads to serious sufferings on the part of the consumer.

10.2 AGENCIES PROVIDING CONSUMER EDUCATION

10.2.1 Consumer Protection Organisations

A number of consumer protection organisations have sprung up in urban centres to protect the consumers from being exploited. These organisations which function under different names take up the responsibility of bringing to book the sellers who deceive the consumers. But most of these organisations come into the picture only after the consumer is affected. Further, most of these organisations are concentrated in urban centres and do not include the rural sector in their purview.

10.2.2 Mass Media

Print medium has come to play a very important role in educating the consumer. Newspapers, magazines, handbills, pamphlets, etc. are being used to disseminate information about the products available in the market, the places where they are available and the prices at which they are available. If you read the newspapers closely, you will see that the price information on different markets is being regularly published. This will help the consumers to compare the prices of commodities between different markets. In the

absence of such information, the consumers might buy their commodities paying a higher price.

The same medium also publishes information on different types of commodities available in the market and their quality. Such information serves as an important instrument for the decision making of the consumer. **Models of two such sources of information are given at the end of this Unit.**

The media of radio and television in the present days have assumed greater importance than the print media. These media enjoy a very high degree of listenership/viewership and hence the coverage enjoyed by the advertiser is also more. A very important feature of these media is that even illiterate people follow the message contained in these advertisements. They help the consumer in getting educated about different products.

10.2.3 Extension Agencies

The extension agencies of the Governments like the Departments of Health, Food Agriculture, Social Welfare etc., educate the consumers from time to time on various aspects of food. These agencies provide information through meetings, demonstrations, pamphlets, film shows, etc. Most of these activities are carried out in rural areas to educate the people in far flung areas.

10.2.4 Consumer Protection Cells

The latest development in the field of consumer rights is the proposed setting up of consumer protection cells at different levels. These are sponsored by the Central Government and the State Governments have been asked to implement them. Under this scheme, there will be a committee at the District level to which a consumer can appeal if he feels he is deceived by a seller of the commodity. Such committees are also to be set up at the state level and national level. The power of the committees at different levels is different. These have been given statutory powers and hence enjoy legal status.

10.2.5 Voluntary Agencies

Voluntary agencies play a major role in educating the consumers about their rights and responsibilities. Most of these agencies have capacity only to advice the consumers. Another major drawback of these agencies is that they concentrate mostly on the consumer durables. Most of the food commodities like fruits and vegetables and coarse grains do not come under their purview. Hence, consumer education with regard to the common food items of consumption is very poor.

☛ Check Your Progress

- 1** What is the role of consumer protection groups in educating the consumers? What are their main limitations?

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- 2** How does the print medium help in educating the consumers?

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3 What is the main advantage of radio/TV over newspapers in educating the consumers?

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4 Explain the concept of consumer protection cells.

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10.3 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you have understood the importance of Consumer Education. The agencies educating the consumers are the consumer protection groups, mass media, extension agencies and other voluntary agencies. A lot needs to be done in extending consumer education to the rural areas.

10.4 GLOSSARY

Consumer Education: Enlightening the consumers about their rights and duties.

Consumer Protection: Protecting the consumers against exploitation.

Consumer Rights: The rights (things one is entitled to) of the person who buys or uses goods or services.

Exploitation of Consumer: Taking advantage of consumer's weakness by producers/traders in the form of supplying poor quality commodities at higher prices.

Mass Media: Media through which the masses can be contacted, e.g. Radio, TV, Newspapers, Magazines.

10.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1 The Consumer Protection Groups are the agencies which educate the consumers about their rights and duties, what they should do in circumstances when they are put to disadvantage, etc. These organisations also take the responsibility of taking action against those sellers who deceive the consumers.

The limitations of these organisations are that these organisations come into the picture **only after** the consumer has been affected and has complained to them. Further, most of these organisations are concentrated in urban areas and do not cover rural areas.

