

Teaching Teens to Function Effectively in the Consumer Marketplace

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Teens are managing more money each year and more of it is money they've earned, not family money. According to Teen Research Unlimited (1991), adolescents in the United States spent \$82 billion in 1991. However, the Consumer Federation of America and American Express documented the fact that teens are not well prepared to function effectively in the marketplace (Brobeck, undated). In the Consumer Knowledge test, teens correctly answered an average of only 42% of the questions on consumer credit, checking/savings, automobile insurance, housing rental, food purchase and automobile purchase. The lowest scores (average 36%) were on financial services and the highest (average 50%) were on automobile purchases.

Stampfl (1978) identified adolescence as the stage in the consumer life cycle when basic consumer decision making and comparison shopping are learned. Effective consumers must be able to decide what product or service they need, determine what constraints they have (e.g., money), obtain and evaluate information, and make decisions.

A teachable moment occurs when teens achieve greater access to financial resources and become more active in the marketplace. Cooperative Extension in several states has capitalized on this situation and developed consumer judging contests designed to teach consumer decision making and comparison shopping (Koonce, J., Marlowe, J., & Hall, D. N., 1990). Porter (1993) described consumer judging as an effective educational strategy through which Cooperative Extension and secondary educators can collaborate to help teens become better prepared consumers.

The purpose of this paper is to describe Consumerama, a Virginia 4-H program, designed to help youth gain: (a) life skills, including decision making and public speaking; (b) knowledge concerning the consumer marketplace, factors affecting consumer decisions, rights and responsibilities of consumers, and knowledge about specific products; and (c) perspectives that will help them participate in the marketplace effectively. This paper discusses the processes involved in the event,

learning strategies used by students to prepare for the contest, and the learning outcomes that result from participation.

Consumerama

Consumerama is a year-long educational program that culminates with a state-level competition each June. Most Consumerama participants are members of local 4-H clubs while others are students in high school classes that use the contest as a learning activity.

The primary purpose of Consumerama is learning, not competition. However, a general discussion of the components and processes involved in the competition is useful for understanding the types of learning that can occur. Teens learn to rank products based on consumer needs and product characteristics and to justify the rankings. Consumerama includes three types of competition: classes, reasons, and the bowl. Contestants receive individual scores on each part of the contest. These scores are summed to achieve total individual and team scores.

Classes Competition

Each year, four types of goods or services are selected for the classes in the contest. Ideas for classes are solicited from teens and adults involved in the program. After a library search to determine if sufficient information is available, the consumer education extension specialist decides which goods and services will be used. The classes for the upcoming year are announced at the state contest each June and a reference list for each class is distributed in the fall.

The four classes include a food product, a clothing or personal article, an electrical good, and a financial service. For example, in 1994 the classes are: pasta (food), sunscreens (clothing/personal), telephones (electrical), and checking accounts (financial).

Participants are asked to rank four items in each of the four classes, such as four different types of sunscreen, representing four choices available in the marketplace. Most of the items in the class are new; however, some are used or "yard sale" type items. Sometimes catalog information is provided instead of the item itself, representing the mail order option. For financial services or products not easily brought into a building (like used cars), a comparison shopping grid

is used to provide necessary information. The grid includes the price of each product and other relevant information about each item.

A consumer situation, written by the specialist, is presented for each class. The situation describes the proposed use of the product or service, desired product or service characteristics, the purpose for which the item will be used, money available to purchase the product, and any special product considerations.

Each youth ranks the four items in each class (which are numbered one through four) from the best to the poorest item for the specific consumer situation and marks his or her selection on a standard judging card. For example, if the item numbered 2 is the one that best fits the situation, item 1 is second best, item 3 is third best, and item 4 the poorest, the ranking written on the scorecard would be 2-1-3-4.

Scoring is based upon how closely the ranking matches the "official" ranking which is determined by judges before the contest. The Hormel System, the most widely accepted scoring system, is used to calculate scores for all combinations of possible rankings. This system considers the six decisions that must be made to rank four products in four possible positions and compares each pair of items.

If the teen matches the "official" ranking, the score is 50. Points are deducted using "cuts" assigned for each pair of choices (top, middle and bottom). Figure 1 shows an example of the cuts scoring system. If the judge believes that it would be easy to switch the pair, a low number is selected for the cut. In our example, it would be easy to select item 1 instead of item 2 as the best for the situation, so the assigned cut is 2. When there is a clear difference in the items and the decision should be obvious, the penalty for making the wrong decision is greater and a higher number is chosen. In this case, switching items 1 and 3 would be a major mistake, so the assigned cut is 8 and 8 points are deducted from the possible score of 50.

Figure 1. Example of cuts.

