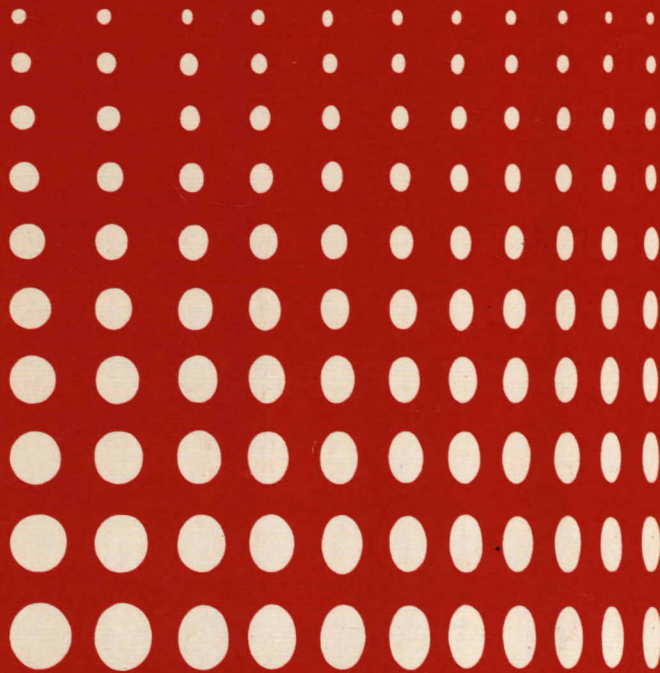


Consumers' Perceptions of Prepurchase Shopping Problems and Solutions:

major findings
and directions for action

John D. Claxton
J. R. Brent Ritchie



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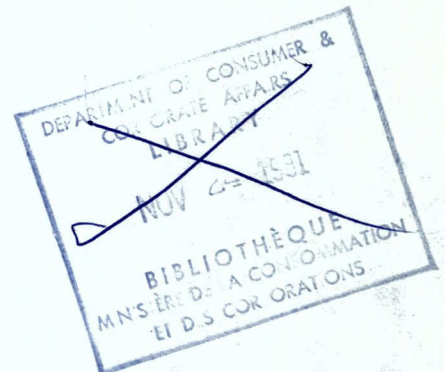
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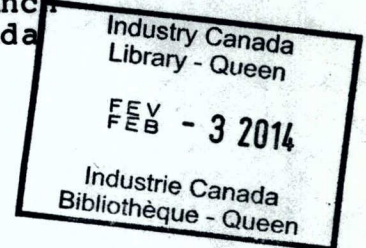
**CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PREPURCHASE SHOPPING
PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS:
MAJOR FINDINGS AND DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION**

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The analysis and conclusions of these studies are those of the authors themselves and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department.

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FOREWORD

The Consumer Research and Evaluation Branch is charged with the task of studying issues related to the selection and purchases of goods and services by consumers. This role covers all aspects of the consumer buying decision-making process. Thus it includes the pre-purchase search, the processing of the information discovered, the selection of the product or service, the after purchase satisfaction or dissatisfaction and the complaining or other behavior.

Theories about this decision-making process by consumers emphasize the role of the pre-purchase search because providing the greatest consumer satisfaction depends upon the evaluation of the product and its range of attributes and the possible alternative purchases. The initial steps involve a search of information and experience already acquired. If the consumer feels this is insufficient, then a search of other sources of information will be made. The micro-economic theories assume that consumers make purchases with perfect information about the products they can buy and the conditions under which they buy them. This assumption is necessary to ensure equilibrium market solutions that maximize consumer satisfaction.

While there is general agreement that consumer product markets do not completely satisfy these assumptions or the model for consumer decision-making, it is important to know how far short they fall from the perfect model. In addition, it is important to know the extent of the variation of these differences from reality according to market and type of consumers. This study by Claxton and Ritchie explores this area of consumer pre-purchase search and the purchasing problems consumers face. Thus it provides new insights into this problem area and the work adds to our understanding and knowledge of this pre-purchase shopping activity. The findings and recommendations in this report remain those of the authors and are not necessarily endorsed by Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada.

Geoffrey Hiscocks.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction has become an issue of increasing interest in recent years as manufacturers and retailers seek ways to attract and keep customers and policy makers consider alternatives for improving consumer welfare. This paper reports on a major research project in this area based on a series of interviews with a sample of consumers in five major urban centres across Canada to study the prepurchase problems of Canadian consumers. Its purpose was twofold: (i) to understand what prepurchase problems consumers themselves consider to be significant; and (ii) to determine the priority that consumers, on the one hand, and government specialists in consumer interests, on the other, would assign to potential solutions to these problems.

Five product/service shopping categories were selected for detailed attention. Four of these were areas that the consumers sampled regarded as presenting considerable shopping difficulty: automobile repairs, home repairs and renovations, clothing and footwear, and furniture and appliances. In addition, grocery shopping was included in the study since it constitutes a sizeable proportion of a family's spending.

