

fact sheet

1

Eight Consumer Rights

Consumer organisations world-wide use the eight consumer rights to lobby on behalf of consumers and validate the views of consumers. Some consumer organisations have adapted the rights to their own areas of interest such as the Consumers' Health Forum's *Consumer Health Rights: A summary of your health rights and responsibilities*.

Many consumer representatives use the eight consumer rights to remind them of their commitment to consumer issues. These rights are often useful for bolstering your argument or putting forward a consumer perspective when there are no clear views from consumers, or if there are differing views amongst consumers.

These rights outline the basic needs of consumers:

1. **The right to satisfaction of basic needs** – food, clothing, shelter, health care and education.
2. **The right to safety** – protection against products, production processes and services which are hazardous to health or life.
3. **The right to be informed** – given the facts needed to make an informed choice, and protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labeling.
4. **The right to choose** – to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality
5. **The right to be heard** – to have consumer interests represented in the making and execution of government policy, and in the development of products and services.
6. **The right to redress** – to receive a fair settlement of just claims, including compensation for misrepresentation, shoddy goods or unsatisfactory services.
7. **The right to consumer education** – to acquire knowledge and skills needed to make informed, confident choices about goods and services, while having an awareness of basic consumer rights and responsibilities.
8. **The right to a healthy environment** – to live and work in an environment which is non-threatening to the well-being of present and future generations.

Before You Start

Before your start:

- obtain relevant information about the committee, its structure, scope of activity, authority and method of operation;
- find out the committee's terms of reference;
- what financial assistance you can expect;
- who the other committee members are;
- relevant reports and reviews;
- meeting timetables and procedures;
- duration of the committee;
- plan and establish long term goals; and
- find out about the expected workload.

Before meetings:

- read over your long term goals;
- set short-term goals for the meeting;
- gather consumer views on the issues;
- obtain a briefing from your nominating organisation or other consumer groups or other individuals;
- check the minutes of the last meeting;

- participate in committee meetings by submitting agenda items, look at the agenda and minutes of the last meeting; and
- highlight any achievable goals, so you can tackle them early on.

At meetings:

- if necessary, have the previous meeting's minutes amended;
- add items to the agenda;
- keep the committee to its objectives;
- take notes of any significant points and major decisions;
- support the consumer perspective;
- use lunch-breaks to chat informally and ask questions; and
- watch out for possible allies and foes.

Between and after meetings:

- report to your organisation;
- re-charge your batteries;
- keep in contact with the secretary and other committee members;
- reflect and evaluate your work on the committee; and
- monitor the progress of the committee.

Dollars and Sense - Resource Checklist

Other committee members and the committee secretariat often have all the money and you, the consumer representative, have all the common sense. This resource checklist is to remind you of some of the resources you can get from them as they get the benefit of your common sense:

- sitting fees – paid to you while you attend meetings;
- travel costs – usually cover airfares and taxis;
- phone calls – cover costs of consulting and other committee related activities;
- photocopying – secretariat will do this or reimburse you to do it;
- postage and faxes – cover the cost of consulting and sending working drafts out for discussion;
- expenses for people with disabilities – can cover carers, special phones, talking computers, and agenda papers in large print;
- copies of articles;
- searches for books;
- arrange telephone conferences;
- provide some limited typing support;
- training courses;
- definitions and explanations of technical terms; and
- modem to provide e-mail access.

It is not realistic to expect to obtain all of the above resources, some secretariats simply do not have the resources to support you as you deserve. This list is by no means exhaustive but it is to give you an idea of the sort of support you could try asking for. Try to use your imagination, if you fail to successfully

lobby for sitting fees, try to at least get your expenses paid.

Reasons for getting the loot:

- you are attending committee meetings in a volunteer capacity, it is not part of your work;
- most other committee members have access to phones, photocopiers, faxes, email and computers which makes committee life much more bearable for them;
- most other committee members have an allowance from their work to cover accommodation, taxis and meals;
- most other committee members have work colleagues on the committee to discuss issues with so they do not need to consult as widely or as extensively as consumer representatives; and
- most other committee members are supported by organisations which are well resourced unlike most consumer representatives whose organisations are often poorly resourced in comparison.

fact sheet

4

Common Problems and Solutions

Your agenda papers are incomplete:

- ask for a copy of the paper; and
- ask for any important items to be deferred until you've looked at them.

The agenda papers were late:

- ask the Secretariat why the papers were late; and
- if its more than a one-off situation, and the Secretariat is not fixing the situation, have a word with the Chairperson.

Jargon

- get committee members to explain the jargon; and
- get the secretariat to provide you with a list of commonly used words or acronyms.

Having problems getting heard

- create a positive first impression;
- refer to the committee standing orders or agreed procedures and track down the debate rules. Often a person can only speak once in a debate;
- whenever you speak articulate your point or argument well;
- change your seating so you can catch the chairperson's eye better; and
- try not to out-shout someone.

You are locked in a stalemate:

- take the initiative; and
- change the game.

You disagree with a major decision

- refer to your nominating organisation for support.

Agreement is reached but nothing's done

- follow up so it gets done.

A previous agreement is re-discussed

- refer back to previous minutes and bring this to the attention of the committee.

Accountability

- belong to a consumer organisation;
- report back to your nominating group; and
- consult with the wider consumer movement - you have access to information that other committee members do not.

Confidentiality

- seek advice from your nominating organisation;
- discuss confidentiality issues with the Chairperson; and
- discuss with the committee or the Chairperson your reporting responsibilities.

Conflict of Interest

- consult with your nominating organisation.

Public Statements

- consult with your nominating organisation.

Isolation

- establish networks with other consumer representatives and groups;
- keep in regular contact with your nominating organisation; and
- keep in contact with other committee members (if appropriate).

Directorships of incorporated entities

- ask the secretariat about your liability and appropriate insurance.

fact sheet

5

Effective Representation - You're OK

- have a positive and realistic outlook;
- present your argument rationally and convincingly;
- negotiate;
- plan what issues you are going to tackle on behalf of consumers;
- create a positive first impression;
- analyse issues and judge their effects on consumers;
- present the consumer perspective not your own personal view;
- plan your tactics;
- speak with potential allies;
- caucus with other committee members;
- consult with your constituency;
- network with other consumer representatives;
- report regularly to your nominating organisation;
- keep in control;
- don't bargain over positions;
- ensure everyone is committed to the outcomes;
- use agreed-upon criteria;
- improve your skills; and
- use your skills.