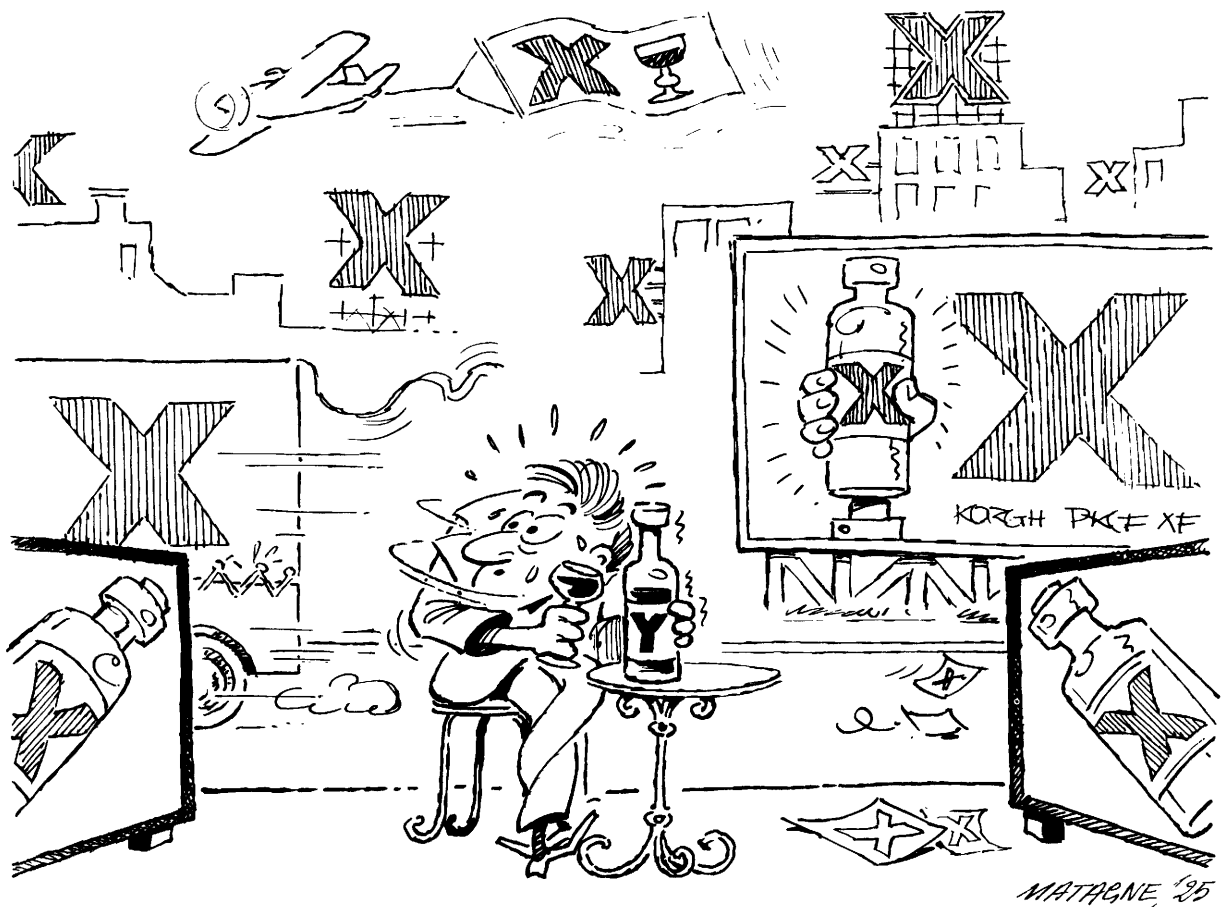


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European consumers have little love for the consumer society: this is one of the many paradoxes brought to light by a survey carried out at the request of the European Commission.

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****THE EUROPEAN CONSUMER**

The European consumer is a paradoxical creature. He is suspicious (he checks his change). He lets himself be cheated (but goes back to the shop to complain). He is sceptical (he doesn't believe a word the advertisements say). He considers himself well-informed (but doesn't read specialized consumer publications). He is an individualist (doesn't belong to a consumers organization) but has great faith in comparative tests (conducted of course by consumers organizations!). All in all it seems that the European consumer has little love for the consumer society.

A survey of 9 500 consumers conducted in the nine Community countries on behalf of the European Commission has produced an interesting picture of the European consumer, his attitudes and his behaviour.

The main findings of the survey are as follows:

1. There is a lack of consumer information: less than one consumer in two considered himself sufficiently well-informed when it comes to shopping, the precise figures being 43% for major purchases (furniture, household appliances etc.) and 51% for food. There is obviously room for improvement here, especially in Belgium and Italy, where the lack of information is much more keenly felt than in Germany and Denmark. Generally speaking, young people complained about lack of information more often than their elders.

