



How to educate consumers?

CONSUMERS LEARN SUSTAINABLE AND EFFECTIVE WAYS OF CONSUMPTION

1. Subject-specific information

Just like we have not managed to educate "critical consumers" (during the 70ies and 80ies) we may not be able to enthuse all consumers for an attitude of consumption which is "oriented on sustainability".

1.1 Basic principles of consumer education

1.1.1 Consumers of the 21st century: problems and needs

For some decades consumers in most European states could feel protected by political measures. Improving consumer-rights and strict governmental controls led gradually to a situation where consumers were only vaguely aware of their role on the market. This development from a philosophy of protection to a philosophy of information in the area of the EU confronted the consumers with serious problems - all of a sudden they should show competences which enabled them to act like aware and conscious consumers.

At the same time problems resulting from a careless management and handling of resources were becoming a topic of general and scientific discussion. Today we are asked to turn from old consumer habits to a way of consuming which is oriented on sustainable effectiveness, and the practical consequences of this new attitude, which enables us to master our everyday-life, have become the central theme of consumer education.

Before beginning our work, which tries to make people reflect and re-evaluate their ideas and their needs, we must draw a picture of the large variety and complexity of possible ways of conduct, and of the multifarious problems and needs of consumers.

needs of consumers	resulting problems and questions
consumers want to live their consumption-needs fully and without restrictions	
consumers are exposed to an abundance of information and want to be able to handle it; consumers want to be granted the basic right of access to available information;	The quality of information cannot be evaluated, because we lack corresponding knowledge; because we do not have sufficient time, because of a lack primary skills for examining the information, or because of a physical handicap. Which skills do consumers need to develop in order to distinguish information from publicity? Where can they access information? Which knowledge is a prerequisite for understanding the most important parts of information?
consumers want to be accepted as equal partners by trade and producers;	What is the role of consumers with regard to the protection of consumer-rights? Which communication-techniques are adequate for claiming one's rights?



	In which way can consumers co-shape competition?
consumers want to be allowed to take their time to choose products and services, and not have to make decisions under interior or exterior pressure;	Publicity and measures of marketing lead to mass-production and make consumers subject to influences on their shopping-decisions which are difficult to make out.
consumers want to be granted the basic right of access to products and services (in accordance with their life-style and habits);	Not all consumers have the same possibilities to get specific products and services. Which are the possibilities to improve the chances for a balanced access to the existing resources? Which factors exercise an influence on shopping-decisions?
consumers want to feel that their particular needs are taken into consideration on an individual basis;	How can needs be distinguished from wants?
consumers want to make their own decisions regarding consumption in a self-confident way.	What are the full consequences of my attitudes regarding consumption (for myself, my family, society, environment, economy)? How can consumers be adequately prepared to act self-confidently, and to call in their rights?

1.1.2 The purpose of consumer education

Consumer education is general education

Successful consumer education must not direct consumers, and must not use interdictions or commands. It is neither a stipulation to buy more, nor a support for the purchase of a specific product; it is also not an instruction to generally renounce consumption.

