

Triumphs and trials

The inside story of consumer reps

Representing the voice of consumers in ISO technical committees is not always easy, but it is a rewarding and important task. Below, five consumer representatives in very different ISO committees tell us about their personal experiences. Read about the trials and triumphs they encountered in promoting consumer needs in standardization.

Cosmetics

Being a consumer advocate on an ISO technical committee is not an easy job but it is a crucial one. Our role is to independently represent the interests of the general public in standards development. During the process, we identify and communicate consumer concerns, such as safety. The result is increased public confidence in ISO standards.

So what does it take to be a consumer representative? Passion is key. Consumers may be underrepresented in ISO committees, so it is important to have their voice heard. It was my enthusiasm in Australia that persuaded the Chair of working group WG 7, Sun protection test methods, within ISO/TC 217, Cosmetics, to invite me to represent consumer issues.

In addition, commitment, personality and love of challenge are important to promote consumer interests, particularly in technically oriented environments. Consumer advocates rarely have individual voting rights, as they are usually members of a national delegation. If their views are overridden or ignored by their country members, they will not succeed.

The value of consumer advocacy is not always recognized, making ISO nomination difficult. In Australia, delegates must first seek nomination from mirror committee members before they can attend ISO/TC meetings. Similarly, at my first ISO meeting of WG 7, some experts queried my role by stating “But we are all consumers here!” Yet clearly, for transparency, experts cannot represent their own sector and consumers interchangeably.

Furthermore, representation in ISO committees requires a level of expertise in both the subject matter and in committee process. Technical expertise, which many consumer advocates have, is a bonus when drafting technical standards. In addition



to representing sunscreen users, I am also an Organic Chemist with a background in pharmaceutical manufacture and research and development of sun protection products. Committee experience is also useful. Seventeen years on Australia’s sunscreen mirror committee for the Consumers’ Federation of Australia plus six on ISO committees has prepared me well to professionally represent consumers and to warrant equal respect from technical experts.

Another important quality is knowing how to compromise. A consumer representative must recognize when to stand firm, and when to concede on minor issues in order to secure major gains. Achieving global consensus is not easy, but the re-

sulting International Standards will have a wide and powerful outreach.

ISO standards aim to reduce technical barriers to trade. By harmonizing requirements for products and services, they provide a valuable opportunity for globally promoting best practice. This is something consumer advocates must take advantage of. For instance, Australia has the world’s highest incidence of skin cancer due to our extreme climatic conditions. By having an Australian consumer representative on WG 7, it was possible to ensure stringent international testing procedures that we can adopt which will not compromise the safety of any consumers, but specifically Australians.

Being a consumer representative is a rewarding and challenging task. However, there are a few barriers that require consideration. One of the biggest issues is lack of funding. In Australia, consumer delegates are volunteers. Conducting independent research, gathering statistics and attending international meetings requires money. The only funding is a government grant to partially cover a proportion of travel costs. For this reason, it has not been possible for me to attend some WG 7 interim meetings.