With regard to automobile repairs, the lack of integrity, or fair dealing, of garage owners and operators and incompetent mechanical service emerged as major problem areas. Consumers were seriously concerned about these problems, so much so that they indicated a willingness to pay 10 percent to 20 percent more than the going rate to avoid them. Similarly, with respect to furniture and appliances, consumers were prepared to pay 20 percent higher prices to ensure good service (i.e., prompt delivery and reliable warranty service) and fair dealing. The integrity of the contractor and his concern for the consumer were key problem areas in home repairs and renovations. Consumers were generally dissatisfied with the quality and workmanship of clothing. More problems were mentioned with regard to grocery shopping than any other shopping categories, including high prices, poor quality merchandise, poorly packaged and labelled goods, and inadequate service. Unlike the other categories, no consensus was achieved in ranking these problems.

In general, the more expensive the purchase and the less frequently it is made, the greater seems to be the uncertainty that consumers feel in their ability to make a wise purchase decision. Because they must depend on retailers for information and advice in these situations, any retailer-related shopping problems are magnified.

Perhaps as a result of this sense of insecurity, consumers tended to favour solutions involving government legislative action to impose more stringent standards on industry and to closely monitor and enforce compliance. Stiffer penalties for unfair practices and warranty and service requirements were preferred to measures, such as automobile care programs for owners and information on product and retailer performance, which emphasized consumer self help.

By contrast, government specialists in consumer interests ranked non-legislative solutions higher, reflecting their assessment of the cost-benefit feasibility of such measures and their probability of success. Thus they favoured, for example, publicizing unfair or unacceptable trade practices and encouraging consumers to make greater use of the Better Business Bureau and similar organizations to voice complaints and make enquiries.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Prepurchase Shopping Problems: A Subset of Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Issues

Over the past several years increasing attention has been given to the topic of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Manufacturers and retailers are interested from the perspective of attracting and keeping happy customers. Examples of this interest can be seen in the advertising themes such as "We guarantee it," used by a major retailer, and the promotional emphasis on a "Buyer Protection Plan" by an auto manufacturer. On the other hand, public policy makers are concerned from the perspective of increasing consumer welfare. Whether policies center on providing an ombudsman service or setting product standards, the topic of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction is of central interest.

This paper reports on a major research project carried out to study the prepurchase shopping problems of Canadian consumers. It provides a chronological overview of the data collection and reporting activities of the study, highlights its major findings, and discusses the future directions indicated by the study. Readers interested in references to earlier research are advised to refer to the main report, Volume I, appendices and annexes, Volume 2, or to the annotated bibliography, Volume 3.¹

When attempting to provide a framework for evaluating the somewhat ambiguous area of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, it is useful to distinguish between activities that precede a consumer's purchase and those that follow it. Prepurchase issues would include such questions as:

- what product characteristics do I want?
- how much should I spend?
- what alternatives are available?
- where can I get information to compare models?
- can I trust the accuracy of the information?
- where should I shop?
- how should I judge product quality?
- how can I tell that I'm getting a good buy?
- can I trust the salesman?

1. In addition, an overview of the study was presented in October 1978 at the Association for Consumer Research Conference, Miami Beach, entitled "In Search of Actions to Reduce Consumer Shopping Problems."

Postpurchase issues would include:

- how do I use/operate the product?
- is it functioning properly?
- what do other people think when they see me using it?
- what do I do when it does not perform properly?
- can I take it back?
- how do I take care of it?
- where do I get parts/service?
- how much does servicing cost?
- can I trust the servicing agent?

The degree to which questions like these are resolved will determine a consumer's feelings of satisfaction.

The focus of this study is those issues identified as prepurchase shopping problems. It should also be recognized that consumer problems do not fit neatly into either the prepurchase or postpurchase categories. For example, "How do I get it serviced?" may be of concern either before or after the purchase. However, some problems such as "Where should I shop?" or "Where can I get information to compare models?" are primarily of concern prior to a purchase, and this set of problems is emphasized in the current study.

Purpose of Research

The research discussed here was concentrated in two areas:

- 1) gaining an understanding of what prepurchase shopping problems Canadian consumers consider significant; and
- 2) searching for potential actions to reduce these significant problems and to indicate priorities which consumers [and government specialists] would assign to these solutions.

It is important to emphasize two phrases in the above: "consumers consider significant," and "searching for." It is essential from both a marketing and a public policy perspective to understand what consumers in general consider important. Although consumer activists and complaint bureaus provide useful information for identifying consumer problems, a thorough understanding of the area should be based on an in-depth analysis of the opinions of a wider cross section of consumers.

The phrase "searching for" is used to emphasize the complexity of identifying relevant actions. It is clear that these actions cannot be identified by means of a simple interview with either consumers or consumer experts. However, an iterative procedure involving repeated interviews, as used in this study, may prove fruitful.

Readers wishing to review in detail the operational objectives of the study are referred to the main report (Volume 1, p. 5).

Design of the Study

The study involved six major segments, summarized in Figure 1: bibliographic review, three iterations of data collection, report of the findings, and implications analysis. Two characteristics of this study should particularly be noted. First, the three data collections were based on three sets of interviews with essentially the same sample. As a result, the second and third interviews built on the results of the earlier interview data. For example, a range of prepurchase shopping problems was established in the first set of interviews. The relative importance of these problems was examined in the second set of interviews and the priorities consumers assigned to these solutions was examined in the third set of interviews.

The second characteristic of importance is the activity in the final stages referred to as implications analysis. This involved presenting the findings to a group of top-level managers within Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada. The purpose of this session was to introduce the research to one group of potential research users and to begin to look for action implications suggested by the research. Further details on this session are provided by the summary report prepared after the session.