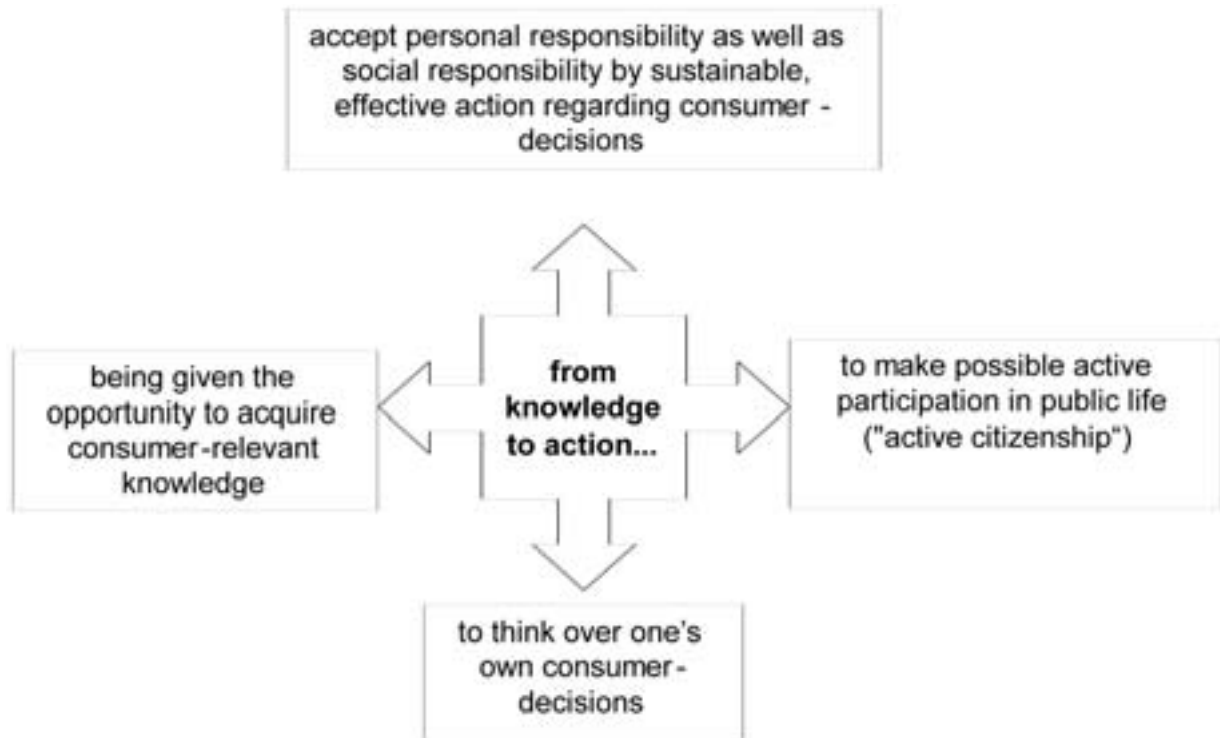
It is an essential part of general education which helps consumers to make their decisions by consciously setting priorities, to shape their everyday-life in a sustainable way, and to use the existing resources cautiously.

In scientific literature consumer education is defined as follows:

Consumer education is a term for those educational measures by which consumption-relevant knowledge is transmitted in primarily action-oriented ways, by which basic skills are acquired, ideas and value-orientations are examined, and by which - if need be - changes of conduct oriented on a sustainable, efficient lifestyle, are initiated.



Our objectives



1.2 Successful consumer education

1.2.1 Elements of successful consumer education

What can be said of other fields of education holds also true for consumer education: instruction which is limited to a mere transmission of information does not really educate.


The experience of many years of institutions of consumer-counselling has confirmed this truth. We also know that there is no direct relation of knowledge and desired behaviour. Psychological feelings, needs, and ideas of people often act as a barrier, when knowledge is to be translated into action.

Elements of consumer education

information on topics like:	encourages active participation on the market	furtheres conscientious decisions of buying
consumer-rights. documents which strengthen consumers.	create awareness of consequences of consumer-action.	create awareness of one's own consumer-attitudes.
topics of consumer-information and consumer-counselling.	express consumer-satisfaction or dissatisfaction.	get to know the structures of our own needs.

<p>distinction of publicity and measures of marketing from information.</p>	<p>create awareness of influences on one's own consumer-attitudes.</p> <p>demonstrate the consumer's responsibility regarding the use of resources.</p> <p>create active and conscious awareness of the role of citizens in society.</p>	<p>create awareness of influences on structures of our own needs.</p> <p>be able to use existing resources in an economic and ecologic way.</p> <p>create awareness of the different ways to deal with information and consumption.</p> <p>evaluate own consumer-attitudes.</p>
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1.2.2 Results of successful consumer education



more knowledge	reflection of attitudes	enhanced skills
<p>putting into practice consumer-rights and consumer-duties; relations of consumers and producers, market and society; know subject-specific expressions and decipher codes; find access to sources of information; know the difference of knowledge from marketing.</p>	<p>willingness to accept responsibility; practice critical awareness; realize the role the consumer plays on the free market.</p>	<p>ability to find information; ability to make and substantiate decisions;</p> <p>ability to communicate on consumer-problems;</p> <p>ability to handle conflicts;</p> <p>ability to claim consumer-rights [3].</p>