2	-	1	-	3	-	4
^		^		^		
2		8		4		

Reasons Competition

At the beginning of the competition, two classes are announced as "reasons" classes in which each participant gives an oral presentation to a judge. The competitor must summarize the situation, give his or her ranking of the items in the class, and justify the rank order of the four items in the class. The top, middle and bottom pairs are compared. For example, for a class of jeans ranked 2-1-3-4, a teen might say "I placed 2 over 1 because it was better made and fit the budget . . ." and "I placed 1 over 3 because"

During the reasons competition, the teen and judge are alone in a room. The judge uses a score sheet (Appendix A) for an evaluation that is based on the teen's explanation of the ranking, rather than the match with the "official" ranking. The score sheet is designed to rate each factor on a five-point scale. More important factors are given additional weight by using a multiplier.

Bowl Competition

The bowl portion of the competition consists of a 25-question paper and pencil test composed of multiple choice and true/false questions. The test includes questions about products and services in the class competition and general consumer knowledge questions (Leech & Kratzer, 1993). Each teen answers the bowl questions without notes or help from others.

Teams

Four teens comprise a team. Each teen's individual score is calculated by adding the scores for each of the four product or service classes, the two reasons scores, and the bowl score. Team scores are determined by summing the scores of the top three individuals on each team. Teams and individuals with the highest scores are recognized.

Preparation for the Competition

A variety of learning strategies can be used to help teens prepare for the Consumerama Contest. Teens learn about the features of each product or service. They are required to identify general product

features from information available in the marketplace rather than memorize the exact features of a brand.

Research is an important first step. Participants are encouraged to use the local library to search for information about each product or service class. Field trips and guest speakers are excellent ways for youth to learn about the products and services. For example, a group may visit a shoe store to learn about sport shoes and a car lot to learn about used cars. A bank representative may host a session on checking accounts, or a banker may visit the students in their club meeting or classroom. Food items might be studied through a taste test. In the research phase, teens learn to obtain, evaluate, and use consumer information about products and services.

Practice sessions may be held to give participants experience in judging. If each teen brings an item for the product or service being studied, several classes will be created and ranked for a given consumer situation. Another option is to use one class of products or services and several consumer situations to help teens learn that ratings will change for different consumer situations and needs.

Besides learning about specific products and services, teens study basic consumer information on such topics as consumer rights and responsibilities, credit, and warranties. *The Consumers' Resource Handbook*, distributed by the United States Office of Consumer Affairs in Washington, DC, is an excellent fundamental reference. Youth can write to Pueblo, Colorado and obtain a personal copy. In practice sessions and classroom situations, game variations of the quiz may be used to learn the information included in the bowl competition.

Teens can prepare for the reasons competition by writing down the justification for each decision. Many participants enjoy discussing reasons as a group before trying to do them alone. However, students have found they are successful in the competition when part of the preparation includes opportunities to simulate the competition by meeting with a judge.

Learning Outcomes

Consumerama is an excellent way to teach consumer decision making and comparison shopping skills that will be useful throughout life. Participants also gain research skills and learn their rights and responsibilities as consumers. They learn to analyze and verbalize the

decision process and gain poise and confidence in themselves and their decisions. Since teens speak without notes when they give reasons, they practice memorization and extemporaneous speaking.

Participation in Consumerama helped one recent Virginia participant win a \$1,500 national 4-H scholarship for her work in Fashion Revue. She applied her comparison shopping skills to decide whether to make or purchase clothing, to help her club prepare food baskets for needy families, and to purchase a computer. Later, this participant taught a Consumerama Class at Junior 4-H Camp and shared her knowledge with younger 4-H'ers. Her mother and 4-H Agent are sure she will use these knowledge and skills for the rest of her life! This 4-H'er is an excellent example of how teens can become prepared to function effectively in our economic system through participation in Consumerama.

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Appendix A

CONSUMERAMA REASONS EVALUATION SCORECARD

SCORING FACTOR	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)
I. The 4-H Member: (5 points) (Poise, Voice, Grammar)					
II. Presentation: (5 points) (Used comparative terms, appropriate beginning and end)					
III. Reasons Situations: (10 points)	2x5=10	2x4=8	2x3=6	2x2=4	2x1=2
Product Specifications: (10 points) (size, type, price, etc.)	2x5=10	2x4=8	2x3=6	2x2=4	2x1=2
Special Features: (20 points) (relate to product and item; warranty if appropriate)	4x5=20	4x4=16	4x3=12	4x2=8	4x1=4
Totals	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
GRAND TOTAL	_____				
	(Maximum Score = 50)				

Addresses for Cited Resources

The Consumers' Resource Handbook is available free by writing for a single copy to Handbook, Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009.

The Hormel system can be obtained from George A. Hormel & Co., Corporate Offices, Austin, MN 55912 or NASCO, 901 Janesville Ave., Fort Atkinson, WI 53538.

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