

BEUC – AIM Common principles for consumer information

Preamble

AIM and BEUC share the view that the provision of information to consumers should be effective, empowering consumers and enabling them to make informed choices, and efficient, keeping the cost of providing that information in proportion to its usefulness.

Both AIM and BEUC are concerned that the growing number and complexity of mandatory information requirements might not necessarily respond to consumers information needs and their usefulness and added value is not always supported by evidence. The provision of too much, complex, or conflicting information can leave the consumer no better informed, undermine consumer confidence and add unnecessarily to producers' costs.

AIM and BEUC believe that it may be possible, working together and applying the following Common Principles, to devise a win-win solution in which the provision of consumer information is more effective and more efficient. These principles were written with regard to the provision of information about consumer goods; however, they may be equally applicable to the provision of consumer information in other sectors, including services.

Common Principles of Consumer Information

Whereas:

consumers have a right to information to enable them to make informed purchasing decisions;

factual information may be provided for different reasons such as advice to consumers regarding specific risks associated with the use, or the improper use, of a product, or advice to consumers as to the proper use or disposal of a product, or to enable consumers to make a meaningful comparison between competing products;

at the heart of any consumer information regime is a consideration of how best to convey all this information to the consumer;

it may be necessary to determine a hierarchy of information needs and to identify the optimum means of conveying different bits of information;

it is necessary to look beyond the many different bits of information to be provided and to consider a coherent, holistic approach based on the needs of consumers as the recipients of the information and the product category concerned;

in circumstances where these Principles raise questions as to the consumers' requirements or other areas of uncertainty, as to whether consumers will find information useful, or as to the best way to convey that information to consumers these questions should be answered by reference to independent consumer research;

these Principles do not address the subjective interpretation of information, claims, and other promotional communications but do apply to the factual information conveyed in such communications;

The following principles apply to factual information provided to consumers:

1. Reliability

Consumers should be able to trust the information provided. Reliability requires that information should be factual, unbiased, accurate and up-to-date. Where appropriate, information should be based on objective evidence and capable of independent verification.

2. Usefulness

The information provided should be of use to consumers. Usefulness requires that information should be provided simply, clearly and comprehensibly so that consumers are able to use it; however, it should not be simplified to the point where it ceases to be objective or loses its meaning. Where information is conveyed by means of logos or pictograms these should be accompanied by programmes to educate consumers as to the meaning thereof.

3. Accessibility

The information provided should be accessible to consumers. Accessibility requires not only that the information is available but also that it is usable. This means that information should be legible, uncluttered and in proportion to what is processable by the reader. Information may be provided through different media so long as it is known to, or easily accessible to, the consumer when they need it.

4. Proportionality

The effective provision of consumer information should be in proportion to consumer need and not impose a disproportionate cost. Proportionality requires that the necessary information should be conveyed in such a way as to minimise the cost of doing so and any resulting disruption to the internal market.

June 2010 – Agreed by AIM Board and by BEUC Executive