Validity of the Data

The two issues of concern when assessing the validity of the data are: the measurement procedures used in obtaining the data and the sampling procedures used to assure a representative cross-section of Canadian consumers. The measurement procedures involved a variety of rating scales, plus the use of NGT (Nominal Group Technique) and conjoint

Figure 1: DESIGN OF THE STUDY

January-March 1977

- Review of past research
- Preparation of annotated bibliography

April-August 1977

- Research design
- Data collection - Phase I
 - identification of prepurchase shopping problems
 - comparison of problems across products/services

September-December 1977

- Analysis of Phase I data
- Data collection - Phase II
 - establish prepurchase shopping problem priorities
 - identify potential solutions to problems

January-March 1978

- Analysis of Phase II data
- Data collection - Phase III
 - confirm prepurchase shopping problem priorities
 - establish solution priorities

April-July 1978

- Analysis of Phase III data
- Reporting: Volume 1 - Research Findings
Volume 2 - Appendices and Annexes
Volume 3 - Annotated Bibliography
Summary Report-Consumers' Perceptions of
Prepurchase Shopping Problems and Solutions

August 1978

- Implications Analysis Section
 - Reporting: Implications Analysis Summary
-

measurement.² The following steps were taken to increase confidence in the validity of the data:

- Parallel measures were used to ensure that findings obtained via one measurement method were replicated by a second method. In other words, the reported findings in any particular area represent a summary of results obtained via two or more measurement procedures.
- Many of the major measurement sections were repeated in a second interview. This was done to ensure that the reported findings represent consumer views that are stable over time.
- Questions in the second and third interviews were based on the findings of prior interviews. This was done to ensure that the questions being asked were relevant to the consumers themselves and were not simply issues suggested by the researchers.

The sampling procedures were designed to enable multiple interviews with the same respondents. Selection of a panel of consumers was based on the following criteria:

- The panel should be selected from urban centers in five geographic-political regions of Canada. Centers selected were Vancouver, Regina, Ottawa, Quebec City and Halifax.
- The panel should be split between upper-middle and lower-middle income respondents. In each urban center two neighbourhoods were selected on the basis of this criterion.
- The panel should be split between men and women. In each neighbourhood the panel was recruited to ensure this split.

2. Described in detail in Volume 1.

In summary, the findings reported here are based on interviews conducted on three separate occasions in five urban centers across Canada. In each urban center respondents were obtained from an upper-middle and a lower-middle income neighbourhoods.³ In each neighbourhood, separate interviews were conducted with the men and the women, each group containing from 10 to 15 respondents. The total number of respondents was approximately 225. Each respondent volunteered approximately six hours of time over the course of the three interviews.

Since this research is based on in-depth information from a relatively small sample, it is important to assess whether the findings are representative of a broad cross section of Canadian consumers. Two factors indicate that the shopping problems identified in this research are indeed "significant."

- The same major problems were identified from Vancouver to Halifax and in both upper-middle and lower-middle income neighbourhoods. This is not to say that there were no differences from group to group. However, the major problems, the ones emphasized in this report, were universal.
- The major problems were expressed by the respondents with considerable vehemence. Because the research procedures allowed the principal researchers to be involved personally in all of the interview sessions, something of the tone of the responses can be reported here. The respondents left no doubt about their feelings regarding the major problems.

Thus, although the findings are not based on a large probability sample, the multiple measures used and the commonality of findings across respondent groups provide the researchers with considerable confidence in the validity of the data.

3. Detailed demographic descriptions of the sample are provided in Volume 1, p. 5, Table 1.2.

Chapter II

MAJOR FINDINGS: PREPURCHASE SHOPPING PROBLEMS

This section will review the prepurchase shopping problems reported by consumers. In the first set of interviews, consumers were asked to compare the relative degree of difficulty encountered when shopping for 24 different products and services. These categories were selected from among those employed by the Consumers' Association of Canada for classifying consumer complaints. The resulting rank order of shopping difficulty is shown in Figure 2.

Products and Services Causing Consumers Greatest Shopping Difficulties

The men and women in the study indicated similar orders of difficulty for most of the shopping categories. Among the major areas of shopping difficulty for both were automobile repairs, home improvement and purchases of automobiles, furniture and appliances. However, women ranked clothing and footwear fourth while men ranked it thirteenth, and men ranked life insurance third while women ranked it ninth. This difference in ranking is possible due to the greater involvement of women in making clothing purchase decisions and of men in making life insurance purchase decisions.

Respondents were also asked in the first set of interviews to list the problems they had encountered in shopping for five particular products and services. The five categories selected by the researchers were: automobile repairs, home repairs and renovations, furniture and appliances, clothing and groceries.

Detailed attention was limited to five categories to avoid overtaxing the respondents. The a priori selection of the five categories was based on two criteria: high incidence of complaint and enquiry in the files of the Consumers' Association of Canada and Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada, and high significance in terms of family expenditure as indicated by Statistics Canada family expenditures data.¹ Four of the five categories selected - automobile repairs, home repairs and renovations, clothing and footwear, and household furniture and appliances - were ranked by the respondents in the earlier part of the interviews as presenting a high degree of shopping difficulty, as shown in Figure 2. While groceries were ranked only thirteenth by women and nineteenth by men in the study, this category represents so large a proportion of family expenditures as to be essential to the study.