2 The print media like newspapers, magazines, handbills, pamphlets, etc. are used to disseminate information about the products available in the market, their prices and the places they are available. Price information on different markets is also published

regularly. This helps the consumers to make a comparison between the prices of commodities in different markets, quality of the products and the ways of using the same. Many a time, educational articles are published to educate the consumers on various aspects, e.g. adulteration and its harmful effects, importance of leafy vegetables, and care needed in buying processed food.

- 3 The main advantage of radio/TV over newspapers in educating the consumers is that it can educate even the illiterate people. While the information published in leaflets, newspapers etc. is of no use to the illiterate masses, the information through radio/TV is understood by all. Another advantage of radio/TV is that they can communicate the message to a large number of people on time.
- 4 The Consumer Protection Cells are the latest development in the field of consumers' rights. The Consumer Protection Cells are sponsored by the Central Government and set up at different levels by the State Governments. Under this scheme, a consumer can make a complaint if he is deceived by the seller. These committees have been given statutory powers and enjoy legal status.

Sources of Consumer Education

(i) Newspapers

Care Needed in Buying Processed Food (Extract from a Newspaper)

In recent years there has been a radical change in the type of food items consumed by an average consumer. Perhaps this has been taken for granted. "Gone are the days when pickles made by grandmothers and home-made jams filled kitchen shelves." Now such things as two-minute noodles, canned fruit slices, sauces, beverages and different kinds of canned meat, which did not find a place in the daily diet of our ancestors, are common. This has been possible because of technological advancement and modern production and marketing methods. Today's children, particularly those belonging to the upper strata of society, have got addicted to the modern forms of nourishment.

Processed food, which is easy to serve, is much in demand. This is a boon to working women who do not find time to prepare an elaborate meal.

Faced with an array of products from the two-minute noodles to instant idli, vada and dosai mix, the uninitiated buyer often looks at the price tag and buys what he/she can afford. But a consumer should know the value of different types of foods available. Only then will he be in a position to buy the best for his money.

Because of the mass media, newspapers, radio and television, processed food items are widely advertised and available not only in cities but in towns. This had had an impact on the food habits of the people, perhaps not wholly beneficial.

Nutrition and balanced diet are age-old concepts. Now people are aware of these because of sustained consumers education.

Media campaign

Most middle and lower middle class families have television sets in their homes. Multinationals and indigenous manufacturers take advantage of this by promoting their products on the small screen. Take infant foods for example. The manufacturers put out information about their products to their advantage, which might be a wilful distortion of reality but they put a heavy burden on the wage-earner's purse. Yet the hard sell of the media makes one feel there is no alternative to processed milk powders although most people know that breast feeding of babies is better than bottle feeding.

Many of the processed food items are nutritionally adequate, but the same amount of nutrition can be obtained by the consumer in a natural form, often at very much less cost than what one pays for the packed items. But the processed food items have come to stay either for good or for evil, because of the time factor in the present-day lifestyle. In such a circumstance it is better for the customer to know not only the different kinds of items available but what is contained in the cans. He should aim at getting the best value for his money. What one should remember before buying any of the advertised processed items is to find out the nutritional value of the product. Very often advertisements do not mention the

deleterious effects, if any, of the preservatives and flavourings invariably used in the processed items.

If you look at any label on a sauce, ketchup or similar item having a long shelf life, you will notice a long list of ingredients. At the end of the list is a reference to "permitted" flavourings and preservatives used. The addition of these items is permitted by rules framed under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954.

Food adulteration

Adulteration of food is a punishable crime. The laws are fairly comprehensive but malpractices do occur. Consequently one comes across many cases of food poisoning.

Experts say that a number of factors come in the way of stringent application of adulteration laws. One major factor is that the demand for a particular item far exceeds supply. This results in substandard items being supplied which ultimately find their way into our homes.

Additives form a significant ingredient in canned items. Very few customers are aware of or question what goes into the processed foods as additives. In some cases the additives, even in small quantities, may cause changes in the food items.