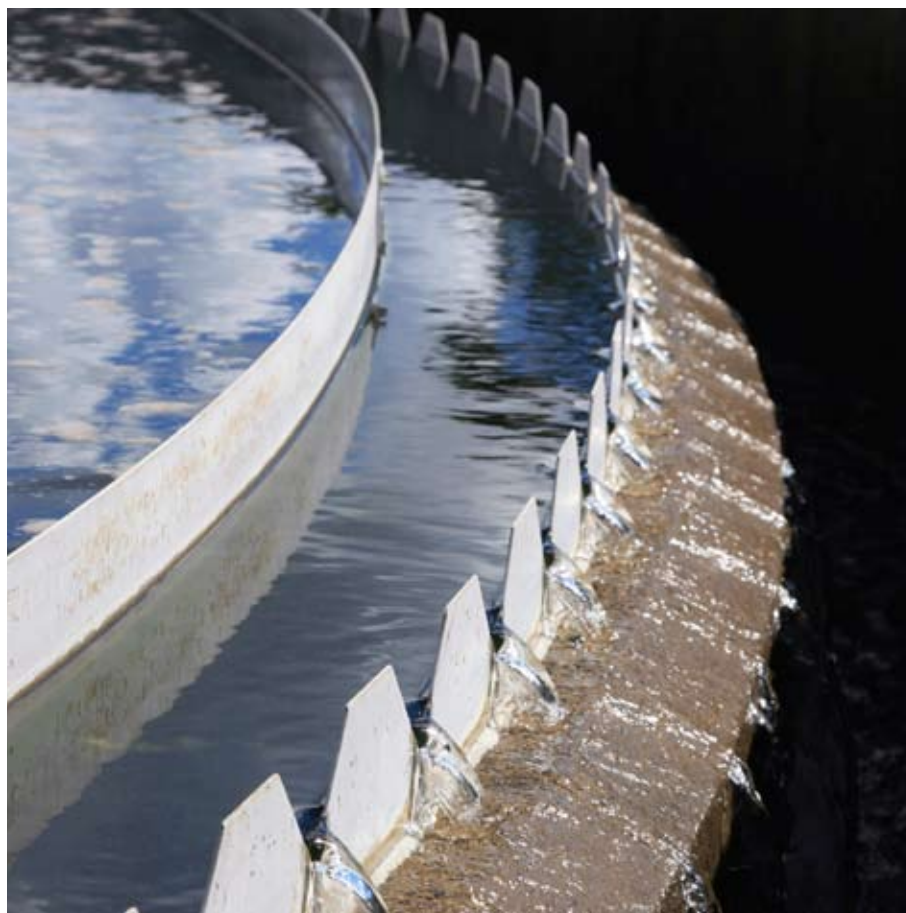
Making a real difference is a very positive outcome and one that makes all the passion, energy and time invested rewarding. The first time I supported ISO/TC 217 publishing in vitro testing methods, there was some reluctance from committee members because sun protection products are traditionally evaluated by in vivo testing on humans. After much effort and extensive dialogue, a reliable in vitro laboratory test method for the determination of UVA is nearing publication. The world will soon embrace this new International Standard, which moves from traditional testing on human skin, to a laboratory technique – an ethical victory for consumers.

Finally, to improve consumer representation in standardization it is necessary to create a consumer delegate position for each technical committee. This would strengthen the legitimacy of consumer advocates and ensure their voice is heard. Such a position should be independent of country and representative of consumer protection worldwide. ISO voting rights will globally reinforce the vital importance of consumer representation.

Robyn Easton,
Australian
consumer delegate,
ISO/TC 217.

Drinking water and wastewater services

When in 2002, I was invited to represent Consumers International (CI) in ISO/TC 224, *Service activities relating to drink-*



ing water supply systems and wastewater systems – Quality criteria of the service and performance indicators, I felt a certain trepidation. Five years later, when the work was completed, I understood why. The job had not been easy. But I do not regret it for a moment.

At the outset, I was nervous about controversies linked to the water sector. Global debates in successive water forums were sometimes politicized, and could culminate in the collapse of high profile contracts. There were misgivings from some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerning industry involvement, and from some industry members who felt similarly about standards.

However, a lesson for me was that whatever theoretical differences existed between members of the technical committee, these tended to diminish once we got down to business.

And the result was a useful and very valuable standard. ISO 24510:2007 provides guidelines for customer care in the assessment and improvement of drinking and wastewater services. Its introduction refers to contextual issues such as the “right to water”, but the standard itself focuses on practical matters.

However, getting to this stage was by no means easy. To give you an idea, just imagine three days negotiating a draft final text in a windowless room in Uruguay, while suffering from jetlag. Not for the faint-hearted!

As an “A” liaison organization representative, I could do everything, except have the right to vote. On the one hand, I was not constrained by positions adopted in advance by national delegations. But on the other hand, although there were occasional national consultations with consumer organizations in national mirror committees, I was the only permanent consumer representative in the committee. I therefore had to take full responsibility for ensuring that consumer interests were met.