1.2.3 Focal points of successful consumer education [4]

Efficiency/economic value

Do I really need the product?
Can I afford the product?
In which way does the product influence my social life, and my lifestyle in general?
How is the product produced?
Where is it produced, and who are the producers?
How are the working conditions during production?
Where are the profits going?
Does the purchase influence the economic situation of my family/ my social environment?

Health-related values

Does the product pose a risk to health?
Is it physiologically valuable?
Are production/storage/wrapping of the product hygienically unobjectionable?
Does the product endanger the health of specific groups, e.g. children?
Does publicity promise unrealistic health-benefits

Social values

Which advertising measures were taken?
Does the product influence the general orientation on values?
Does the production recur to child-labour?
What are the social costs caused by production or usage?

Consumer-rights

Does the labelling of the product correspond to the law?
Was the product frequently offered at dumping-prices?
Which consumer-rights are significant?
When do advertising measures infringe consumer-rights?
Where can I get information and help regarding the protection of my consumer-rights?

1.2.4 Structure of successful consumer education

Consumer education is only successful if we succeed in the consumers' reflection of their own ideas and values, and the integration of their respective knowledge into everyday-life.

Of course the improvement of consumer-knowledge remains an important goal, but the consumers' self-confidence must be strengthened correspondingly. Topics which are related to people's everyday-life must elucidate our role as consumers and the effects of consumption.

For this reason consumer education can be realized in two different ways:

- ◆ directly, meaning that a classic topic of consumption is didactically prepared, e.g. getting to know the rules of food-labelling, and learning to identify codes;
- ◆ indirectly, meaning that e.g. in foreign language instruction a consumption-related topic, such as how to express consumer-complaints, is chosen.

Didactic structure of consumer education

All decisions regarding consumer education have in common that they follow a determined process. But most of the time this process takes place unconsciously. Holistically oriented consumer education aims at making this process transparent to the consumer. The consumers shall develop awareness of their own needs, their knowledge, and their barriers which prevent them from translating existing knowledge into practice. A didactic structure of teaching-sequences which corresponds to actual changes of conduct can be helpful in this respect. This means that a teaching-sequence would begin with reflections on the topic, followed by phases of orientation, planning, and subsequent translation into action, and a final reflection of the resulting problems.

From knowledge to action - the process of consciously changing attitudes

orientation/reflection

verification of own level of knowledge
reflection of own conduct;
what do we not like?



planning

Which changes could make sense for myself?
Which methods are suited?



verification/evaluation

Was I successful?
Where did problems occur?



translation into action/integration

Which is the first step?
How and by whom can I be helped?
Which methods do I use?

When we search international literature for common objectives of consumer education three fundamental educational precepts of intercultural validity our attention:

1. Personal responsibility for own consumer-decisions must be accepted.
2. The consumers' subject-related and social competence must be strengthened by adequate educational measures.
3. Introspection into own consumer-attitudes must lead to changes of conduct.

Only well-informed and self-determined consumers are able to make sustainable and efficient consumer-decisions and obtain by fighting a position which makes them equivalent partners on the market.

1.3 Difficulties of consumer education

◆ How can I "sell" consumer education?

Consumer education is not really an area of education which is sought willingly, - most of the time only people who are totally in debt or really very frustrated by their powerlessness regarding consumption are interested. But from a social point of view it is very important and desirable that a growing number of adults are taught the necessity and usefulness of sustainable and efficient consumer-decisions. For this reason it is important to find an attractive title for a course which deals "only" with consumer education.

Another possibility consists in making topics of consumer education part of other, already existing courses and seminars.



◆ Instructors of adult education come from many different fields - how can we include consumer-topics into our own work in meaningful ways?

