



Raising standards for consumers



POSITION PAPER

Future Consumer Policy priorities & trends

November 2014

Contact Person: Chiara Giovannini, Senior Manager
(Chiara.Giovannini@anec.eu)

1. Introduction

This position paper expresses ANEC's perspectives on the priorities and trends in future European consumer policy following election the new European Parliament and the appointment of the new European Commission. Our focus is on the use of standards as tools to enhance consumer protection and welfare.

We welcome the possibility to contribute to the European Consumer Consultative Group (ECCG) discussions on possible orientations for the future which, we trust, will feed into the development of EU Consumer Policy in the years to 2020.

2. General Consumer Policy priorities and trends

Beyond general product safety, the use of standards as a tool for consumer protection is to be found in legislation on specific product safety, the accessibility of products, the environment and services. Mainstreaming consumer interests in other policies is vital for ANEC as our activities and priorities span many areas that were not the usual remit of DG SANCO. One of the main priorities of the next Consumer Policy should be the effective integration of consumer issues in other policies, beyond the newly-created portfolio of Consumers and Justice.

The mainstreaming of consumer interests into these policies, and the increased participation of consumers in European standardisation, requires:

- Strong and independent consumer representation at the European and national levels (in policy and standardisation fora; enhanced role for the ECCG for strategic discussions);
- Improved enforcement of legislation and standards aimed at the protection of consumers of all ages & abilities, and in addressing new risks (e.g. chemicals in consumer products), as well as strengthened market surveillance, including on-line market surveillance;
- Better consumer protection in the field of services through the creation of a legislative framework at European level for the safety of services, underpinned by service-specific standards and the better awareness & enforcement of consumer rights in cross border services;
- Actions to pave accessibility to the digital environment, and build the trust of consumers in the privacy and security of their personal data;
- Proper enforcement of compliance with various environmental standards and labelling schemes, and the setting of mandatory targets;

- Promotion of the interests of vulnerable consumers (children, elderly people, & people with disabilities) within EU policies;
- Establishing a pan-European accident & injuries database to help determine priorities for standardisation and legislation, and assess their effectiveness;
- Evaluation of the impact of international trade agreements on consumer protection (TTIP as a new kind of free trade agreement with a potential “spill-over” effect on regulation);
- Evolution of the European Standardisation System, particularly to develop European Standards needed for consumer protection and consumer confidence in the services sector;
- Ensuring the effective participation of all stakeholders within the European Standardisation System.

3. Consumer Policy Priorities in the digital environment

ANEC has identified the following priorities and challenges for Consumer Policy in the digital environment. However, because the use of new technologies now permeates every aspect of our lives, the demarcation between the “on-line” and “off-line” worlds is sometimes artificial. The trends and priorities outlined below are therefore to be considered relevant in a general sense.

The changes brought about by the Information Society are strongly impacted by socio-economical new trends linked to the need to protect the planet and natural resources. One of these trends is the concept of “circular economy” (as opposed to waste economy/linear economy), where the role and the profile of consumers is different.

Another emerging trend is the concept of the “collaborative/sharing economy or collaborative/participatory consumption” where the role and responsibilities of consumers are also changing¹.

New role and responsibilities for consumers - the concept of “Prosumer”

In these new economic trends, consumers are not only at the end of the chain (where they play three main roles: purchase, use and disposal) but take an active role and perform new tasks (Pooling/Sharing versus acquisition – Paying for functionalities versus purchasing products – Renovating or/and recycling versus

¹ Collaborative or participatory consumption: a sustainable model for the 21st century, CESE 2788/2013 - INT/686 Own-initiative, 22 Jan 2014.

throwing away – selling and providing services). The use of digital technologies such as sharing platforms allows these new trends to occur on a significant scale.

In this context, consumers become occasionally professionals, with rights and obligations about which they might not be aware. Hence the border between the professional and the consumer parts of daily life is more and more blurred.

Smart Energy

Consumers are playing a more central role in the energy market, where they not only consume but now also can produce. Often, however, consumers do not have the information they need to encourage active involvement and enable them to make informed decisions on their consumption. In order to achieve a greater involvement of consumers in their energy usage and management, consumers need to have free and easy access to real time information on their current usage as well as personalised, understandable and usable information on their historical consumption. Information must lead to knowledge.

To reduce the risk of consumer detriment, independent comparison tools are needed and control required on the way information is shown on price comparison and peer review sites. It is also of paramount importance that consumers are protected against safety, privacy and security risks, and have effective means of redress to deal with any breaches.

Reliable consumer information

Providing effective and reliable information to consumers is at the foundation of any consumer policy, especially when consumers are expected to exercise their “right of choice” or “informed consent”. Having adequate knowledge about the characteristics of a product or service - such as its safety and environmental performance - is a prerequisite to the empowerment of consumers. However, knowledge can be achieved only if the information provided to consumers is coherent, reliable, understandable and transparent. Experience shows that this is very challenging as the traditional ways of informing consumers (“small print”) are not effective at all.

Digital technologies can help consumers receive information in an easier and more focused manner, and enables them to exchange information on-line (blogs, chat forums). But they also bring new challenges as the independence & reliability of comparison sites and online reviews is sometimes questionable.

Personal data and privacy protection

The role of consumers in maintaining their own security and contributing to the security of public and private networks should not be forgotten.

Within the domestic environment, the data processing undertaken by individuals to help them socialise, run and manage their lives should be secure and under their control regardless of where the processing physically takes place.

E-accessibility

More and more services – private and public – are offered exclusively through the internet or at special rates (e.g. rebates on tax returns submitted electronically), including through apps (e-health & m-health). The continued accessibility of older consumers and consumers with disabilities must be ensured.

END.

About ANEC

ANEC is the European consumer voice in standardisation, defending consumer interests in the processes of technical standardisation and conformity assessment, as well as related legislation and public policies.

ANEC was established in 1995 as an international non-profit association under Belgian law and is open to the representation of national consumer organisations in 33 countries.

ANEC is funded by the European Union and EFTA, with national consumer organisations contributing in kind. Its Secretariat is based in Brussels.



Raising standards for consumers

**European association for the coordination
of consumer representation in standardisation aisbl**

Avenue de Tervuren 32, box 27, B-1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel.: +32 2 743 24 70 / Fax: +32 2 706 54 30
E-mail: anec@anec.eu

EC Register of Interest Representatives:
Identification number 507800799-30

www.anec.eu

@anectweet

www.facebook.com/ANEC.Standards



ANEC is supported financially by the European Union & EFTA

*This document may be quoted and reproduced, provided the source is given.
This document is available in English upon request from the ANEC Secretariat or from the ANEC website at www.anec.eu*

© Copyright ANEC 2014