After consulting with CI members at an early stage of the process, we agreed to a set of key objectives (all of which are met in the final standard). They stated that the standard should be applicable to, and highlight:

- “Non-reticulated” systems, that is, systems which are not physically integrated. Furthermore, if consumers were not served they should have the right to know when they would be

- Equitable distribution of service. If existing networks are subject to cuts in supply, then such cuts should be managed in an equitable manner
- Contractual rights to service, not necessarily in the form of individualized paper contracts. This is of particular importance to the one sixth of the world's adults that are illiterate
- Public participation in the regulation of the service
- Payment methods to help those on low incomes
- Prices set in function of a range of factors including capacity to pay of the population, costs of production, historic prices and rate of return on capital.

My only upper hand in the negotiating sessions of the TC was the power of persuasion. But most TC members were readily inclined to take account of consumer issues, including those that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, such as the needs of unconnected populations.

For my part, I had to recognize that there were technical areas beyond my expertise (mainly in the science of performance indicators rather than the engineering aspect). This experience was a valuable education on consensus building. But in the end, what matters is that ISO 24510 makes life better for consumers. We, as consumers, believe it can, and we urge its adoption.



Robin Simpson,
Consumers International
delegate,
ISO/TC 224.

Social responsibility

The approval and publication of ISO 26000, the ISO standard on social responsibility, is a historic moment. Although many around the world are talking about it, few know that the concept originated during the 2002 plenary and workshop of the ISO Committee on consumer policy (ISO/COPOLCO) in Trinidad & Tobago.

It has been a long journey. Following the workshop, ISO/COPOLCO submitted a

proposal to develop a standard on corporate social responsibility. It was agreed in 2004 that ISO would go forward with the project. By then “corporate” was dropped, so that the standard could apply to all organizations, not just companies. It was also agreed that ISO 26000 would not be a management system, and that it was not intended or appropriate for certification purposes.

ISO signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the International Labour Organization, clearly specifying that the new standard would be consistent with, and complementary to, the application of international labour standards worldwide. An MoU was also signed between ISO and the UN Global Compact.

The SR Working Group finally met in Brazil in 2005. Seven more plenaries would follow, together with countless conference calls and meetings around the globe. Finally, in May 2010 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the SR Working Group approved the final draft of ISO 26000. At this point, participants represented 99 countries, and 40 plus international or broadly-based regional organizations, totalling more than 450 individual experts. ISO 26000 broke ISO records for the number of experts working on a single document.

The SR Working Group had a unique composition. Experts came from six different stakeholder groups: consumers; government; industry; labour; non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and service, support, research, academics and others. In addition, specific provision was made to achieve a balance between developing and developed countries. In most cases, there was an effort to twin (join developing and developed countries) leadership and representation on task groups and committees. This put the consumer stakeholder group on an equal playing field with industry, government, and all other groups.

Because of the required stakeholder balance, consumer experts were able to assume leadership positions on committees and task force. A trust fund was established to help defray the costs of participation for some experts, including consumers, and the ISO Committee on developing countries (ISO/DEVCO) helped to fund those from developing countries.

The consumer stakeholder group was one of the smallest; however, it was well organized. From the first meeting to the last, Consumers International (CI) provided leadership and guidance for consumer experts, many of whom had never participated in the ISO



standards development process. CI helped consumer representatives to develop consensus positions, and to engage in healthy discussions when there was lack of agreement. CI even organized a press conference and rally, complete with T-shirts, when the SR group met in Thailand, to inform the media and the other stakeholder groups about the significance of this work for consumers.

Some of the more heated discussions concerned whether or not consumer issues should be included as a core subject of social responsibility. Armed with the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, consumer experts clearly articulated principles for socially responsible practices to meet the legitimate needs of consumers, and persuaded working group members that consumer rights are as important as human rights and labour rights. In the final document, “consumer issues” is one of the seven core subjects. The others include organizational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, and community involvement and development.

When developing International Standards, ISO and other standards developers can learn from the SR process, which successfully maintained an equal balance of all stakeholders, including consumers, and assured that there were adequate resources for their participation.



Linda Golodner,
Consumer expert,
ISO Working Group on SR.

Nanotechnologies

Being a consumer representative in a committee that deals with very technical issues can be challenging. But the results of participation benefit both consumers and industry, by looking after the safety and uptake of products by the public.