1. Statistics Canada, Urban Family Expenditures, 1974.

Figure 2: RANKING OF SHOPPING DIFFICULTY
ACROSS 24 PRODUCTS/SERVICES

Question (Interview 1): Below is a list of products and services which may or may not cause you certain difficulties when you are shopping for them. We want you to think about your own shopping experiences. We would like your opinion as to the degree of difficulty which is involved in shopping for each of the products or services listed.

RANK ORDER OF SHOPPING DIFFICULTY*		PRODUCT OR SERVICE
<u>MEN</u>	<u>WOMEN</u>	
2	1	Automobile repairs
4	2	Automobiles
1	3	Home improvement
13	4	Clothing and footwear
5	5	Household furnishings
7	6	Household appliances
6	7	Housing and real estate
8	8	Home entertainment
3	9	Life insurance
9	10	Household moving
17	11	Sporting goods
19	12	Groceries
12	13	Photographic equipment
10	14	Automobile insurance
15	15	Children's toys
18	16	Home gardening supplies
11	17	Legal services
23	18	Drycleaning
20	19	Stationery supplies
16	20	Travel agency services
21	21	Drugs and pharmaceuticals
14	22	Jewelry
22	23	Financial services
24	24	Personal Care

* Rank order correlation was .84

The problem statements listed by respondents for the five categories were obtained by the NGT method. These lists were analyzed and a short list of major problem areas for each category was determined. In the second set of interviews, the same groups of respondents were asked to rank the degree of seriousness of each of these major problem areas. In the second and third sets of interviews, they were also asked to indicate the degree to which they would be willing to trade off higher costs of purchase in order to avoid shopping problems. Both the seriousness of problem areas and the cost-benefit trade offs were analyzed using conjoint measurement.

Because of practical considerations, it was decided to interview male and female respondents in separate groups on two product and services areas each and jointly on the fifth shopping category. Accordingly, only the men in the sample were questioned about shopping problems regarding automobile repairs and home repairs and renovations. Only the women were questioned about problems regarding clothing and grocery purchases. Both men and women were asked about problems regarding furniture and appliance purchases.

Automobile Repairs

When asked in the first set of interviews to indicate the problems encountered in getting their cars serviced or repaired, the respondents identified 170 problems. This list was analyzed and the following six major problem areas emerged:

- lack of integrity (fair dealing) on the part of garage owners/operators
- lack of competent mechanical service
- failure to honour appointments and estimates
- lack of personal concern for customers
- inadequate warranties and guarantees
- poor product design

During the second set of interviews, respondents ranked the seriousness of each of these major problem areas. Two areas, integrity and competent mechanical service, emerged as priority problem areas. Inadequacy of warranties was seen as a secondary problem, and the other three areas were rated as third in importance. The issue of problem seriousness was addressed again in the third set of interviews, and the same priorities were confirmed. Figure 3 provides a more complete view of the two most serious problem areas by listing typical problem statements provided by respondents during the initial interviews.

Figure 3: CONSUMER CONCERNS IN SHOPPING FOR AUTOMOBILE REPAIRS

Question (Interview 1): Think about the times when you needed to get your car serviced or repaired. List the problems that you encountered.

Priority Problem: Lack of integrity of garage owners/operators

Typical consumer problem statements:

- have parts paid for actually been replaced?
- charging for repairs not carried out
- are repairs really necessary?
- pressure to have extra repairs done
- doing extra work without authorization
- replacing parts that are not defective
- charging for more time than actually needed for repairs
- installing used parts but charging for new
- apprentice mechanic billed at journeyman rates

Priority Problem: Lack of competent mechanical service

Typical consumer problem statements:

- failure to complete entire job necessitates return visits
 - servicing misses small items that they were told to repair
 - difficult to find a good mechanic who will find the problems
 - lack of knowledge or ability to identify and correct minor problems
 - unbelievable incompetence in service stations
-

During the second and third sets of interviews, respondents were asked to indicate their preferences regarding trade-offs of higher service costs versus major servicing problems. The results indicated a willingness to pay 10 to 20 percent above the average going rate in order to avoid these problems.

Home Repairs and Renovations

When asked to indicate the problems associated with arranging home repairs and renovations, respondents identified a list of 146 problem statements. Analysis of these indicate five major problem areas:

- lack of integrity of contractors
- lack of competent contractors
- lack of concern for customers' needs
- inadequate guarantees
- general industry problems

Three of these problem areas were viewed by respondents as being priority problems: contractor integrity, contractor competence, and concern for the customer. Figure 4 provides examples of problem statements for each of these areas.

Clothing

A total of 190 problem statements regarding clothing shopping were elicited from the survey respondents. These were categorized via content analysis to form 32 problem themes - 14 manufacturer related, 11 retailer related, and 7 arising from general market conditions. The 4 problem themes that were viewed as priorities were:

- poor quality of materials and workmanship
- sizes not standard
- prices of clothing too high
- fabrics that do not live up to claims

Figure 5 provides examples of problem statements for each of these areas.

The problem themes regarding clothing shopping covered a considerable range of topics. The four that are listed above dealt primarily with quality of merchandise (workmanship, sizing and fabrics). Other themes centered on retail sales staff (too few, untrained), in-store convenience (lack of changing rooms, alterations), and "fair dealing" (misleading pricing, "pushy" sales practices).

Figure 4: CONSUMER CONCERNS IN SHOPPING FOR HOME RENOVATIONS

Question (Interview 1): Think about the times when you wanted to get your home renovated or repaired. List the problems that you encountered when you were getting a contractor (or tradesman) to do the renovations or repairs.

