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The Preventive Aspect In Consumerism

By

P C Shivadas
THE PREVENTIVE ASPECT IN CONSUMERISM

BY

P.C. SHIVADAS

EDITORIAL MANAGER
NEW STRATTS TIMES
THE PREVENTIVE ASPECT IN CONSUMERISM

Like almost everything else, a country gets the consumer movement it deserves. In Malaysia, consumerism has still to make an impact. This has often been ascribed to apathy and a lack of awareness.

The Government has from time to time urged the people to help themselves in making the consumer movement strong and the consumer associations in the various states are seen as the answer. Government grants to these associations have been increased.

But these grants alone are not going to do the trick. People are urged to report malpractices but how many take the trouble to do so. At the moment of becoming a victim there is a great deal of indignation. But how many of such victims take their cases to a consumer association or write a letter to the newspapers? Is this not important if other people are to be made aware and do not get duped similarly?

Invariably, however, most people just settle for not buying a product or service they have had an unhappy experience with. So it becomes a one person's battle against a particular shoddy or misleading product or service. And we all know what the outcome is.

One thing needs to be borne in mind from the outset. Each and everyone in the country is a consumer. The producers of goods and services while producing for the market are themselves buyers of goods and services in the same market.

So what does it take to bring out a strong consumer movement? A Ralf Nader of Malaysia? Hundreds of laboratories to test products for their genuiness and value? The answer to these and other questions would seem to create doubts.

Do we then throw up our hands in despair and plod on uphill, never reaching the top?

If we are not making real headway then it is perhaps time we changed our thinking on the matter. It might be said that at the moment we are attempting to apply curative measures to tackle the problem.

I believe we should at the same time apply ourselves to the preventive aspect in much the same way as health.

Why do we (I use we because each and every one of us is a consumer) come up with a shoddy product or work? Because we want to take shortcuts to that goal we have set ourselves — to get rich quickly, finish a piece of work quickly. This is motivated by greed and the lack of energy to do the best possible job, given our ability.

Such a situation arises, to my mind, from a lack of self-esteem and confidence in oneself, narrowing the whole question down to attitudes and the human element.
The person who complains about a bad product must ask himself, "Am I guilty of the same charge?" The same can be asked of a person who provides a service. Perhaps from this we can assign a reason why the consumer movement is not what it should be. People are aware of their own failings and hence have not got the energy or inclination to point an accusing finger and so something about it beyond just the initial indignation.

So unless we, each and everyone of us not matter what we are doing, are constantly questioning ourselves, evaluating ourselves, to see if we are giving off our best we cannot expect anything better of ourselves and society at large. It is to be remembered that the most successful companies and people are those who set themselves a high standard. And by success I mean of the sustained variety.

In conclusion I would say that in order to strengthen the consumer movement we need to work on people's attitudes to their role and responsibilities as much as or more than the curative measures currently employed.

In attempting to inject some food for thought, I would be remiss, if I, as a representative of the Press, did not touch on the role of the Press in this matter.

Certainly the Press can play a big role in informing the people about their rights and responsibilities as consumers. But the Press cannot print accusations without absolute proof or without the case being settled in court when it comes to cases of cheating or misleading products and services. Hence the reason why we are wary of the handouts of consumer associations.

Given the legal constraints, the Press can and should highlight cases of malpractices brought to court as a means of making the public aware of certain goings-on.

The Press can also focus on protective legislation and the rights of consumers already available and make out a case for legislation that is not yet available through its access to information in other parts of the world where the consumer movement may be more effective.

Given the delicate ground the Press has to tread on, it nevertheless can contribute a lot to better consumerism in this country in both curative and preventive aspects.