

Alliance for consumer education event – 23 November 2006

Breakout session: Communicating consumer education developments

This session was taken by:

- Paul Burton and Sam Brew, Consumer education team, Office of Fair Trading

Paul Burton opened with a brief review of the OFT's work on producing a consumer education strategy and the role of the consumer education Alliance in delivering this. The main points were:

- prior to the Enterprise Act 2002 the OFT had no formal consumer education policy
- A consultation on a consumer education strategy in 2004 revealed:
 - little coordination of consumer education
 - considerable repetition
 - the exact number of organisations involved in consumer education was unknown
- A consumer education strategy was produced to address the highlighted issues and aimed to provide a national focus and a voice for UK consumers.

Sam Brew explained two charts mapping consumer education delivery channels, audiences and their usage, and outlined the process of developing them. The aim is to leave alone areas of the map already well served and identify less well served areas where resources need to be targeted.

The plan is now to develop the map in some form and the group was asked to consider two questions:

- Do you think there is scope to develop a consumer education map across the UK?
- Would it be of use?

The main themes and key points from the discussion were:

- Consumer education is fundamental to Local Authority Trading Standards Services' (TSS) work but funding constraints are an issue. A resource bank or information source is a possible way to help TSS know what is available and help reduce costs. The OFT agreed that the Alliance could be a gateway to consumer education resources and could remove a huge amount of duplication.
- Some regional groups already share consumer education resources on an informal basis. It was also noted the TSI's Consumer Education Liaison Group is a source of information but is limited to members, whilst the CSN Connect website allowed a project to be viewed and for the tools to be printed off. The OFT explained that the Alliance could sit above all the mentioned groups as 'network of networks'.
- OFT noted that its Business Communications team could identify where problem areas exist and pass this on to consumer groups, a case of 'consumer education through the backdoor'.
- The importance of consumer empowerment, with the option of enforcement action as a last resort, was stressed.
- The issue of financing resources was raised. Some TSS reported that they were considering charging others for resource use to recoup some of their investment. Other TSS felt it was reasonable to charge others to share resources. It was agreed that sizeable cost savings could be made by rebranding existing resources.

The discussion moved on to the removal of duplication and the accurate targeting of resources.

- It was also stressed that because of the constraints within which the OFT works, there would need to be reliance on intermediaries (some represented within the room) to disseminate information.

The group was asked what they felt would be possible.

- A web-based index of resources was suggested. It need not be complicated - especially if it was based around a list of topics which could be clicked on to reveal additional details. OFT website staff confirmed this was potentially doable from a technical perspective.

- Consumer Support Network (CSN) was stated as a good example of how useful it can be to have information available at an early stage and how much time this can save. There was agreement that resources such as the CSN were very helpful. The idea of a 'toolbox of information' was suggested. It could include an 'idiots guide' covering:
 - how to start the creation of information database
 - the dos and don'ts of a consumer education strategy
 - details of previous research
 - a bullet point plan of action
 - how to carry out a review
 - a bank of generic resources

Existing owners could be asked to pool their resources. If there was a charge for a resource, pooling could reduce costs.

The group was directed to consider who might be looking at consumer education resources and the possible benefits for business organisations were discussed. Linkages could lead to a business training resource and this might also offer funding opportunities.

The idea of a message board / blog was proposed – potentially as part of the Alliance web presence - and the group agreed this could be useful provided it was kept up to date. This could be assisted by contributions onto a web based resource, perhaps using a simple input web submission form, but would be reliant on contributors taking time to add to it.

The discussions concluded with a summary of the main points covered:

- the idea of building on initial mapping of consumer education does have potential
- the creation of a resource based tool would be beneficial
- it cannot be passive but must be an active working resource
- the group expressed an overall enthusiasm towards the whole idea and there was a willingness to contribute
- the resource held commercial possibilities.