Priority Problem: Lack of integrity of contractor

Typical consumer problem statements:

- need to constantly oversee repair work to ensure that it is properly done
- low quality parts/materials substituted for high quality ones
- contractors try to make you do more repairs than are necessary
- billing for more hours than time worked

Priority Problem: Lack of competent contractors

Typical consumer problem statements:

- difficult to find a competent contractor who shows interest in his work
- lack of competent and honest tradesmen
- difficult to identify competent contractor
- lack of knowledge as to proper construction techniques

Priority Problem: Lack of concern for customer

Typical consumer problem statements:

- work not started or finished on promised date
 - job takes longer than promised
 - failure to respect promised date of completion
-

Figure 5: CONSUMER CONCERNS IN SHOPPING FOR CLOTHES

Question (Interview 1): Think about the times when you have been shopping for clothing for yourself or your family. List the problems that you encountered.

Priority Problem: Poor quality materials and workmanship

Typical consumer problem statements:

- poor quality stitching, poor seams, poor quality thread
- poor workmanship, poor seams, nylon thread
- poor quality stitching, invisible thread, poor quality buttonholes

Priority Problem: Sizes not standard

Typical consumer problem statements:

- crazy sizing, no standardization for both adult and children's clothing
- sizing inconsistent in adult and children's clothing
- no standard sizes

Priority Problem: Prices of clothing too high

Typical consumer problem statements:

- price of clothes is too high
- too many high priced imported shoes
- high price of clothing due to protective tariffs

Priority Problem: Fabrics that do not live up to claims

Typical consumer problem statements:

- shrinkage of "non-shrinkables"
 - shrinkage and fading or running of clothes
-

During the second and third interviews, respondents were asked to indicate the relative importance of each of these themes. The results indicated that in deciding where to shop consumers considered merchandise quality to be approximately twice as important as any of the other concerns (sales staff, in-store convenience, and fair dealing). These results confirmed the focus of the four priority problems listed earlier -- namely, a general dissatisfaction with product quality and workmanship.

Groceries

The initial set of interviews produced a list of 227 grocery shopping problems. Although the number of problems was higher than for any of the other shopping areas discussed, there was generally less consensus as to the seriousness of each problem. This lack of consensus was supported by the finding (noted in Figure 2) that groceries were viewed as presenting considerably less shopping difficulty than most of the other product and service categories.

The 227 grocery shopping problems were categorized to form 45 problem themes. Because there was less consensus as to priority problems, a longer list of major problem areas was determined, as indicated in Figure 6.

Furniture and Appliances

Both the men and the women in the sample addressed this question. The men identified 149 problems and the women 138. Analysis of the complete set produced a list of 24 major problem themes for men and 22 for women. The four areas that were viewed as priority problems by both men and women were:

- poor workmanship and materials
- difficult to judge product quality
- uninformed retail sales staff
- products do not last

Examples of problem statements for each of these themes are provided in Figure 7. In addition to these four, men viewed misleading retail advertising as a serious problem, while women viewed lack of product information as serious.

Figure 6: CONSUMER CONCERNS IN SHOPPING FOR GROCERIES

Question (Interview 1): Think about the times when you have been shopping for groceries (foods, soaps, tissues, etc.). List the problems that you encountered.

<u>RANK ORDER OF IMPORTANCE</u>	<u>MAJOR GROCERY PROBLEM THEMES</u>
1	High price of groceries
2	Poor quality meat and produce
3	Lack of unit pricing
4	Poor package design/inconvenient to the consumer
5	Stores selling previously frozen goods
6	Differences in prices from store to store
7	Goods not labelled as to contents, grade, quality and origin
8	Not enough open dating/not standard code
9	Meat packaging tricks
10	Overpackaging of items/deceptive
11	Unpriced items/incorrectly priced
12	Out of stock items
13	Local products cheaper elsewhere
14	Long waits at checkouts
15	Retailers are quick to raise prices due to market conditions but are slow to lower them
16	Poor sanitary practices in store
17	More brand names wanted by consumers
18	Overcharging for groceries due to errors
19	Too many sugar foods
20	Misleading advertising in quality cost and promotions
21	Aisle displays
22	Advertised item not available to the consumer
23	Coupons and premiums in products are useless
24	Pre-packaged product
25	Stores selling thawed foods due to poor refrigeration units

Figure 7: CONSUMER CONCERNS IN
SHOPPING FOR FURNITURE AND APPLIANCES

Question (Interview 1): Think about the times when you have been shopping for major items for your home (such as a stove, chesterfield, television, etc.). List the problems that you encountered.

Priority Problem: Poor workmanship and materials

Typical consumer problem statements:

- poor quality covering material on new furniture
- poor workmanship and materials in both furniture and appliances - hard to detect when buying

Priority Problem: Difficult to judge quality

Typical consumer problem statements:

- difficult to understand technical description and relate this to price and quality
- difficult to make choice due to large number of brands

Priority Problem: Uninformed retail sales staff

Typical consumer problem statements:

- most sales people know little about the quality of products and cannot provide useful advice
- sales people lack information to give the consumer about the products they are selling

Priority Problem: Products do not last

Typical consumer problem statements:

- products don't last and then parts are not available
 - planned obsolescence of goods forces you to buy more often
-

In the second and third set of interviews, respondents were asked to indicate the relative importance of a series of retail store characteristics. The findings indicate that consumers prefer to shop at a retail outlet that provides dependable after-sale service (prompt delivery and dependable warranty service) and has a reputation for fair dealing (truthful advertising and a sales staff that is concerned about the customer). The availability of a well-informed sales staff and printed product information are not as important. Good service and fair dealing were considered as important as prices. Consumers indicated willingness to pay 10 to 20 percent higher prices if they received good service and fair dealing. It should be noted that these are "average" findings. Clearly, to some consumers price is paramount, while to others service is critical.