2. There is widespread distrust of advertising: only half those questioned felt that "advertising provides consumers with useful information". Eight consumers in ten felt that advertising "often makes consumers buy goods which they do not really need" or "misleads consumers as to the quality of products" while six in ten thought that "brands which are heavily advertised are more expensive than those which are less advertised or are not advertised at all".

An analysis of the replies shows that the young, the well-off and, above all, the educated, are most likely to regard advertising in an unfavourable light. This finding will no doubt be disputed although everyone knows that this is nothing new. Critical attitudes do however appear to be gaining ground everywhere, not only in the Community.

3. The media come in for criticism: television comes out fairly well as a source of consumer information: about 50% of those questioned felt that it does a good job thanks no doubt to the excellent (if infrequent) programmes specifically aimed at the consumer; radio comes next (42%), followed by daily newspapers (38%) and weekly newspapers or magazines (31%).

Here again, there was a definite link between level of education and critical attitudes. As educational standards are tending to rise, criticism of the media may well become even more acute if nothing is done.

Generally speaking, the Danes, the Germans and the British have a more positive attitude towards the media than the French, the Belgians and the Italians.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF A CONSUMER SURVEY?

A survey of this kind is useful in two respects:

- it shows how the public - or rather different sections of the public - views its day-to-day situation and how individuals react. In this context comparisons between the nine countries are very revealing, as are breakdowns by sex, age, family size, income, and so on.
- computer analyses of the overall results show how public attitudes are formed, in other words identify the variables which influence opinion.

4. Consumers organizations have made little impression: fewer than four interviewees in ten in Luxembourg and the United Kingdom and one in ten in Italy could name a consumers organization.

No more than 2% of those questioned were members of a consumers organization, though a substantially higher proportion (15% "definitely" and 32% "perhaps") would be prepared to pay the equivalent of £3.50 a year to join one or subscribe to its publications. It must be gratifying for consumers organizations to know that they have a large potential following.

In the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg consumers organizations are considered relatively effective on the whole. However, the public is very sceptical as to their influence on government. It is not for us to say whether the public is right or wrong - the answer would vary in any case from country to country.

5. Comparative tests are well-regarded: although consumers organizations are not widely known, the public is fairly familiar (52%) with tests to compare the price and quality of various brands of goods. Indeed, the vast majority of those who had heard of such tests accepted the results and one in two claimed that their buying habits had been influenced by them.

INTEREST IS GROWING

The six-monthly EURO-BAROMETER surveys carried out on behalf of the European Commission show that public interest in consumer protection is increasing steadily. And significantly, one public image of the Common Market is that it allows consumers to choose from a wider range of goods.

**THE RESULTS IN DETAIL

1. Inflation. Not surprisingly, most of the consumers questioned (66% for the Community as a whole) felt that prices had risen more rapidly than incomes in the twelve months preceding the survey (it was carried out in October/November 1975). The effects of inflation were most keenly felt in Italy and Belgium. Denmark is rather unique in that it is the only country in which the majority of those questioned felt that they were coping well or not too badly with inflation.

As might be expected, the largest families and families with the lowest incomes were more conscious than others of the fall in their purchasing power.

Asked how they would react if prices continued to rise at the same rate in the months ahead, consumers said they would shop around for cheaper goods (82%), give up the idea of making any major purchases (such as furniture, household appliances, television, car, etc.) for the time being (78%), and go for special offers or sale goods (75%).

Inflation: the figures

In the twelve months preceding the survey prices in the Community rose so fast that consumers could hardly fail to notice. The figures are given below:

Germany: + 5.4%	Netherlands: + 9.0%	United Kingdom: + 25.0%
France: + 9.6%	Belgium: + 11.0%	Ireland: + 16.8%
Italy: + 11.2%	Luxembourg: + 10.9%	Denmark: + 4.3%

2. A dissatisfied customer. European consumers often feel that they have been cheated when making purchases or that they are the victims of an error or mistake on the part of a public service (41% and 40% respectively on average). In both instances the proportion is a lot higher in Italy than elsewhere. As we will see later, this seems to be indicative of a general feeling of dissatisfaction with society. Those who had felt cheated reacted as follows:

- . shops: four interviewees in ten complained to the shop or even asked for the faulty goods to be replaced or their money refunded;
- . public services: seven interviewees in ten complained verbally or made representations in writing.

3. A careful shopper. For the Community as a whole eight consumers in ten (83%) claimed that they often check their change, two thirds said that they often check the final bill (66%) the unit price (66%), and the indications on the label or packing (65%); but it seems that only four consumers in ten (42%) check the weight shown on the scales.

4. Consumer information. 43% of those questioned felt that they were sufficiently well-informed when it comes to making major purchases (furniture, household appliances and so on); 51% felt the same in relation to shopping for food.

