

Meglana Kuneva

European Commissioner for Consumer Protection

Launch of the Retail Forum

Sustainable Choice Must Be An Easy Choice

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

3 March 2009, Brussels

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are almost in the tenth year of the 21st century and climate change and carbon footprint attract more and more attention. Our individual behaviour can really make a change and we, at European level, are working to develop tools and mechanisms to inform and guide producers and consumers for making environmentally responsible choices.

As European Commissioner for Consumers I naturally take a very strong interest in this field – not least because individual households consume over one third of final energy used in the EU and produce about two thirds of municipal waste.

Food and drinks, housing and private transport account for 70-80% of environmental pressures. These are also major categories of consumer expenditure.

Against this backdrop, the need to foster more sustainable consumption and production patterns is abundantly clear.

We need an overall policy that will support the development of appropriate "consumer ability" to act in a more sustainable manner,

as well as to promote energy efficiency and competitiveness of European businesses.

The "Action Plan on sustainable consumption and production and sustainable industrial policy", adopted in July of last year, is certainly a step in the right direction.

Further to the Commission's "macro" initiatives to fight climate change and reduce CO2 emissions under the Sustainable Development Strategy, the Action Plan proposes "micro" initiatives that each and every one of us can take to limit the negative impact on the environment of our consumption.

Sustainable consumption is a complex subject as regards public regulation. There is no simple definition. Plus, we are all driven by different motives when considering sustainable choices:

- Some of us will look for bio, organic, GMO-free products;
- Others may consider ethical, socially responsible aspects;
- Some will give preference to animal welfare considerations;
- Others will lean more towards the carbon footprint and ecological impact of products.

To help consumers make informed choices, reliable information must be available. However, research has shown that it is not sufficient simply to inform consumers on the environmental features of products, their use and their disposal.

The availability of information alone cannot make a significant change and can even be counter-productive and lead to confusion and frustration.

What we are trying to achieve

What we need to focus on is consumer education and research of consumer behaviour.

The Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumers has made significant efforts to educate consumers and develop their (or should I say, "our") capacity to behave in a more sustainable manner.

In co-operation with colleagues responsible for environment, we have introduced a new sustainability module in the DOLCETA online education tool for adults, and a sustainability chapter in the EUROPA Diary targeting young consumers.

But what we need to achieve must go way beyond that.

We are ultimately looking for a behavioural change – a fundamental shift in the way consumers and markets interact.

For that, we need to develop more innovative modes of public and private governance.

Traditional consumer policy broadly focuses on correcting market failures.

Now is the time to upgrade our approach and add-up a "modern" consumer policy – one which looks to the future and which seeks to design and influence the demand side of the market, leading it towards a more sustainable model.

But if we really want consumers to change, the sustainable choice must be the easy choice.

Product information must be clear and based on agreed methodology so that consumers trust it and can easily compare the same type of product across different brands and producers.

Sustainable products must be widely available. They must not be more expensive and perceived as a "luxury" option. They also must be prominently displayed.

In short, acting sustainably should become the norm for EU consumers, setting an example for the rest of the world.

How to get there?

Clearly, we still have a long way to go before we get even close to this ideal situation – but this does not mean that we should just sit back and wait and see. The sooner we start the better.

Already, very simple first steps – measures that can easily be implemented with no substantial investment – can have a significant impact.

For example, simple measures can hugely increase the energy-efficiency of stores. Take the example of plastic bags. Up until recently the norm, these have now been phased-out in many shops.

This, in turn, has triggered a significant change in consumer perception – a once expected automatic supply of plastic bags is now seen by many as irresponsible.

As I have already said, providing consumers with information is not enough.

We need to provide guidance and to establish a practical lifestyle model that consumers are able to emulate. This cannot be brought about by regulations, but by smart, well-placed and targeted initiatives.

It is inspiring to know that researchers consider that a "loyal group" of 10-15% of "sustainable consumers" can trigger a deep process of change throughout society. The challenge now is to mobilise these 15% of sustainable consumers.

However, we must avoid putting all the responsibility for change on consumers, who already are under a great deal of pressure, fuelled by the alarming developments of the world financial and economic crisis.

Responsibility must be shared by all. We need a concerted approach – a partnership in which all stakeholders are working towards the same goal, each through their own means.

My services and I will not spare time and efforts to make sure all interests are well presented and taken into consideration within this forum.

While public authorities can provide incentives and a favourable framework for innovative actions, other stakeholders have an impact at different stages of the life-cycle of products.

Within the framework of the Action Plan on Sustainable Production and Consumption, voluntary initiatives like the Retail Forum can help us to develop substantial and ambitious goals and work ardently for achieving them.

Conclusion

You, ladies and gentlemen, representing European retailers here today, are in a unique and powerful position to do this.

Retailers are very close to consumers – indeed part of their everyday lives. Therefore you can have an immediate impact on the choices we make.

At the same time, you also work closely with producers. This places you at the crucial meeting point between production and consumption. This is why your activities have a major impact – the main impact in fact – throughout the life-cycle of a product.

I strongly believe that retailers truly hold the key to more sustainable consumption patterns, by making more green products available and, even more important, affordable.

This is why I am delighted to launch this Forum today, alongside Commissioner Dimas.

I wish you constructive and fruitful work in the months ahead and I look forward to learning of your progress.

Thank you.

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