Chapter III

SEARCHING FOR ACTIONS TO REDUCE PREPURCHASE SHOPPING PROBLEMS

This section reviews the two segments of the study in which suggestions were selected for reducing prepurchase shopping problems. In the second and third interviews with consumers, respondents were asked to suggest solutions to their problems, and to indicate their perceptions as to solution priorities. In addition, an implications analysis session was held with 18 government specialists in consumer interests who were also asked to suggest solutions. These two sets of solutions are discussed here.

Consumers' Suggestions for Reducing Prepurchase Shopping Problems

During the second set of interviews, respondents were asked to suggest solutions by product/service category for major problem areas. A total of 186 suggestions were compiled and content analysis of these produced 24 categories of suggestions. These suggestions were of the following major types:

- more resources to existing programs
- additional laws to control business
- consumer educational programs
- consumer information programs
- actions specific to automobile repairs

Figure 8 provides a list of the 24 categories of suggested actions. A review of these indicated, at a general level, one set of actions to protect consumers (laws, controls, regulations), and a second set of actions to help consumers help themselves (education, information). The next step was to assess which actions consumers viewed as priorities.

Consumers' Ranking of Potential Actions

During the final set of interviews, consumers were given the list of 24 potential actions. They were asked first to consider feasibility, relative cost and the number who would benefit from each and then to rate each action as highly desirable, somewhat desirable, somewhat undesirable and highly undesirable. Figure 9 indicates the average desirability ratings for men and women and also the percentage of respondents that viewed each action as either somewhat or highly desirable.

Figure 8: CONSUMERS' SUGGESTIONS FOR
REDUCING PREPURCHASE SHOPPING PROBLEMS

Type 1: More resources to existing programs

- expanded complaint bureaus for hearing and following up consumer complaints
- subsidization of consumer organizations
- stiffer penalties and exposure for firms guilty of unfair practices
- more policing of business practices and advertising
- easier access to courts to permit consumers to press charges

Type 2: Additional laws to control business

- laws to standardize and restrict the number of product models
- laws to require standard information on product construction, performance and care
- laws requiring sales personnel to meet minimum levels of qualification
- laws requiring manufacturers and retailers to meet minimum product quality requirements
- laws requiring manufacturers and retailers to provide minimum levels of warranty and after-sales service
- laws establishing a government agency to control the retail price on consumer products and services
- modification of laws concerning existing tariffs and controls on imports so as to lower consumer prices

Type 3: Consumer educational program

- government sponsored consumer affairs programs in high schools
- government sponsored programs on television, radio, and newspapers to help consumers become wiser shoppers
- subsidized manpower training programs to prepare better qualified sales personnel

Type 4: Consumer information programs

- a government sponsored, independent national testing centre for evaluating products and providing information to help consumers compare brands
- a program to gather and disseminate information on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction with products and services
- a program to gather and disseminate information on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction with retailers and garages, etc.
- establishment of information booths in major shopping centres where consumers can get information comparing products or stores
- government sponsorship of regular published test reports in local newspapers comparing various brands of consumer products

Type 5: Actions specific to automobile repairs

- licensing laws which require garages to provide minimum guarantees, fair prices and qualified mechanics
- establishment of local automobile testing centres to advise automobile owners as to what repairs and services are needed
- subsidized manpower training programs to provide more and better mechanics
- government sponsored auto care courses to help owners better understand the operation and care of their automobile

Figure 9: CONSUMER PRIORITIES FOR REDUCING
PREPURCHASE SHOPPING PROBLEMS

ACTION	<u>DESIRABILITY*</u>		PERCENT OF ALL CONSUMERS VIEWING ACTION AS A PRIORITY
	WOMEN	MEN	
More resources to existing programs			
- expanded complaint bureaus	1.3	0.9	17
- subsidize consumer organizations	1.1	0.9	23
- stiffer penalties for unfair practices	1.7	1.6	50
- more policing of business	1.4	1.0	19
- easier access to courts		1.2	15
Additional laws to control business			
- standardize and restrict models	0.5	0.2	7
- required standard information	1.6	1.5	26
- sales force qualification requirements	0.7	0.5	6
- product quality requirements	1.7	1.6	39
- warranty and service requirements	1.6	1.4	36
- retail price controls	0.7	0.2	17
- reduce import restrictions	0.6	0.4	8
Consumer education programs			
- for high school students	1.1	1.1	28
- via television, radio, newspaper	1.1	1.0	15
- training for sales personnel	0.6	0.4	6
Consumer information programs			
- national testing center	0.9	1.2	19
- information on product performance	0.6	0.7	6
- information on retailer performance	0.9	0.6	6
- shopping center information booths	0.7	0.2	8
- test results in newspapers	1.1	1.1	18
Automobile repairs			
- garage licensing requirements	1.6	1.4	27
- local automobile test centers	1.1	0.5	12
- manpower training for mechanics	0.9	0.9	9
- auto care courses for owners	0.4	0.5	4

* When considering "desirability" consumers were asked to think about feasibility, relative cost, and the number who could benefit. Scores indicate Highly Desirable (+2), Somewhat Desirable (+1), Somewhat Undesirable (-1), and Highly Undesirable (-2).