On this point differences between countries are a lot more marked than differences between social categories within a given country. German and Danish consumers scored very well but Belgian and Italian consumers were well below the Community average.

5. Advertising. Generally speaking European consumers are rather critical of advertising:
- (a) only 50% felt that "advertising provides consumers with useful information";
 - (b) nearly eight consumers in ten felt that "advertising often makes consumers buy goods which they do not really need" (77%) or that "advertising often misleads consumers as to the quality of products" (76%);
 - (c) 62% of those questioned felt that "brands which are heavily advertised are more expensive than those which are less advertised or are not advertised at all".

An analysis of the replies shows that male and female attitudes to advertising are very much the same. Age doesn't affect attitudes to any great extent either, although young people (especially young women) are more inclined to be critical - as indeed are people in the higher income brackets. The most important variable in fact is level of education: the better educated the consumer the more likely he is to be critical of advertising.

6. The media. In the Community as a whole, the media with the best image as far as consumer information is concerned is television; it is followed by radio, daily newspapers, weekly newspapers and magazines in that order.

Here again the higher their level of education the more critical contacts were of the major sources of information.

On the whole the Danes, the Germans and the British were more favourably disposed towards the media than the French, the Belgians and the Italians.

The importance of television is also evidenced by the fact that on average eight interviewees in ten said that they would welcome the introduction (or extension) of television programmes specifically designed to provide consumers with objective information.

Specialized consumer publications have a poor readership: in the Community as a whole one consumer in two is not even aware of their existence (37% in the United Kingdom and 71% in Italy).

THE COMMUNITY PROGRAMME

A consumer protection and information programme was adopted by the Community's Council of Ministers in April 1975. The main objective is to defend the five fundamental rights of the European consumer: the right to protection of health and safety, the right to protection of economic interests, the right to redress, the right to information and education and, last but not least, the right to representation (see Industry and Society No 15/75).

7. Consumers organizations. Fewer than four consumers in ten in any of the nine Community countries could name even one consumers organization: the average was less than one in four. Consumers organizations are far less well-known in Italy than elsewhere.

Very few consumers (only about 2% of those questioned) actually belong to such organizations. However, a much higher proportion (15% "definitely" and 32% "perhaps") said that they would be prepared to pay £3.50 a year to join one or subscribe to its publications. Consumers organizations should obviously launch a membership campaign!

Contacts were obviously rather unwilling to comment on the effectiveness of organizations they don't know much about: those who did express an opinion in the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg felt that they were quite effective. However, about six contacts in ten felt that consumers organizations had little or no influence on government policy.

8. Comparative tests. In the Community as a whole people are much more aware of comparative tests than of consumers organizations (52% as against 44%). The vast majority of those who were familiar with these tests accepted the results and more than one consumer in two claimed that they had influenced their buying habits.

9. Consumerism and the authorities. Although the idea of public subsidies to consumers organizations was not well received, the vast majority of those interviewed were in favour of the results of comparative tests being given wider publicity. They would also welcome the opening of local consumers' advice centres to deal with complaints.

10. Consumerism and the political parties. In the Community as a whole, 62% of those interviewed felt some affinity with a political party, but only one in ten felt that this party defends consumers "very well"; the most common reply was "fairly well".

11. Consumerism and the Common Market. The six-monthly "Euro-Barometer" surveys have shown that public interest in consumer protection is increasing steadily. Moreover between six and eight interviewees in ten in all Community countries - apart from the United Kingdom (50%) and Denmark (41%) - regard the Common Market as "a good thing".

Over the past two years public opinion in the United Kingdom has in fact been swinging in favour of the Common Market.

Significantly, 67% of those questioned felt that the Common Market "enables consumers to have a wider range of products". However, only 38% felt that it "helps to hold price increases back by encouraging competition".

**EIGHT CONSUMERS IN ONE

On reflection Euroforum's opening remark about the European consumer being a "paradoxical creature" is less than accurate: a closer look at the survey shows in fact that the European consumer comes in eight different models!

One: The "don't knows"

This group accounts for 8% of those questioned (weighted to make it representative of the population aged 15 and over in the nine Community countries).

What is striking is the high proportion of "no replies" to most of the questions (63% of the women, 50% of those aged 50 and over and 70% of those with a low level of education). The group included large numbers of country dwellers and low-income interviewees. They probably feel that surveys do not concern them and are in any event indifferent to most socio-political problems. They are "non-leaders" and almost certainly never vote in elections.

This group was particularly large in Belgium (20% of the sample).

Two: The easily-swayed

This group accounts for 8.5% of those questioned. Its main feature is the relatively small number of positive replies to the series of questions relating to behaviour when shopping for food (checking change, the bill, the unit price, the indications on the label, and the weight). The contacts were mainly male (64%) and tended to be fairly young. Income level didn't appear to be significant though these interviewees were more likely than others to consider that prices were not rising more quickly than their income and less likely to say that they intended to tighten their belts. They had little

political motivation and rarely belonged to or practiced a religion.

