
Forum

Consumer affairs conference responds to new issues

At its recent 10th anniversary conference, the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business tackled the many new and challenging issues facing organisations and consumers in today's frenetic, competitive and volatile marketplace.

With 58 speakers and panellists and over 150 delegates, some from as far afield as the US, South Africa, Canada and New Zealand, the conference dealt with emerging issues in a global context.

It was held at Old Parliament House in Canberra on 26 and 27 October and was accompanied by several displays of software for complaints handling and customer service.

SOCAP was initially set up in the US in 1973 in response to the emerging consumerism there. Several years later the organisation came to the attention of Colin Kent who worked for the Commonwealth Bank at the time and he realised its potential for improving Australian business practices. After discussions with Bill Dee, then a senior officer with the ACCC's predecessor, the Trade Practices Commission and now Managing Director of Compliance Solutions, Mr Dee convened a meeting in 1990 of several business people 'to establish mutual goals between industries and consumers'.

Out of that grew SOCAP Australia — an organisation that now boasts almost 400 members in business, government, consultancy services and academic institutions.

Unlike SOCAP USA, which is a peak body for private sector organisations only, from the very beginning SOCAP Australia involved the public sector as well, with links to the broad consumer movement.

Today there are sister organisations in the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Japan, Korea and, of course, the USA.

Mr Dee believes SOCAP has been instrumental in the development of better complaints handling systems across most sectors. 'Because of these improved systems, we are better able to read and anticipate what the market is saying at an industry and enterprise level — and identify the shortcomings,' he said.

While there is still room for improvement in the handling of complaints, SOCAP is at the leading edge in devising processes and methodologies to react more quickly to consumer demands.

The processes developed are being used as an instrument of organisational improvement. 'Companies are now using complaints handling to look at systemic problems within their organisations.'

Other important issues for consumer affairs professionals, and which were addressed at the conference, include privacy and security in the e-commerce arena.

'Quality of goods and services are also ongoing concerns, in both the online environment and the traditional marketplace,' Mr Dee said.

An emerging issue is the quality of information that is available — how accessible it is, how user friendly and can consumers make informed choices on the basis of it.

This is important not just in the private sector, but also in the public. Expressing a clear commitment to the general principles that apply to well-managed consumer relations has been apparent in SOCAP's promotion of service charters across both sectors.

'They are in response to an increasing demand for better, more responsive services delivery,' he said.

Mr Dee hopes delegates will take away from the conference a stronger commitment to complaints and dispute resolution, customer satisfaction, privacy and corporate compliance.

According to Mr Dee, some sectors are right on the ball in their consumer affairs procedures, while others are seriously lagging. 'It depends on the competitiveness of the industry. The more people can vote with their feet, the more competitive an industry becomes and therefore the more responsive it is. For example, in banking it is difficult for people to change accounts and to switch mortgages without incurring penalties. The computer industry is another that generates consumer complaints.'

He commended the financial industry, commenting that it was well on track, probably because of the nature of the industry in that it deals with people's assets.

At its 10th annual conference it was the first time SOCAP had run an industry-specific format, as well as sessions of general interest. Day one targeted financial services, manufacturing and retail, telecommunications, government and utilities, with more than 50 different speakers, panellists and facilitators.

Day two looked broadly at the big picture with addresses from Apple Computer Australia's managing director, Diana Ryall, the ABC's new head Jonathan Shier, British Telecom's head of consumer affairs, Annette Lovell, and Giant Foods Inc USA vice-president, Odonna Mathews.

Conference partners

SOCAP was well supported for the conference with key sponsorship from AAMI, AMP, Ansett Australia, Amway, Telstra and the NRMA. Conference partners were:

- Australian Banking Industry Ombudsman
- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission
- Australian Food and Grocery Council
- Australia New Zealand Food Authority
- Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia
- Australian Security and Investment Commission

Commonwealth Ombudsman

Energy Industry Ombudsman Vic

Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW

Office of Fair Trading ACT

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman

By forming these partnerships, SOCAP hopes to not only lift its profile through the conference, but also to bring in new members.

Meet the regulators

At the pre-conference cocktail party, delegates had an opportunity to meet the policy makers and regulators including:

- Sitesh Bhojani, Commissioner with the ACCC
- Delia Rickard, Co-director of ASIC
- Mark Bodycoat, Commissioner with the Office of Consumer & Business Affairs South Australia
- Tony Shaw, Chair of the Australian Communications Authority
- Ian Lindenmayer, Managing Director of the Australia New Zealand Food Authority
- Colin Neave, Australian Banking Industry Ombudsman
- John Pinnock, Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman
- Jan Harris, General Manager, Consumer Affairs, Department of the Treasury

ACCC deputy chair wins award

A highlight of the conference was the presentation of the SOCAP Significant Contribution to Consumer Affairs Award at the conference dinner. This year's winner was ACCC Deputy Chairman and SOCAP member, Allan Asher. The award, presented for the first time last year:

- focuses on best practice consumer affairs initiatives and achievements consistent with SOCAP objectives;
- provides a positive role model; and

- provides formal peer recognition of achievement and contribution by a SOCAP member.