Ten actions were viewed by both men and women as being desirable. These and the other 14 are listed separately below:

10 actions seen as more than
"somewhat desirable" by both
men and women

- * stiffer penalties for unfair practices
- more policing of business
- easier access to courts
- * required standard information
- * product quality requirements
- * warranty and service requirements
- * consumer education in high school
- consumer education in the media
- test results in newspapers
- * garage licensing requirements

14 less desirable actions

- expanded complaint bureaus
- subsidize consumer organizations
- standardize and restrict models
- retail price controls
- reduce import restrictions
- training for sales personnel
- national testing center
- information on product performance
- shopping center information booths
- local automobile testing centers
- manpower training for mechanics
- automobile care courses for owners
- information on retailer performance

*indicates action is seen as a priority by greater than 25 percent of the sample.

It should be noted that seven of the ten preferred actions centered on legal requirements and controls, whereas the majority of the less desirable actions centered on consumer self help and information.

Automobile Repairs

As indicated in Figure 2, automobile repairs represent one of the major areas of shopping difficulty for consumers. This finding was reinforced by the vigor with which consumers discussed these problems during the interview sessions. Because of consumers' concerns in this area, special attention was given to searching for potential actions to reduce this group of problems.

The 24 actions discussed in the last section were somewhat general in the sense that each action could have impact on a number of product and service areas. Volume 1 of the main report also listed a series of actions that consumers suggested specifically for automobile repair problems. Analysis of these automobile repair actions resulted in the matrix of actions presented in Figure 10. The matrix is relatively comprehensive, providing action in the areas of establishing standards, monitoring practices and sanctions, education of mechanics, ombudsman functions and auto testing. However, it is important to note that consumers' preferences for government action priorities were focussed on legal actions - legislating standards, monitoring and enforcement.

The implementation analysis session with 18 consumer specialists from Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada produced a list of 19 potential actions to reduce automobile repair problems. These are presented in Figure 11. After considerable discussion of the potential cost-benefit effects of the various actions, each session participant rated the priority he or she felt should be accorded to each action. This produced the following five priority actions:

- encourage the formation of automobile trade associations to set standards
- rigged car inspections to test garage integrity
- encourage consumer inquiries and complaints through the Better Business Bureau and similar groups
- publication of case histories (including names) of repair services which fail to deal fairly with consumers
- diagnostic centers

As noted earlier, consumers' action priorities centered on legislative controls while all five action priorities identified by government specialists were non legislative. The researchers' interpretation of this difference was that consumers were looking for an easy solution and therefore opted to have the government do it. Furthermore, consumers appeared somewhat naive in the sense that they felt that "passing a law" would be easy and efficient.

The researchers' view of the implementation analysis section, on the other hand, was that the government specialists presented experienced evaluations of potential actions. In this case the final suggestions were based on thorough considerations of both cost-benefit feasibility and probability of success.

FIGURE 10: MATRIX OF CONSUMERS' SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING AUTOMOBILE REPAIR PROBLEMS

Action area	Action initiated by industry associations	Action initiated by consumer associations	Action initiated by governments
1. Establish Standards - pricing practices - qualification of mechanics - standard contracts - estimate procedures - customer treatment	- industry accreditation (certificate displayed by garage)	- owner association accreditation (certificate displayed by garage)	- legislation re business license requirements
2. Monitoring Practices and Sanctions - records of customers' satisfaction - have "rigged" automobile serviced	- removal of accreditation	- removal of accreditation	- fines - cancellation of license
3. Education of Mechanics	- apprentice program		- manpower training programs
4. Ombudsman - hear complaints - follow up inquiries - pressure for satisfaction - take court action - publicize results	- industry-sponsored ombudsman	- owner-association sponsored ombudsman	- government-sponsored ombudsman
5. Automobile Testing - diagnostic tests - service cost estimates	- industry-sponsored testing	- owner-association sponsored testing	- government-sponsored testing

Figure 11: SUGGESTIONS MADE BY GOVERNMENT SPECIALISTS IN CONSUMER INTERESTS FOR REDUCING AUTOMOBILE REPAIR PROBLEMS

- A. Publication of case histories (including names) of repair services which fail to deal fairly with consumers.
- B. Rigged car inspections to test honesty.
- C. Encourage consumer enquiries and complaints through the Better Business Bureau and similar groups.
- D. Publicize trade practices that are unacceptable and which should not be agreed to by consumers (e.g., blank work orders).
- E. Inform "the market" of opportunities arising from current levels of consumer dissatisfaction.
- F. Look into market structure rigidities (barriers to entry).
- G. More extensive licensing and regulation of repair services plus more enforcement of the law.
- H. Encourage the formation of automobile trade associations to set standards.
- I. Educate consumers concerning the functions of the Better Business Bureau and trade associations.
- J. More self regulation by the industry.
- K. Educate consumers on how to obtain "fair deals" (how to complain, how a car works).
- L. Diagnostic centres.
- M. Encourage greater use of small claims courts.
- N. Make it compulsory for garages to post the price of parts, labor and time required for different types of servicing.
- O. Require garages to retain old parts which have been replaced.
- P. Simplify the design of automobiles.
- Q. Stimulate and/or subsidize consumer groups (e.g., the Automobile Protection Association).
- R. Make it easier for consumers to undertake class action suits.
- S. Encourage dealers to observe "good practice" (e.g., mechanic signing work order so consumer knows who has repaired his car).

