

Title: Being a consumer

Context: GCSE Home Economics Revised Specification

Learning outcomes:

Students will be able to:

- Identify who is a consumer;
- Refer to a range of services that we 'consume';
- Evaluate how consumer-friendly services are; and
- Discuss barriers that prevent some individuals from being effective consumers.

Background reading:

What's in a name? Why it can be helpful to think of people as consumers, Scottish Consumer Council, January 2007

Hardcopies supplied in the GCSE Home Economics support materials or available on request from the Consumer Council.

Activity 1.

Set the scene by asking students to summarise, in no more than 20 words, their definition of the word 'consumer'. Their definitions could be written on post-it notes and then stuck onto the whiteboard or a flip chart.

Discussion points:

- Do the definitions tend to focus on the purchasing of high street goods and services?
- Are services mentioned at all? What do we mean by services? *e.g. Dry cleaning, hairdressing, painting and decorating, car repair...*
- Do any of the definitions take into account the consumption of public services, which are paid for indirectly through taxes?

Activity 2.

This activity aims to get students thinking about the broader definition of consumer.

Give students the list of 'other names' for consumers

Ask them to tick the 'other names' that apply to them and their families as consumers.

Teacher reflection:

Consumer is a powerful word. It can empower people by reminding them that they pay for the service, either directly or indirectly through taxes, and that they have a say in how those services are delivered. They are not simply a 'user' they are also a participant. Ask students to substitute the names e.g.

Public Transport Passenger – Public Transport Consumer
NHS Patient - Health Service Consumer
School pupil – Education Services Consumer

Do students think this makes a difference to their perception of themselves as a consumer?

Activity 3. The consumer tests

The Consumer Council and our consumer colleagues elsewhere in the UK use seven consumer tests (sometimes referred to as consumer principles) to assess how consumer focussed a service is. The tests have been in existence since the early 1970's and are just as relevant today as they were when they were first developed.

The tests are useful because they pinpoint generic factors that can be applied to all service providers, whether they are from the private or public sector.

Give students a copy of Activity Sheet 3 which lists and explains the seven consumer tests. Use these to have a discussion about the types of difficulties

consumers might face when using various services. This links with '**Barriers that may prevent individuals from being effective consumers**'.

Here are some discussion topics that you might wish to cover:

Information People need information about services if they are to make best use of them.

- What information might people need to make an informed choice?

Some examples: Availability, Price, Rights, Duration, Description/Performance

- How should the information be made available?

Some examples:

Alternative formats on request e.g. Braille, large font, other languages

On the website, in hardcopy, at point of sale

Free from jargon and written in plain English

Fairness This involves considering whether there are groups who are not as well served as others.

- Can students give examples of groups who could potentially be excluded and what they might miss out on?

Some examples: Consumers living in rural areas, consumers with a disability, consumers without access to the internet, consumers that aren't near a bus route, consumers who cannot make personal calls during office hours.

Access Can people actually get access to the services they need?

The barriers might be physical or perceived and link to **Information** and **Fairness**.

- Are some products or services likely to put some consumers off because they appear too complicated or intimidating? How can they be made more welcoming and inclusive?
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Choice Do people have choices about the service they receive?

- What can/should consumers do if they are unhappy about the service they receive?
- What is the term used to describe when consumers take their business elsewhere because they're unhappy? *Voting with their feet*
- Is it better to inform the business about why you're taking your business elsewhere rather than boycotting them but saying nothing? Why?

Some examples:

In Northern Ireland we are not able to choose from a range of public transport providers due to there being no competitors here, unlike other parts of the UK.

Consumers can only go to the NHS for publicly funded healthcare. However, there can be choices built into this, for example, choosing to have alternative therapies such as acupuncture instead of, or to compliment medical intervention.

Redress When things go wrong, is there a system in place to make sure that consumers get some redress?

- Can students identify systems which exist to ensure consumers have access to redress?

Some examples:

- An effective complaints procedure
- A returns policy offered by retailers
- An arbitration service run by a trade association

- A customer charter
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Safety Are services safe? What systems are in place to make sure standards are as high as they should be?

- Can students suggest how companies and service providers monitor safety standards?

Some examples:

- Quality Assurance testing
- Random checks
- Mystery shopping
- Safety audits
- Rigorous laboratory testing
- Analysing customer feedback or surveys
- Can students think of regulators and agencies that enforce safety standards?

Some examples:

- Trading Standards Service
 - Health and Safety Executive
 - Environmental Health
 - Food Standards Agency
 - British Standards Institute
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Representation There should be ways of making sure that service users are happy with service provision and can influence decisions made about how services are provided.

Some examples:

Customer satisfaction surveys
Suggestions boxes or Customer Feedback Forums on company websites
Consumer panels

BBC Trust - make sure the public who own and pay for the BBC get the best out of the BBC. They do this in part by consulting the Audience Councils set up in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- If students have been dissatisfied (or impressed) about a service they have received, would they consider letting the service provider know?
- What would be the benefit(s) of providing the feedback? i.e. alerting the company to good or poor practice, driving up standards which will benefit the company and future consumers

Assessment:

Students should select a retailer or service provider and evaluate their service provision according to one of the consumer tests and report back on their findings.

Students or a group of students could evaluate a retailer or service provider on the basis of all seven of the tests.

Activity 2.

'Other names' for consumers:

NHS Patient

Road user

Public Transport Passenger

Electricity customer

School pupil

Water and sewerage customer

Cinema patron

Air passenger

Housing tenant

Restaurant diner

Activity 3. The consumer tests

Information People need information about services if they are to make best use of them.

Fairness This involves considering whether there are groups who are not as well served as others. For example people living in remote or rural areas.

Access Can people actually get access to the services they need? This might be physical barriers, financial, or feeling excluded from a service.

Choice Do people have choices about the service they receive? For example – NI consumers do not have a choice of electricity provider.

Redress* When things go wrong, is there a system in place to make sure that consumers get some redress?

Safety Are services safe? What systems are in place to make sure standards are as high as they should be?

Representation There should be ways of making sure that service users are happy with the service provision and can influence decisions made about how services are provided.

* The word **redress** can mean financial compensation, having a problem fixed or even having their problem acknowledged, receiving an apology and getting assurances that it won't happen again.