The first challenge I encountered was gaining acceptance and recognition. Having previously participated in ISO technical committees as a senior government official, I felt a difference in treatment when acting as a consumer representative. Although some committee members were

aware of the benefits of understanding and addressing broader consumer issues, other technical experts did not believe that consumers had the necessary knowledge and expertise to contribute effectively.

When ISO/TC 229, *Nanotechnologies*, was established, I was therefore advised to not introduce myself as a consumer representative, but rather as an independent consultant. At first, I was somewhat uncomfortable to join the Canadian Advisory Committee to ISO/TC 229, and later, ISO technical committee, ISO/TC 229. Most scientists and participants knew each other well, and worked together on an ongoing basis. Although it took some time before I was accepted as part of the team, my previous experience in government dealing with similar situations helped a great deal, and I was successful.

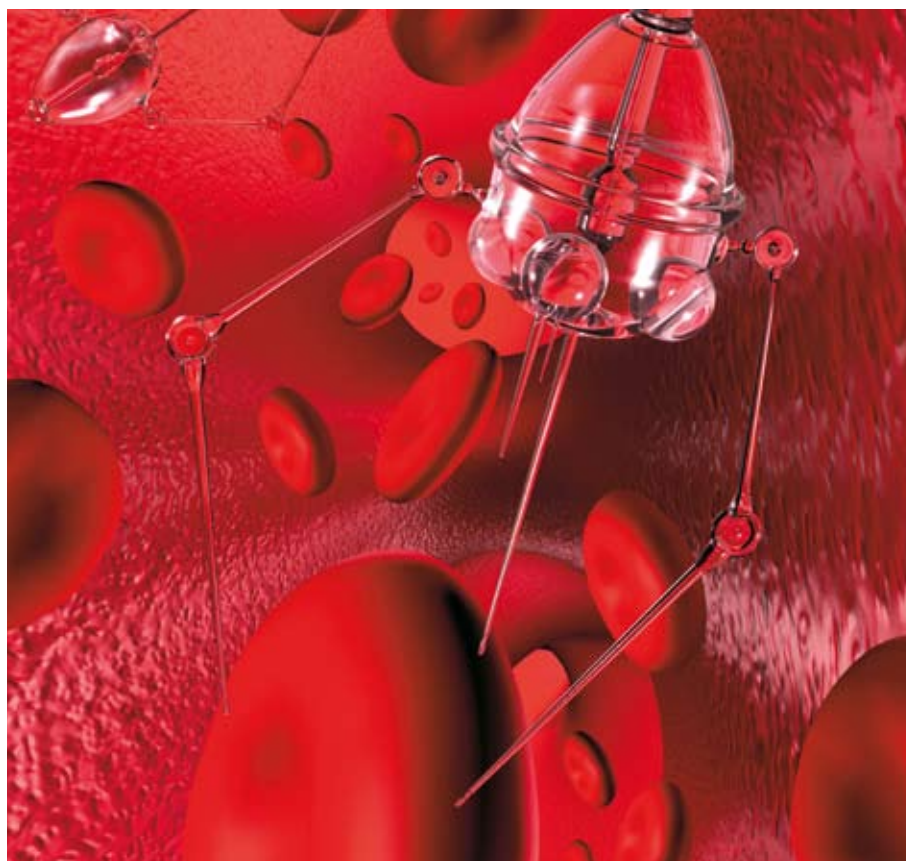
The second hurdle I encountered was bringing myself up to speed with relevant technical research to develop an accurate and relevant consumer perspective. Even though I have a solid background in chemical and material sciences, it was a challenge to update my knowledge and carry out the research required to develop policy positions that represented the broad consumer concerns and issues on nanotechnology.

Without such technical knowledge, it can be very difficult for a consumer repre-

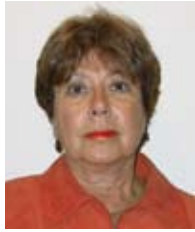
sentative to participate effectively, understand new technologies and represent the views of all consumers in that field. In order to develop solid policy positions, it was essential that I find the necessary resources to carry out relevant research. In the end, the Consumers Council of Canada, with the support of Industry Canada, helped me obtain the resources to carry out a background study that involved literature review, surveying customers across Canada, and comparing results with consumer surveys carried out elsewhere. Although successful, this was an ongoing challenge, as it was necessary to always keep up to date with new developments, and the evolving views of consumers on specific issues.

