

communicating

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As our powers grow, so does the need for us to be both accountable and transparent. It is therefore essential we communicate effectively with consumers and consumer bodies, businesses, other government departments and our enforcement partners.

Through our communication activity, we aim to:

- show how competitive markets that work well are important for consumers, fair-dealing businesses and overall economic performance
- explain our decisions openly and accessibly
- promote a culture of compliance by explaining to business what the law is and how the OFT will apply it
- help raise consumers' awareness of their rights
- coordinate activities with our enforcement partners locally, nationally and internationally
- advise government on how to achieve the most effective climate in which competition – and consumers – can flourish.

These are important ways which contribute to achieving our main goal of making markets work well for consumers.

In 2001, we drew up a communications strategy based on the key principles of openness, clarity, proactivity, speed of response and accessibility.

Communicating with business

During the year, we stepped up our efforts to increase businesses' compliance with the legislation we enforce. This work was run by our new business information unit which was established to increase business awareness of competition and consumer legislation.

Business advice open days

We continued to participate in business advice open days organised by HM Customs & Excise. We have been involved as a key partner in these events since 1999 and they have formed an important strand of our programme to raise awareness of the Competition Act among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

We took part in 11 open days in 2001 in North London, Torbay, Winchester, Edgbaston, Croydon, Stevenage, Cardiff, Cornwall, Stoke-on-Trent, Manchester and Exeter.

Since October 2001, we have begun using the events to raise awareness of a wide range of consumer protection, as well as competition laws.

Roadshows

During 2001, we planned a programme of OFT regional roadshows aimed at businesses, enforcers, consumers and the media. The roadshows include seminars for SMEs on competition and consumer legislation and a consumer advice stand. The first two events were held in Bristol and in Leeds in early 2002. We aim to hold up to eight roadshows a year across the UK.



Advertising

We ran a 'Complain, Comply, Confess' publicity campaign warning small businesses to be aware of the dangers of cartels. The campaign had three key aims: to encourage those who suspect cartel activity to complain to the OFT, to dissuade firms from getting involved in cartels, and to encourage cartel members to come forward under the OFT's leniency programme. The campaign involved advertisements in the national press and on national radio. It was followed by a mailing to accountants with large numbers of SMEs on their books.

Publications

We continued to issue our *OFT Weekly Gazette*, an e-mail newsletter which provides subscribers including businesses and their advisers, with news on our enforcement of the Competition Act and our mergers work.

Research

Our annual survey of awareness of the Competition Act among SMEs, carried out in February and March, showed that awareness of the Act had increased significantly on the previous year. More than half (53 per cent) of respondents were aware of the Competition Act. This compares with 43 per cent in 2000 and 23 per cent in 1999.

Later in the year, we began work to expand the scope of our research to investigate awareness and understanding among SMEs of consumers' rights and key consumer protection laws. The new research programme also asks businesses to rate the effectiveness of our communication channels and to tell us how they prefer to receive information. After designing the research and commissioning agencies to carry it out, the research itself got under way in November. The results will inform our future work.

In the run-up to Christmas, we embarked on a campaign to warn consumers of the dangers of excess debt. The campaign urged consumers to think carefully before borrowing money or buying on credit

Communicating with consumers

Alerting consumers to unfair practices and explaining their rights is a key part of our role. We have built on previous successes by improving how we communicate these messages – using more precise targeting and straightforward language. Research, commissioned in 2001, to find new ways to reach vulnerable groups will enhance this work.

Debt

In the run-up to Christmas, we embarked on a campaign to warn consumers of the dangers of excess debt. This was run in partnership with the Trading Standards Institute and the Department of Trade and Industry. It was launched at the start of National Consumer Week. The campaign urged consumers to think carefully before borrowing money or buying on credit.

It included leaflets offering advice on debt, posters, and a budget planner to help people monitor their monthly income and expenditure. The campaign materials were made available through local trading standards offices, Citizens' Advice Bureaux and the OFT website.

The campaign received widespread media coverage.



Home shopping

Recognising that more and more people are shopping from home, particularly over the internet, we launched a campaign to alert consumers to their rights. This was informed by the findings of a 'web sweep' in which we found that half the UK websites examined failed to give easily accessible information on refund or exchange policies.

We created a new section on our website outlining consumers' rights when buying from home by telephone, mail order, fax, digital television and the internet. The web pages include tips on finding traders who comply with the Distance Selling Regulations and avoiding unscrupulous operators.

Other elements in the campaign included a leaflet, *Shopping from home: the facts at your fingertips*, adverts in the regional press, and guidelines on the regulations for trading standards officers and Citizens' Advice Bureaux staff.

Public liaison

Our public liaison unit (PLU), dealt with 83,500 requests for information (80,000 in 2000), mostly via our consumer information telephone line. The team does not get involved in individual disputes but can provide information on consumers' rights and advice on where to turn to for help.

Research

We designed research to gauge the effectiveness of our communication with consumers. In 2002, we will be measuring consumers' awareness of their rights, the benefits of competition and the OFT. The research will also assess the effectiveness of our current communication channels, particularly those we use to get information to vulnerable consumers. The results will shape our future work.

Communicating with the media

Media coverage of our work continued to grow in 2001 as we made an increasing number of important announcements.

During the year, our press office issued 70 press releases and dealt with over 4,100 media enquiries. The Director General of Fair Trading and senior OFT officials gave a number of interviews. In total, 157 interviews and media briefings by OFT officials were arranged during the year.

Towards the end of the year, we put in place plans to increase coverage in the regional press of key issues related to our work, particularly on the consumer side. We will be putting these plans into action in 2002.



General publicity and marketing

oft.gov.uk

We added two new sections to our website during 2001: one offering advice to consumers shopping from home and the other providing guidance to those in debt (see 'Communicating with consumers', above).

During the year, the number of visitors to the website increased from around 8,000 a week to around 11,000 a week.

Based on research into the needs of website users, we developed plans to restructure the site and make it easier to navigate. Our new-look site went live in February 2002.

Speeches

The Director General and senior officials gave speeches on a wide variety of topics related to our work. Some of the Director General's key speeches during the year were to the Trading Standards Institute Conference, the Finance and Leasing Association, the LACOTS Year Ahead Symposium, the Competition Law Association, the Annual Conference on International Antitrust Law and Policy, and the International Competition Policy Conference.

A Guide to the OFT

We developed a new publication to help anyone interested in the OFT understand our work. *A Guide to the OFT* describes our new unifying goal, our new structure and the recent legislative changes that have increased our powers.

Fair Trading

We continued to publish our magazine *Fair Trading* which provides regular updates on our work and explores the key issues in competition policy and consumer protection.

Download OFT publications, publicity materials and the Director General's key speeches from our website

www.oft.gov.uk

Order OFT publications and publicity materials by telephoning **0870 60 60 321**

OFT consumer information line: **08457 224499**

To receive a free copy of *Fair Trading* magazine three times a year, e-mail marketing.marketing@oft.gov.uk and include the words '**Subscribe Fair Trading magazine**' and your name and postal address.

A Guide to the OFT provides an overview of who we are, what we do and the legislation that shapes our work. A printed copy can be ordered by telephoning **0870 60 60 321**