Mr Asher has had a long association with the consumer movement in Australia. He was a Council Member and Public Affairs Manager of the Australian Consumers' Association, and as a barrister and solicitor has been active in consumer protection and competition issues. He was the Australian Councillor on the board of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions from 1979 to 1986 and was a member of the Consumer Standards Advisory Board of the Standards Association of Australia.

Mr Asher has also had extensive experience in promoting consumers' economic interests in developing countries, working as a consultant for over 20 years for governments and international agencies concerned with competition, law enforcement, product safety and consumer protection. He chaired the OECD Consumer Policy Committee from 1993 to 1996 and is the foundation chair of the International Society of Consumer and Competition Officials. His term at the Commission expires on 5 November and he will then take up a new position at Consumer International in London as the global director of campaigns.

New book launched

Friday lunchtime at the conference featured the launch of a new book, *In the consumer interest*, published by SOCAP and edited by a founding SOCAP member and past president,

Simon Smith. Mr Smith is General Manager, Consumer Issues and Charter Office of AAMI.

The book charts the shifting responses of business and industry to consumer issues and consumer activism in the second half of the 20th century, and the evolving role of government as regulator. It looks at how the consumer interest has been served in six key sectors — public administration, financial services, food manufacturing, health, communications and justice.

In the consumer interest also celebrates the contributions made by a gallery of consumer champions. The book's contributors were asked to nominate 30 individuals in total whose achievements in the consumer interest have been of lasting benefit to all Australians. Nominees include icons of Australian social justice such as Ben Chifley and Lionel Murphy, as well as current crusaders like this year's SOCAP award winner, ACCC Deputy Chairman Allan Asher, and ex-Commonwealth Ombudsman and now CEO of the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia, Philippa Smith.

More information

Conference papers will be available from SOCAP at its website <<http://www.socap.org.au>> and a synopsis will be published in its quarterly magazine, *Consumer directions*.

In the consumer interest can be obtained from SOCAP for \$35 for members and \$45 for non-members.



Allan Asher, Deputy Chairman of the ACCC, receives his award from SOCAP's past president John Wood.

Photography by Irene Lorbergs

ACCC Deputy Chairman goes global

Allan Asher, the Deputy Chairman of the Commission, leaves the organisation on 5 November. He will be taking up a new position at Consumer International's headquarters in London, as the global director of campaigns. With his wife, Joan, and 23-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, Mr Asher will arrive in London in December ready to start at Consumer International in January.

Before doing so, Mr Asher will fly to Durban, South Africa, the morning after finishing at the Commission, to attend the Consumers International triennial congress.

As well as chairing several sessions at the congress, he will also attend his final meeting as president of ISCCO — the International Society of Consumer and Competition Officials — an organisation for government officials working on competition and consumer issues.

Mr Asher spoke recently about his new position and his perceptions about the direction of consumer policy.

What is Consumer International and who belongs?

It's a federation of 260 voluntary consumer groups and government agencies all of whom have, as a major part of their activities, the promotion or protection of the interests of consumers. They come from 112 countries — almost every country in the world has a consumer group. Consumer International has offices in different regions: in South America, Africa, South-east Asia and Europe.

As global director of campaigns, what will you be doing?

I'll be directing the global campaigns in those areas where there are now global rules and policies — areas like the health, safety of food, international trade, competition and economic issues. The consumer voice now is very much a global one and I'm delighted to be able to continue a lot of the things I've been doing on a smaller Australasian stage.

It's a new position. The organisation has come to recognise that there is a need for a greater degree of coordination of international campaigns. Up till now, many of these have been run on a regional or national basis by constituent member organisations or in some of the regional offices. But CI recognises the globalising nature of many of these issues and the need for a global response.

It's a 3-year contract. I think it will certainly be fun. In fact I elevate that to one of the most important aspects of work. I can say that every job I've done, first and foremost has been fun. And I'm also able to say that they've all been jobs that have had a socially useful function. Perhaps with one exception as I started my career working for chartered accountants. That was neither fun nor socially useful!

Since those chartered accountant days, your career has been consumer-oriented. How has the perception of consumer policy changed during that time?

Twenty years ago, people conceived of consumer policy as being about social justice, about redressing some profound imbalance in market power. But from the mid-80s onwards that has changed a lot and, now, properly understood consumer policy is about mainstream economic policy. It is still about justice but also about making markets work. It's about providing the demand side of the economic equation with the same degree of focus that the supply side has had. Together with globalisation, that means it is a huge field that covers most areas. But certainly health care, food and nutrition, marketing, information technology, manufacturing and product safety are very much at the core of consumer issues.

What do you hope to achieve at Consumer International?

Much the same as I've hoped to achieve everywhere else — at the Australian Consumers Association and the ACCC. When I say that consumer policy used to spring from a sense of justice and welfare, the fact that I say now it's mainstream economic policy doesn't strip it of that other character.

And at the international level, the starkness between the poor and the rich, in both