The third hurdle was obtaining resources to participate in committee work involving travel. Consumer representatives do not receive a salary or have their travel expenses covered by the organization for which they work. This often means going hat in hand to various potential funding sources to obtain resources. It also makes it more difficult to make commitments to participate in certain activities because you never know from one meeting to another whether the resources to participate will be available.

As a former regulator in the field of consumer product safety, I am very aware of the contribution that voluntary standards



make to filling the gaps in regulations and reducing injuries. This, I believe, is one of the major benefits of participating as a consumer representative on technical committees developing voluntary standards.



Dr. Elizabeth Nielsen,
member
of the Canadian
Advisory Committee
to ISO/TC 229.

Fire safety

Developing practical solutions that actually protect people from fire hazards requires thorough research and testing. ISO technical committee ISO/TC 92, *Fire safety*, knows this well. Its work can be long, very detailed, time consuming and requiring a high level of technical knowledge. The end result, however, are standards that address fire related safety, health and environmental issues to save lives, reduce fire losses, and bring in substantial cost savings through effective fire safety engineering.

The scope of ISO/TC 92 is of particular interest to consumers, as it covers:

- Fire hazards and fire risks to life, property and the environment
- The contribution of design, materials, building materials, products and components to fire safety
- Methods for mitigating fire hazards and risks by determining the performance and behaviour of materials, products and components, as well as of buildings and structures
- The assessment and characterization of building occupants and their behaviour during fire.

Although fire safety standards save lives, their implementation is not equal in everywhere. In many developed countries, the application of such standards is comprehensive and well administered, greatly reducing fire related incidents. However, this may give people a false sense of security. New materials and products come into the market all the time. Consumers need to be continuously aware of fire safety at home, work and public places.

ISO/TC 92 standards are of special value to developing countries. Apart from



supporting fire safety design and providing for advanced measurements, they are simple to use at a low cost. Their implementation is suitable for prescriptive regulations, and provide for an easy route to increased fire safety. Member countries of the ISO Committee for developing countries (ISO/DEVCO) are encouraged to take part in the activities of ISO/TC 92.

According to the ISO consumer representation directory, five experts have identified themselves as representing consumer interests in ISO/TC 92. Although a fairly small part of the overall TC membership, their input is important for introducing the consumer perspective into fire standards.

So how do consumer inputs get into ISO/TC 92 standards and onto the world stage? Often, consumers do not have the time or ability to continuously take part in the ongoing work of the committee. But they do have a number of avenues for submitting their input.

The first one is through the records of human experience and behaviour in fires. This is often passed in through review of events, case studies, news and research. Research institutes, academics, etc. in each country bring these forward to their national mirror committees, and then to the international work of ISO/TC 92. Regulators responsible for consumer safety also promote consumer concerns within national or international committees. Flexibility and transparency in communication, together with ease of access facilitate this activity.

Consumers are encouraged to contribute and participate in ISO/TC 92 through their national mirror committee.

Currently ISO/TC 92, subcommittee SC 1, *Fire initiation and growth*, has just published a standard of particular interest to consumers: ISO 12863:2010, *Standard test method for measuring the ignition propensity of cigarettes*, and is working on another, ISO 12949, *Standard test method for measuring the heat release rate of low flammability mattresses and mattress sets*. The efforts and contributions from consumer groups in ISO member countries have made the development of these documents possible.

As new technologies and products are developed exiting standards will be revised and new standards may be needed. Ensuring consumer input is an ongoing important task, we encourage consumer representatives to take part and contribute.

The standards developed by ISO/TC 92 have a long-standing record of reducing loss of life, injury and property for consumers – evidence that this process is working. ■

Rae Dulmage and Emmanuel Sopeju
are the fire safety liaisons to ISO/COPOLCO.

