

Consumerism on the Wrong Track

AFTER years of bureaucratic consumerism, aggrandizement of Ralph Nader, and costly lawsuits against manufacturers, a new finding has been reported that could shake up the whole consumerist movement.

A survey made for national insurance brokers, March & McLennan, by pollster Louis Harris, shows that 65 percent of the public thought that injuries from household products were caused by misuse. In certain categories, misuse was cited by as much as 82 percent. Only 11 percent blamed the instructions and 9 percent blamed design.

If consumers blame themselves for most product problems, then the idea of enacting laws, creating federal bureaus and setting up inspection systems to protect the public has been on the wrong track.

Many business firms stand behind what they sell and others do not. Federal laws requiring statements of guarantee or warranty to be supplied on certain products and listing of ingredients on others may not necessarily change that situation.

Those who really want to guarantee the quality and quantity of what they sell will do so whether or not it is legally required. Those who wish to evade responsibility hire sharp lawyers to phrase their warranties so that consumers may find adjustments too much trouble.

Secondly, many consumers do not read either the instructions for use or the warranties — at least, not until difficulties arise.

A need for standards by which consumers may evaluate merchandise was publicized recently by the federal Department of Transportation. It said there is little correlation between tread wear and prices charged for tires, and consumers can't tell the difference. That is not surprising when many car owners don't know what size tires their cars require. Marking them in metric measurements hasn't helped.

The consumer protection movement may be nullified to a large extent, if the Harris survey reflects a general condition, by the trend toward "do it yourself" installation and repairs.

Back in 1977, the Consumer Product Safety Commission was told that many people fall off ladders while making repairs around the house. The CSPC went to work and rewrote the rules for making and using ladders, turning out an 80-page document that increased the cost of making aluminum ladders as much as 15 percent. It is not known whether those rules have kept any users from falling off their ladders.

In these days when it costs a repair service \$20 to \$30 just to send out a man on a truck to look at a broken appliance, more people are undertaking their own repairs.

Recently a local resident paid \$34 for a serviceman to look at his garage door opener and tell him he couldn't fix it because he had never seen one like it before. So the home owner bought a new one, installing it himself. Now he knows how to repair it, if needed.

Some manufacturers of small appliances and parts for larger ones get around such problems by using molded plastic, with nothing that can be taken apart with a screwdriver. Nobody can repair them.