

World Consumer Day 2006: from consumer protection to consumer empowerment

On the occasion of the World Consumer Day on Wednesday, March 15^t, European Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner Markos Kyprianou stressed the key role played by the Commission in ensuring that the rights of consumers are respected across the EU: "There are now 450 million consumers in Europe. Their expenditure represents over half of EU GDP. They are key to economic growth and creating jobs. And yet there is an EU-wide lack of consumer confidence when it comes to cross-border transactions. A solid legislative framework has to be complemented with enhanced consumer information and education at EU level, to shift from consumer protection to consumer empowerment."

"My vision of EU consumer policy combines legislative action with a long-term commitment to consumer education and empowerment" Mr Kyprianou added. "I view the EU consumer as a real player with a leading role in the EU single market, not as a passive observer of market forces. We are about to review a great deal of EU consumer protection legislation to make it more consistent, but we are also working towards making sure European consumers are aware of their rights and capable of defending them."

EU consumer protection policy

Consumer policy is a shared responsibility between the EU and Member States, based on articles 95 and 153 of the EU Treaty. Article 95 provides measures for the creation of the internal market. Article 153 foresees the taking into consideration of consumer interests into other EU policies. Both provisions commit the EU to achieving a high level of consumer protection.

Lack of consumer confidence

A completed internal market in the retail sector would see consumers equally confident in buying across borders as domestically. E-commerce is making this easier practically but consumer confidence is still lagging behind and the internal market remains fragmented. Consumer protection can address many of the obstacles to consumer confidence, through regulation, enforcement, information, education and redress.

Consumer representation, information and education

Initiatives undertaken by the Commission to boost consumer representation, information and education include the European training courses for personnel of consumer organisations, the development of interactive web-based education tools for adults, the distribution of the European Consumer Diary to schools in all EU Member States and the future launch of European Masters degrees in consumer issues.

A strong legislative framework

Over the last 15 years, the Commission has pushed through a large number of sector-specific pieces of legislation, dealing with different aspects of consumer protection. The General Product Safety Directive provides an example: it puts in place the RAPEX notification system for unsafe products, and is the basis of further decisions on specific products, such as child-resistant lighters. Dangerous substances such as the use of phthalates in certain toys and children's products have been banned thanks to EU legislation. Measures guaranteeing increased cooperation between national authorities to enforce EU consumer protection laws on behalf of all European consumers will be operational at the end of this year to help combat cross-border scams. The most recent Directive, the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, is not limited to a particular sector, but is applied widely to ban misleading and aggressive business-to-consumer practices.

Address your local European Consumer Centre!

If a consumer has a complaint against a company or is in a dispute with a trader in another Member State, (s)he can turn to the EU co-sponsored network of European Consumer Centres. The centres assist citizens in the exercise of their rights as consumers and provide for easy access to redress in cases where the consumer has purchased an item in a different country. There are now European Consumer Centres in twenty four countries across Europe, with another three planned to open before the end of this year, to then cover all Member States plus Norway and Iceland.

For further information, please visit:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/index_en.htm

For access to the different European Consumer Centres, please visit:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/redress/ecc_network/index_en.htm