There is hardly any area of life where we are not also confronted with our role as consumers. It is really a permanent role, and for this reason there is no topic which does not touch it. But the respective consumer-related aspects need to be laid open (from the instructor's as well as from the participants' point of view). The question thus needs to read like this: During which phases and relating to which contents can I best integrate consumer-relevant topics into my course?

◆ How can we delimit education from information?

Adults sometimes are happy to take information, rather than ask for education. Education requires active participation, while information is like consuming, - it does not necessarily require intellectual or emotional participation, or confrontation with the responsibility we bear as consumers. It is for this reason important that on planning courses of consumer education we include the process of orientation, planning, implementation, and evaluation as a general principle of planning.

Conflicts regarding the objectives

When we work with adults on topics of consumer education some specific conflicts regarding the objectives should be expected, - sharpening respective awareness helps us to react appropriately.

◆ Area of nutrition

The decision of whether to use convenience-food or cook fresh food often depends on time-resources, and sometimes also on ideas regarding established roles. To find an adequate solution we need to consciously set individual priorities and empty our mind of preconceived values. The decision for or against food which was produced in a biological way is often based on financial limitations, and not on a lack of will to choose ecologic food.

◆ Ways to deal with money

This area often entails conflicts of psychic nature. People are not sufficiently aware of the structures of their needs and do not know which factors can exert an influence on them; they are not ready to reflect their own attitudes of consumption.

But as long as no carefully directed reflection takes place, the identification of areas where cuts would be possible remains mere theory.

◆ Area of social environment

How do my activities affect my social environment? The pressure exerted by social groups on adults is often much stronger than they are ready to admit. As a consequence, specific attention needs to be paid to ways in which to assert oneself in the social environment [5].

◆ Area of psychological ambivalences

Individual psychic needs often collide with either an abundance or a lack of offers of products and services. Even when a person really wishes to act in a sustainable and effective way, and also has the necessary knowledge, the question of how to carry out his purpose with the available material and immaterial resources (time, physical-strength, mobility etc.) remains open.

◆ Conflict between actual well-being and a long-term perspective of health

From experiences regarding primary, preventive health-care we know that preventive measures (stop heart-failure, nutritional-information, etc.) have little success; they do not really "embrace" the whole person, but - at best - inform of a specific problem. The step of individualising the problem is not taken. Reality shows that for adults, and naturally even more for children and adolescents, health is not talked about as long as a person feels well. Anticipating possible future consequences of the present lifestyle is avoided, because it can plunge a person into inner conflicts.



◆ Conflict between own responsibility and institutionalised health-care

The demand to accept own responsibility with regard to consumption is just as new as the demand to accept responsibility for one's health. We have long been pampered by a social system which generously ignored all vices resulting from our chosen lifestyles, and by strict laws of consumer-protection (strict, consumer-oriented food-regulations). The citizens were only little prepared for the rapidly occurring changes, and cannot understand the different political initiatives regarding the subject.

◆ Ideals of beauty, and health

Socially convened ideals of beauty define our lifestyle to an extent which is bothersome and does not feel good. As in other areas, we generally refuse to see in which ways these ideas are related to health. In order to live up to a determined ideal of beauty high risks are taken (obsessive slimming and fitness, diet-products, cosmetics etc.).

2. Didactic processing

	Introduction/ orientation	<p>Consumers learn how to consume in more effective ways! Foundations of successful consumer-education</p> <p>Get to know each other, warm-up. For this purpose pairs are formed; names are associated with experiences and can thus be better remembered. The participants say and write down what they expect of the course, and place their notes on a wall-board, so all can read them. Input: needs and problems of consumers.</p>
1	Methods	<p>Games to get to know each other, for groups: Each participant writes the following information on three different cards: 1st card: name 2nd card: which articles do I particularly like to buy? 3rd card: where do I sometimes feel insecure as a consumer? He tapes these cards, with the writing turned inside, and letters upside-down, to the body.</p> <p>The participants are divided into 2 groups (1 and 2). They are asked to walk around the room and establish contact with another person. Both lift their partner's cards and read them. Then the question: why do you particularly like to buy...? (G1), or: where do you sometimes feel insecure as a consumer? are asked.(G2)</p> <p>The answers should be remembered. After as many encounters as possible have taken place, the remembered answers are written down on additional, individual cards, and taped to the body of the respective persons (this looks like scales, and for this reason the game is called the scale-game).</p>



