

You don't have to be paranoid to shop here but being sceptical helps: Empowered New Zealand consumers, past and present?

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Reports of consumers seeking to engage and influence suppliers of products and services through their actions in the marketplace are well documented in marketing and consumer behaviour literature. Such acts of consumer resistance are mainly viewed and described in terms of 'consumer empowerment' (e.g., Carrigan *et al.*, 2004; Shaw *et al.*, forthcoming; Harrison, 2005). Consumer actions aimed at changing marketing and business behaviour can be manifested through, for example, boycotting and protesting against those suppliers deemed unethical and rewarding those displaying genuine ethical credentials through buycotting. Despite the attention given to the concept literature to-date falls short of providing a clear definition of consumer empowerment, indeed the term is often assumed rather than defined. To develop further important insights into consumer behaviour in this area we maintain that empowerment must be considered much more than a term of the moment.

We look to other disciplines to develop a meaning of consumer empowerment and begin by exploring the term empowerment itself. In the area of Extension research Page and Czuba (1999, p. 3) provide a general definition of empowerment as "a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and their society, by acting on issues that they define as important". This highlights the capacity to implement rather than control and it challenges the status quo and implies the prospect of change. In terms of consumer empowerment this relationship exists between producers and consumers with consumers seeking a shift or expansion of power to address their economic, social and/or political concerns. Such movements in power between producer and consumer are clearly illustrated in cases such as the 1995 boycott of Shell (Grolin, 1998) and consumer rejection of genetically modified foods (Gaskell, 2000). In addition to seeking to address concerns at a multi-dimensional level, empowerment can also be witnessed as a synthesis of individual and collective change. While empowerment may be viewed as a social process, in consumer empowerment consumers moved to use their economic power may do so at both an individual and/or collective level. This has obvious implications in terms of the effectiveness of their actions in achieving desired change.

While Page and Czuba (1999) provide a useful starting point for building our theory of consumer empowerment it is vital to consider the factors critical to fostering, or conversely obstructing, consumer empowerment. Among these we deem a consideration of consumer sovereignty vital to our understanding of consumer empowerment. Smith (1990), however, denounces the idea that consumers are sovereign and refers instead to a degree of sovereignty enhanced by information, choice and alternative retailers and restricted by competition, state intervention and individual income. In today's consumer orientated society one would assume that the availability of these factors would have much improved the power of consumers. For those increasing numbers of consumers who seek to respond to reports of questionable business practices such as child labour and environmental pollution attempts to redistribute the power between consumer and supplier have been described as a struggle for consumer power (Shaw *et al.*, forthcoming).

The purpose of our presentation, therefore, will be to increase our understanding of consumer empowerment through the development of a clear definition of this concept. To develop a theory of consumer empowerment it is critical to increase our understanding of the existence and nature of various acts of consumers seeking to exercise power. As such, our presentation will present findings from present day ethical consumers in Dunedin, New Zealand alongside a researched history of the Dunedin Consumer Association from the 1960s and 1970s. Both these sets of consumers seek to exercise power in the marketplace; however, they operated under very different circumstances. It is these differences in market conditions but similarity in terms of consumer resistance and organisation which will expand our understanding of the concept of consumer empowerment.

References

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