The Prevention of Food Adulteration Act lays down certain guidelines. It prohibits the sale of any substance which may be injurious to health when used as food. The law defines the permissible limits within which the additives can be used. Apparently the Act overlooks the cumulative effects of these additives in a canned item. Unfortunately no studies have been undertaken to find out the cumulative effect of the slow consumption of additives. Perhaps it is difficult to make such studies. Also, no studies have been done on the effect of one additive or the other.

The Act covers preservatives, antioxidants, flavourings and colourings. In some cases the additives have been identified as harmful and health-conscious countries have banned them.

In the case of traditional food preservatives — salt, sugar or spices — there is no restriction on their use because they are not harmful. The Act, however, restricts the use of certain preservatives which are called class II preservatives. Sulphur dioxide, which is commonly used, belongs to this category. Prolonged consumption of food items containing sulphur dioxide may lead to vitamin deficiency. Such foods can also become toxic if stored for a long time.

Nitrate and nitrites are also class II preservatives. These are used in canned meat products. Small quantities of nitrites are safely excreted by the human metabolic system, but they are likely to prove fatal when they find their way into the blood system in large quantities.

The use of antioxidants has been strictly controlled by law. These prevent fatty and oily foods from turning rancid. Some antioxidants are derived from natural sources such as vitamin C and its derivatives. The use of butylated hydroxy toluene (BHT) and butylated hydroxy anisole (BHA) in such items as ghee, butter or in fat-containing mixes (gulab jamun or jalebi) has been allowed. Both BHT and BHA accumulate in our body. The use of these chemicals has been banned or restricted in many countries because their prolonged ingestion is known to cause asthma or dermatitis.

Artificial sweeteners are frequently used. Saccharine, most commonly used, is suspected to have ill effects such as digestive disorders or blood clotting abnormalities. It is banned in a number of countries but not in India.

Artificial colourings have a purely cosmetic effect. They either intensify the original food colour or add to the colour which has been lost while processing. The use of artificial colouring cuts cost when it replaces the original colour.

Some safeguards must be taken. The ideal solution would be to avoid all processed foods. But this is not possible. One has to compromise by choosing items that have the minimum number of additives or those that use natural preservatives in preference to chemical ones. If you have even the slightest doubt about a processed item, avoid buying it.

— by Shraddha Saxena

Source: Extract from Daily Newspaper

CONSUMER EDUCATION (Poster)

**CONSUMER
BEWARE!**

**COLOUR
ADULTERATION**

DO YOU KNOW?

- COLOUR ADULTERATION IS THE MOST FREQUENT FORM OF ADULTERATION.
- NO ARTIFICIAL FOOD COLOURING IS REALLY SAFE.
- COLOURS ARE NOT FOODS AND DO NOT ADD TO THE NUTRITIVE VALUE OF FOODS.
- COLOUR SERVES TO MASK DEFECTS IN FOOD MAKING INFERIOR FOODS LOOK SUPERIOR.
- COLOURINGS ARE A HIGH RISK FOR CHILDREN AND THE FOETUS IN A PREGNANT MOTHER.
- COLOURINGS MAY REACT WITH THE FOOD AND OR CHANGE TO POISONS IN THE BODY, CAUSING MUTATIONS, CANCER OR OTHER TOXIC EFFECTS.

WHAT IS COLOUR ADULTERATION?

- USE OF ANY COLOUR PROHIBITED UNDER THE PFA ACT, IN OR UPON ANY FOOD OR BEVERAGE.
- USE OF MARKETED COLOURS NOT STAMPED WITH THE ISI MARK OF QUALITY.
- USE OF COLOURS ON FOODS SUCH AS RICE, PULSES, SPICES TEA AND COFFEE WHERE FOOD LAWS DO NOT PERMIT ARTIFICIAL COLOURING.
- USE OF PERMITTED COLOURS EXCEEDING THE MAXIMUM PERMISSIBLE LIMIT OF 0.2 GRAMS OF DYE PER KG OF THE FINAL FOOD OR BEVERAGE.

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