		<p>The cards are to be kept and assorted according to topics.</p> <p>Expectations regarding the course are written down, and successively read to the group by all participants; they are then pinned on a board, so they can be seen by all.</p> <p>Input of information: What are the problems and the needs of consumers – the participants gather the information, they are supported by presentations on foils</p>
2	Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get an idea of the great variety of the problems and needs of consumers.
3	Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumers of the 21st century: their problems and needs
4	Duration	50 – 60 minutes
5	Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 12-15 coloured cards (postcard-size) per person ✓ felt-tip pens ✓ adhesive tape ✓ OH-transparency: consumer-problems and consumer-needs

	Planning	<p>Consumers learn how to consume in more effective ways! Foundations of successful consumer education</p>
1	Methods	<p>Brainstorming: We all are consumers: what would we like to learn in order to be better able to deal with our role as consumers? The participants write all skills and fields of knowledge on a suitable piece of paper.</p> <p>Clustering: the related aspects are arranged according to knowledge, skills, and outlook. Using foil 1 the connection between different areas is explained.</p> <p>Reference is made to possible ways to "wrap" consumer-educating contents. (e.g. a cooking-course can be improved by including criteria of food-quality).</p> <p>Input of information: the didactic steps of consumer-education - transparency 4 change of paradigms regarding work with consumers - transparency 5.</p> <p>Exercise: the necessary essential competences developed by consumer education are arranged and discussed in groups</p>
2	Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting to know the possible objectives of consumer education • elements of consumer education • getting to know necessary consumer-competences

3	Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - objectives of consumer education - elements of consumer education - change of paradigm in consumer education
4	Duration	40 minutes
5	Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ OH-transparency: from knowledge to action ✓ OH-transparency: the didactic steps of consumer education ✓ OH-transparency: change of paradigms in consumer education ✓ exercises of classification of necessary competences of instructors of consumer education

	Translation into action	<p>Consumers learn how to consume in more effective ways! Basic principles of successful consumer education What do we need to consider on teaching consumer education?</p>
1	Methods	<p>Analysis of the weak points which were individually discovered during the introductory phase – find general terms and signal problem-areas on the flip-chart (e.g.: I buy too many sweet things to nibble on, or: I feel especially insecure when I buy technical things,...) Group work: "find" the perspectives of consumer-education by assembling a puzzle Exercise: Classing problem-areas with those perspectives of consumer-education which correspond to them – OH-transparency Reflection: where can I integrate isolated content-parts into my work? Group-discussion</p>
2	Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investigating possible perspectives of consumer education, proceeding from individual examples from the introductory phase
3	Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perspectives and methodical steps of consumer education
4	Duration	30 minutes
5	Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ flipchart, felt-tip pens ✓ OH-transparency: perspectives of consumer education ✓ OH-transparency: topics of consumer education



	Testing/ evaluating	<p>Consumers learn how to consume in more effective ways! Basic principles of successful consumer education</p> <p>Where can instructors of consumer education encounter difficulties? Or ambivalences, or conflicting objectives? Where might I encounter difficulties?</p>
1	Methods	<p>Reflection: Which processes of learning do I, as an instructor of adult education, need to go through? Which additional assets (or which advantages) can I or can the participants of my courses derive from the integration of consumer education into my courses? Enter advantages or additional assets on the flipchart.</p> <p>Supplement: ambivalences and conflicting objectives which are also commented in respective literature.</p> <p>Discussion: Which advice can we offer?</p>
2	Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • become familiar with possible points of criticism and questions arising on translating consumer education into practice; learn strategies for mastering difficulties
3	Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ambivalences resulting from the translation into practice of topics of consumer-education
4	Duration	✓ 330 minutes 0 minutes
5	Material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ coloured cards, felt-tip pens, ✓ flipchart, pencils

