

Consumer Education Seeks New Frontiers

By Hayakawa Katsumi

Modern consumer education for a large, sophisticated consumer society did not come under debate in Japan until the 1950s when the mass production of new consumer products, brought about by scientific and technological advances and sales promotion activities, stimulated the need to sell these products. Amid the chaos which ensued following World War II, consumer education aimed to cultivate discriminating consumers capable of shouldering responsibility for the high growth period by providing Japanese consumers with product information and instructions on correct uses for various new products.

The Japan Productivity Center established a committee on consumer education in 1958; in 1960, they set up an organization which provided guidelines to consumers. The following year, this organization broke away from the center and became the foundation called the Japan Consumers' Association, modeled after the Consumers' Union in the U.S. With the purpose of fostering shrewdness among consumers living in a mass producing and mass consuming society, the association, using the *Consumers' Reports* publication issued by the Consumers' Union in the U.S. as a model, published a monthly report, the *Gekkan Shohisha* which featured results of comparative product testing.

In response to numerous consumer problems, such as air and other forms of environmental pollution which arose as a by-product of quick economic growth, in 1961 the Economic Planning Agency (EPA) set up the Economic Welfare Council whose task was to improve the quality of life. The commission issued "The Report Concerning the Protection

of Consumers" in 1963 which noted that consumers lacked an organization and access to product information, and concluded that consumers have psychological weaknesses and should be protected.

Finally, the report proposed that consumer education for the general public be supplemented by social education. In 1965, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry's Industrial Structure Council compiled the report "Utilize Consumer Trends and the Ideal

of Consumer Education." The same year, an advisory body to the prime minister, called the Social Policy Council, was formed and issued a report the following year entitled "Regarding the Consumer Protection Organization and Consumer Education."

The theme of the various above mentioned reports can be summarized in three points: (1) ability to make rational price decisions regarding products and services; (2) developing the means for



Above: Unneeded items can be sold at flea markets, another excellent facet of the recycling movement. Left: MIPRO offers detailed advice for individual importers. In addition to a full collection of catalogs from famous department stores around the world and outdoor products, instructions on how to fill out order forms are also provided.

rationality improving lifestyles; and (3) promoting consumer awareness in an economic society as a whole and encouraging an understanding of the role of the consumer.

Coordinating U.S./Japan activities

Basic consumer protection laws were enacted in May 1968 clarifying consumer affairs administration. Among these is Article 12, which states that consumer educational activities will be promoted and expanded, and indicated that the country has a responsibility to educate consumers. Simultaneously, consumer activities in America were being actively introduced. In particular, President John F. Kennedy's 1962 *White Paper on Education*, outlining the "Four Rights of the Consumer," included "the right to know" (the right to receive information). Furthermore, in 1975 President Gerald Ford added a fifth right, "the right to receive consumer education." These developments provided a great stimulus to those administering consumerism and to those working in the consumer education field in Japan. Through the Japan Consumers' Association and various other consumer-related groups, including women's groups, consumer education was in the vanguard as a form of social education. However, injury from product usage began occurring among increasingly younger consumers, namely high school and junior high school students. There was a growing need to start earlier to improve the quality and capabilities of the next generation of consumers. With the entrance of women into the workplace, a rise in the divorce rate, and a decline in the number of children per family, it became imperative that children had their own independent, autonomous consumer lives. Consumers, administrators and educators increasingly promoted the need for consumer education to be included in school curriculums.

In 1984, a team, consisting primarily of members of the Japan Academy of Consumer Education, was formed for the purpose of observing consumer edu-

cation activities in American schools. Sponsored by Avon Products, participants included consumer representatives, university professors, members of the mass media and corporate representatives. The group researched the situation of consumer education and educational activities in American companies and schools, from the elementary school to university level. Thus, it was a meaningful study.

Based on this experience, the following May 30, Consumer's Day, Virginia A. Knowler, a member of the presidential staff in charge of consumer affairs, and three other experts were invited to Tokyo to attend a symposium held at Nikkei Hall. The symposium was timed to coincide with the 20-year anniversary of the founding of the Social Policy Council within the EPA. Numerous consumer affairs administrators at the central and regional levels participated.

The meeting site was then moved to Kyoto where an international symposium on consumer education was held. The event was sponsored by the Japan Academy of Consumer Education and the Kyoto City Board of Education. The nearly 300 participants which exchanged views on consumer education included educators from all levels, journalists and representatives from consumer-related divisions within corporations.

Another study tour was organized in 1986 with representatives from the Ministry of Education participating. The tour looked for ways to transplant American-style consumer education to Japanese school education.

The course of study in elementary, junior high and senior high schools, that determines which subjects will be taught, is revised every 10 years contributing greatly to raising the basic level of education equally throughout the nation's schools at the elementary and intermediate levels.

In September 1986, the Social Policy Council submitted a report entitled, "Consumer Education in Schools" which contained a list of requests to the Ministry of Curriculum Council. The Curriculum Council, which was in the process of making revisions in the new course of study, outlined a middle

school curriculum for educating consumers and fostering a practical attitude toward consumerism and creation of a sound home life. In the high school level, the council encouraged the consideration of societal changes and the expansion of details regarding consumer lifestyles. The gist of the new course of study was announced in March 1989, introduced in elementary schools in 1992, in middle schools in 1993, and in high schools in 1994, and was incorporated in home economics and social studies classes.

