

European BACKGROUND INFORMATION Community

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE

2100 M Street NW, Washington DC 20037 Telephone (202) 872-8350

New York Office: 1 Dag Hammerskjöld Plaza, New York NY 10017 Telephone (212) 371-3804

BACKGROUND NOTE

No. 30/1976

July 15, 1976

A COMMUNITY OF CONSUMERS

Most of Europe's shoppers count their change, believe that advertising means higher prices, are unaware of consumer protection organizations, and think politicians don't care about their interests.

These were among the findings of the European Community's first major survey of the public's attitudes to consumer information and their habits in using it.

The survey was made in October/November 1975 in the Community's nine member countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). More than 60 questions were put to a representative sampling of 9,500 people 15 years of age and older. The survey is part of the Community's consumer protection and information program initiated in 1975.

The Consumer and Inflation

Most people (66 per cent) questioned thought that prices over the preceding 12 months had risen faster than income. Italians and Belgians felt inflation most. Denmark was the only country where most of the public felt they were doing well, or not badly, at beating inflation. While large families and low wage earners were most conscious of their loss of purchasing power, every wage group and families of all sizes were feeling pinched.

Asked how they would change their buying habits if inflation continued, 82 per cent of those questioned said they would shop at cheaper stores, 78 per cent said they would put off major purchases (furniture, cars, televisions), and 75 per cent said they would look for special offers or sales.

The Disgruntled Consumer

Four out of 10 Europeans felt victimized when making purchases or using public services. In Italy, many more people (53 per cent) felt put upon than elsewhere in the Community. The pollsters viewed consumer dissatisfaction as an expression of dissatisfaction with society in general.

Consumer Rationality

Eight persons out of 10 said they often count their change after making a purchase. Two-thirds often check the addition of a bill, the unit price, and the labelled price. Only four people out of 10 check scale weights.

Consumer Information

Four out of 10 people thought they were well enough informed to make major purchases and five out of 10 to shop for food.

Differences between countries were much more pronounced than differences between social groups in the same country. Danish and German consumers seemed more aware of being well informed, while Belgians and Italians were below the Community average.

Views on Advertising

Most European consumers were critical of advertising. Only half the public thought ads gave consumers any useful information. Nearly eight people out of 10 thought that advertising often made them buy things they didn't really need or that advertising was often deceptive about product quality. Six out of 10 people thought that heavily advertised brands often sold for more than brands that were advertised seldom or not at all.

Answers from men and women were about the same. Young people and the highly educated were more critical.

Consumers and the Media

For consumer information, Europeans prefer television, radio, and daily newspapers, in that order. Weeklies and magazines come last. Highly educated people are more critical of all the media than are the less educated.

The Danes, the Germans, and the British are slightly more in favor of these media than are the French, Belgians, and Italians.

Eight people out of 10 would like to see television programs developed specifically to inform consumers.

Publications specializing in consumer information are not well known. One consumer out of two doesn't know these publications exist. The spread ranges from a low of 37 per cent in the United Kingdom to a high of 71 per cent in Italy.

Attitudes Toward Consumer Organizations

Only one person out of four had any precise information on consumer organizations. Knowledge of these organizations was weakest in Italy where nearly seven people out of 10 were uninformed.

Membership in consumer organizations was low -- 2 per cent of the people interviewed -- but 15 per cent of them would "definitely" and 32 per cent would "probably" be willing to pay \$7 a year to join one.

Attitudes Toward Comparative Testing

More than half the people interviewed knew something about comparative testing of products and had confidence in the results. Of those who knew about comparative testing, one out of two said it had affected their buying decisions.

The Consumer and the Public Authorities

By a large majority, Europeans favored wider publication of the results of comparative product tests and the creation of local centers to consider complaints from consumers.

The Consumer and Political Parties

Six out of 10 persons interviewed had a political party. In this group only one out of 10 thought the party defended consumers' interests "very well."

Only in Belgium and Ireland did the majority of persons interviewed not feel an affinity to any political party. Among those who felt close to a political party, only the Danish felt that the party looked after the consumers' interests.

The Consumer and the Common Market

Earlier polls showed that Europeans are becoming increasingly interested in consumer questions. In this respect, six to eight persons out of 10 in every member country but the United Kingdom (50 per cent) and Denmark (41 per cent) think the Common Market is a "good thing" for the consumer. Nearly seven out of 10 persons thought the Common Market gave them a wider choice of goods. On the other hand, barely four persons out of 10 thought the Common Market helped hold down prices by promoting competition.

Different Types of Consumers

The pollsters decided that the consumers questioned fell into eight general types: the "indifferent," representing 8 per cent of the people interviewed; the "ready buyers," representing 8.5 per cent; the "uncomplaining public,"

representing 8.5 per cent; the "budding consumer," representing 9 per cent; the "enlightened but individualistic" non-organization-joining consumer, representing 19 per cent; the "grumblers," representing 18 per cent. The seventh and the eighth types are "critics of the system," representing together 29 per cent of the population and distinguished mainly by the strength of their hostility toward advertising as one of the chief "institutions" of the system.

* * *

NOTE: The full study in English should be available by August at the Washington office.