

# Watchdog has interest of consumers at heart

by Karien Slabbert

"The South African National Consumer's Union (Sancu) is proud to be known as the official consumer watchdog," says Ina Wilken, chairperson of Sancu. As a united and responsible voice, Sancu is a voluntary, autonomous body that today represents millions of consumers. "Indeed, we are for the consumer," says Wilken.



Ina Wilken,  
Chairperson, Sancu

Its membership extends from the vitally important grassroots support of leading women's organisations, such as various women's agricultural unions, the National Council for Women of South Africa, through to influential bodies such as Denosa, the Association of Retired Persons and Pensioners, as well as large organisations, such as Pick & Pay, Nestlé and Absa.

As an independent non-governmental body, the Consumer's Union speaks with authority on behalf of all consumers. Additionally, the Consumer Goods Council plays a major role in ensuring that consumers are guaranteed quality products. "As one of our members, they keep us abreast of trends in that specific field," comments Wilken.

The Consumer's Union works in close co-operation with manufacturers, retailers, the agricultural sector, the South African Bureau of Standards and government where consumers' interests are concerned. Says Wilken: "Sancu's policy has always been one of communication and consultation before confrontation. It aims to build up consumers' awareness of their rights, responsibilities and bargaining powers through education, information and protection."

**Sancu incorporates the following membership categories:**

- **Affiliate memberships:** Voluntary associations or organisations with an interest in consumer affairs. Their representatives attend

meetings, are expected to keep their organisations informed and are free to take part in deliberations

- **Associates:** Representatives from service organisations, commerce and industry, agriculture/food-related bodies have an opportunity to help consumers and to inform them about production, marketing and advertising
- **Individual/private memberships:** Individuals, who have an interest in consumer affairs or feel they want to help the organisation, are free to join as private members.

According to Wilken, Sancu has played a vital role within the consumer movement since its inception 46 years ago. They are known for their tenacity when it comes to consumerism and are always on the forefront when the public is confronted with irregularities – either through business or through government. Once Sancu becomes aware of a problem, they respond on behalf of consumers through dialogue, press releases or the many boards that represent consumers' interests. Wherever Sancu is represented their voice is heard loud and clear.

The three cornerstones of consumerism, Wilken points out, are education, information and protection. However, the onus is on the individual consumer to ensure his/her rights are enforced.

The most effective way to lodge a complaint is to start at the very beginning. Wilken gives the following useful tips:

- Keep your slips
- Know with whom you dealt
- Go to the manager
- Read the small print – even before you sign
- Ensure you are able to redress
- Keep copies of all correspondence
- Put everything in writing
- Persist: It will pay off.

**Wilken also gives the following additional tips on consumer rights:**

**The right to be heard:** Somebody must listen when the consumer is not satisfied with a purchase or a service performed – whether it is the repair person or anybody involved in the matter. Go straight to the top! Approach the owner or the manager with your complaint. Consumers must join forces and lobby for the right to air their complaints.

**The right to be informed:** Consumers have the right to receive all the information they require about a product or service. It is their responsibility to see that they get it. For instance, as a consumer you have the right to know the exact ingredients of every type of processed food you buy, and the right to know all the details on a contract.

If you do not understand certain points, you must insist on having them explained to you. Insist on your right to be informed. Write to the relevant authorities and get support from people and organisations in your community. To date, consumers have not used this right to their advantage.

**The right to safety:** Consumers must be protected against flaws or hidden dangers in products or services they buy. They also have the right to physical safety while they are buying.

As community watchdogs, consumers must be on the lookout for potentially dangerous situations. They must draw local authorities or the relevant government departments' attention to their problems and unsafe products.

**The right to choose:** Consumers must insist on a variety of products and goods to choose from, based on personal taste, quality or price. Competition in the market place allows you to buy what suits your particular circumstances.

**The right to redress:** When you are sold an inferior product or service, you have the right to go back to the seller and demand a replacement or a refund. In some instances the law protects this right. Consumers can take their cases to the courts to exercise their right to redress. If consumers are satisfied with their inferior products and services, they have only themselves



to blame. As consumers do not demand redress for inferior products and services, businesses are not aware of them and others are caught in the same trap.

**The right to consumer education:** Consumers have the right to demand education in consumer affairs. Both the state and the private sector have a role to play in this. Many opportunities are available. The responsibility lies with you, the consumer, to ensure that you are educated in consumer affairs.

**The right to a healthy environment:** Consumers have the right to a physical environment that will enhance the quality of life.

**The right to satisfaction of basic needs:** Consumers have the right to basic goods and services that guarantee survival. This includes adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and sanitation. **M&JR**