Unlike the U.S., which has a 100-year history in consumer education, Japan's history is quite shallow. In schools teachers lack the necessary educational materials, and teaching methods have not been formalized. There is also a lack of equipment and facilities.

In February 1990, the National Institute on Consumer Education was initiated. This center offered a forum of continuing education for adults, with the aim of popularizing consumer education. In an unusual move for the Japanese bureaucracy, which tends to worry about the negative effects of sharing administrative authority, the EPA's Social Policy and the Ministry of Education's Life-long Learning bureaus jointly managed the foundation. In addition to the tie-up, the foundation was funded almost entirely through corporate contributions. The board of trustees, the decision-making body, included administrators, members of consumer groups, educators, and people from a variety of other fields.

The center, modeled after Eastern Michigan University's Consumer Education Center, promotes the spread of consumer education, instructional activities, materials development, the sponsorship of seminars for educators, the development of manuals and the creation of a nationwide network using a database. The center aims to develop an international network encompassing Europe, the U.S., and other Asian countries. For example, it has actively held lectures, offered courses and sponsored symposiums, inviting as guest speakers Eastern Michigan University Professor Rossella Bannister, consumer education

consultant Haydon Green, and others. Thus, the center is on the way to operating at full speed.

From the beginning, consumer education has been mutually indispensable to four parties: educators, administrators, company executives and to the consumers themselves. Therefore, a number of groups and organizations, including the National Institution on Consumer Education, are actually engaged in consumer education. For example, learning from the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals (SOCAP) of America, the Association of Consumer Affairs Professionals (ACAP) was formed. The group is comprised of business professionals who work in consumer-related businesses, distributes information from companies, and actively develops educational materials. Accompanying the rapid popularization of credit cards, the Japan Consumer Credit Industry Association offers credit card-related counselling and educational activities to prevent credit card bankruptcy. The life insurance industry's Japan Consumer Life Insurance is making advances in providing support in the areas of life planning and offering instruction on other themes for a healthy consumer lifestyle.

The aforementioned Japanese Consumers' Association is enthusiastically promoting consumer education, primarily in schools. Consumer lifestyle advisors, consumer life consultants and other specialists use their own groups and other local consumer life centers as their base and are also involved in teaching students and working adults, and offers home education activities. Nakahara Hideki, who worked for Avon Products and introduced American consumer education to Japan, is now teaching at a university and has formed an international consumer education network as a non-profit organization to actively introduce new developments in consumer education in the U.S. and Europe.

Greater individual efforts required

Thus, in this way, Japanese consumer education has developed, using the U.S.

as a model. Now, however, consumer education has reached a new turning point. Consumer education faces the new trends of a graying society, market liberalization, the information age, further deregulation, and stricter enforcement of product liability laws (effective from July 1995).

Accompanying the enforcement of product liability laws, safety education becomes a major consideration. Amid the current trend toward liberalization and deregulation, Japanese consumers are faced with a broader range of decisions. Consumers are being asked to take responsibility for themselves and help themselves, as they can no longer rely on outside protection. Meanwhile, as society evolves into an increasingly grayer one, its members will not be able to rely on social security alone. The situation requires that people design their own independent life plans and establish new values.

The goal of consumer education is to cultivate the ability to think critically, to make independent, autonomous decisions, and create a lifestyle for one's self based on one's own values. The ultimate aim is to raise each person's quality of life. However, until now, Japanese people have been poor at shaping their attitudes toward life and creating lifestyles. Consumer education, which is responsible for preparing economic citizens to live in a market economy, is the only means through which to cultivate citizens who will shoulder the responsibilities of the coming economic society in the 21st century.

What is indispensable is an international orientation and awakening the awareness of each person as a global citizen. As has already been pointed out, on a global scale human existence is already endangered by environmental pollution, the population explosion and other problems. In this respect, Japan's consumer movement has finally begun to champion the cause of green consumerism. The consumer movement is also actively engaged in conserving energy and other resources, recycling and environmental protection. In this way, consumer education will gradually expand to include environmental education.

In addition, Japan can no longer remain aloof from the problems of population and AIDS, the depletion of tropical rain forests, global warming, destruction of the ozone layer, and the new wave of refugees spurred by regional ethnic disputes and other problems of a global scale.

Interest in these various fields is rising, and although education is referred to as developmental education, the participation of everyone from young people to businessmen, women and general consumers is expected. If consumer education pertains to the economic activity of consumption, or any activity which constitutes a person's livelihood, then it is crucial that this point of view is not lost.

There are some people who disagree that the scope of consumer education be broadened in this way. However, people are consumers from the time they are born until the time they die. This includes everyone—men and women, the young and the old—they can not cease being consumers. Economic consumption, which uses money as a medium, also necessitates the consumption of the earth's resources, air, water and the sun's energy for people to live. If we think about it, we can not help but "think globally and act locally," the slogan adopted by women in the U.K.

We need to find a way of life as global citizens. In today's economic society which features multiple forms of consumption, the consumers of the world's advanced economics face a variety of common problems. Next to the U.S., those who need to realize this fact more than anyone are Japanese consumers. Japan has to figure out what kind of lifestyle model it will create now that it has outgrown the American-style model of a mass consumption lifestyle. Japan's consumers are in the process of groping for a new frontier, and have eagerly started studying.

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