Three: The complacent

This section of the public (8.5% of those questioned) feels sufficiently well-informed to take the right decision when making major purchases and when shopping for food. Generally speaking, these consumers were not very critical of advertising and rarely felt that "advertising often misleads consumers as to the quality of products".

This group had a slightly higher proportion of women than the population as a whole (58%), but a considerably higher proportion of contacts aged 50 and over and of contacts with a low level of education. Of all the interviewees these were the most satisfied with the life they lead and the most attached to their religion.

In many ways this group is socially close to the "don't knows", though the individual interviewees are more aware, better educated and more committed. They believe what they read in the newspapers and what they hear on radio or television. They are well integrated into the system.

Four: The semi-aware

There is nothing remarkable about this group (9% of those questioned) except that it includes rather more women than men (60% as against 40%). Without being critical of advertising or feeling that they are not sufficiently well-informed, the vast majority of the interviewees (73% as against 48% for the sample as a whole) claimed that, if inflation continued they would "get together with other consumers to obtain more information and defend their interests". They were neither more politically aware nor more religious than average and tended to trust their chosen party to defend consumers. Although their wish to see consumers organize may be rather vague they are certainly not saturated with information and appear to be on the point of discovering that consumers have rights. Consumers organizations would do well to devote particular attention to this group.

Five: The enlightened individualists

This is a surprisingly large group (19%) at first glance. Interviewees here correctly consider themselves to be sufficiently well-informed; they were more aware than any other group of consumers organizations, comparative tests and television programmes for consumers; they felt that consumers organizations are effective and accepted test results. Without being highly critical of advertising they tended to feel that heavily advertised products are more expensive than others. But they are not militants for the simple reason that the idea of "getting together with others" does not appeal. Many are of average education, completely satisfied with the life they lead and reasonably aware politically. Although they are not very committed to any political party they trust the party with which they feel an affinity to look after consumers.

Level of education apart, this group represents a cross-section of all the socio-demographic categories. It is relatively larger in Germany (31%), Denmark and the United Kingdom (24%), and the Netherlands (20%).

Six: The actively dissatisfied

This group, which is almost as large as the previous one (18%), is very distinctive. The majority of interviewees claimed to have felt cheated when shopping or to have complained about a public service; and eight interviewees in ten had taken action to assert their rights. They considered themselves better informed than average, were prepared to get together with others, had heard of consumers organizations (they did not consider them very effective) and comparative tests (they claimed that these influenced their buying habits). They would be quite prepared to join a consumers organization.

This group has quite a large proportion of young people and accounts for a higher percentage of the sample in Italy than elsewhere (26%).

Although these consumers belong to a variety of income groups, with a slight concentration in the above-average group, they are clearly dissatisfied and the majority feel that prices are rising more rapidly than incomes. They are politically aware (they feel an affinity with and are committed to a political party) but do not trust political parties to defend consumers. They are not much more attached to their religion than the average. What is remarkable is the leadership element: political involvement and the feeling of influencing events is highest in this group.

Seven and eight: The critics and the rebels

These two types, which together account for 29% of those questioned, are fairly similar. The first is hostile to the media, the second to advertising.

Seven (17%) is particularly critical of the media on the grounds that they give consumers little or no information. This group is fairly young, has slightly more men than women, and a relatively high level of education and income. In some respects it is quite close to the "actively dissatisfied": far from satisfied, politically aware, with a high "leadership" score. This group would be fairly well disposed to getting together with other consumers and joining a consumers organization. However its disenchantment with the system, as evidenced by its attitude to the media, is probably indicative of its disenchantment with society which the media reflect and reproduce.

Once again this group is relatively larger in Italy (23%) than elsewhere.

Eight (12%) is representative of the Community sample as regards sex, age, level of education and income. What sets it apart from the sample is a marked hostility to advertising.

Interviewees in this group were moderately satisfied and not very aware politically (those who felt an affinity with a political party were fairly committed to it but didn't place much trust in it). They are not well integrated in the present-day society; their attack on advertising is almost instinctive and even consumers organizations come in for a measure of criticism.

This group is to be found in the same proportion in all nine countries.

**CONCLUSION

To sum up, the survey provides food for thought for everyone - authorities and consumerists alike - involved in consumer information and protection.

Everyone who helped with the survey will be interested in their reactions - critical or otherwise.

Problems of this scale and complexity cannot be clarified by a preliminary survey, which is necessarily experimental and as aware of its limitations as of its contribution. By their very nature social surveys, even in a limited field, reveal more fundamental attitudes, cultural reactions of obscure origin and value systems which are not yet fully understood.

Perhaps the best solution would be to conduct further research at national level and compare these results at European level at a later stage.

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