Chapter IV

CONCLUSIONS

The earlier sections of this report have highlighted the major findings arising from an extensive study of consumers' prepurchase shopping problems. This final section reviews the conclusions presented in Volume I of the main report and discusses the conclusions emerging from the implications analysis session and discussions with those who have reviewed the research.

Earlier Conclusions

Six conclusions were drawn earlier in the study, based on the collection and analysis of data from consumer interviews. These are discussed in Volume 1 of the main report. They are:

- Consumers were not only capable of identifying those areas which cause them problems but were also able to indicate clearly the specific issues which cause them most concern within each product/service category.
- Consumers at an individual level had great difficulty identifying the kinds of actions that they felt would best reduce these concerns.
- This study enabled consumers to communicate their concerns to government. These same concerns need to be communicated to manufacturers and retailers who supply consumer goods and services.
- The findings indicated substantial agreement among consumers from all regions of Canada regarding the product and service categories which present most difficulties.
- It is clear that consumers are extremely frustrated by their inability to obtain what they perceive to be satisfactory, reliable automobile servicing.
- The three-phased approach and the use of NGT proved very fruitful in providing consumers with an opportunity to express themselves openly on issues of relevance to them.

Readers interested in greater detail regarding these conclusions are encouraged to study the earlier report. The following sections will extend these conclusions and discuss others that were highlighted by the implications analysis session.

Generalizations Regarding Shopping Problems Inherent to Particular Product and Service Categories

Because this research only looked at five product/service categories, it is clear that this question has to be addressed cautiously. However, it is possible to arrange the five in a typology that suggests product/service category differences. In Figure 12 the five are arranged in the following four categories:

- (1) small expense - consumables (groceries)
- (2) moderate expense - semi-durables (clothing)
- (3) major expense - durables (furniture and appliances)
- (4) moderate to major expense - services (home repairs and renovation, automobile repair/servicing).

Analysis of Figure 12, plus review of the data on shopping problems, suggests a distinction between smaller, more frequent expenditures (such as groceries and clothing), and larger, less frequent expenditures (such as furniture, automobile repairs and home repairs). To simplify discussion, these will be referred to as "minor" and "major" expenditures. The distinctions between these two types of products and services appear to be that:

- product quality concerns (manufacturer-centered concerns) appear to be moderate for minor expenditures and high for major expenditures;
- the difficulty of judging value for money appears to be low for minor and high for major expenditures;
- concern regarding advice and service (retailer-centered concerns) appears to be low for minor and high for major expenditures; and
- the focus of concern appears to be manufacturer-centered for minor and both manufacturer- and retailer-centered for major expenditures.

Figure 12: PROBLEMS BY PRODUCT/SERVICE TYPE

Product/Service Type	Nature of shopping problems indicated by consumers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Groceries- small expense- consumables	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- many minor irritants regarding both product and retail services- little consensus as to problem priority.
<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Clothing- moderate expense- semi-durables	<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- several major concerns all regarding products- workmanship- fabrics- nonstandard sizing
<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Furniture and Appliances- major expense- major durables	<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- several major concerns regarding both products and retail service- workmanship, products don't last- uninformed sales staff- difficult to judge product quality
<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Automobile repair/servicing and home repair/renovation- moderate to major expense- services	<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- several major concerns regarding the nature of retail service- competence- integrity- warranties

In summary, these observations suggest a very consistent picture. As the magnitude of the expenditure increases and the frequency of purchasing the product or service decreases, consumers feel increasing uncertainty. This includes uncertainty regarding product quality and the related issue of attempting to judge whether or not a purchase represents good value for money spent. Associated with rising uncertainty is an increased feeling of dependence on the retailer for information and advice. This increased dependence magnifies any retailer related shopping problems which, in turn, increases an interest in government actions focussed on retailers.

Do Consumers Want More Government Initiatives?

The superficial answer to this question is: yes, more controls and regulation. However, a more careful analysis suggests that a more fundamental description of consumers' feelings would be: clear, definite dissatisfaction with some aspects of their shopping experiences and a definite desire for improvements.

It is our interpretation that consumers are particularly dissatisfied in areas of major services expenditures. The core of their "wants" could be summarized as: Can I find good, competent service from an agent that I can trust?

Consumers are also dissatisfied in areas of major product expenditures, although this dissatisfaction appears less severe. The core of their "wants" in this area could be summarized as: Can I find a way through the maze of products to a choice that will serve me well and be good value for my money? Further, analysis of consumers' problem statements suggests that, for many consumers, this "want" is transformed to a concentration on the retailer: Can I find a retailer that is on my side - providing good products and good advice?

Now to return to the initial question: Do consumers want more government initiatives? This may not be their central desire. However, given their level of dissatisfaction and their apparent perception that "things are not getting any better," consumers look to their governments for assistance.

Framework for Government Action: Consumers' Priorities

The two prior sections indicated the general pattern of consumers' shopping problems across product and service types and consumer interest in government initiatives to reduce these problems. The purpose of this section is to summarize by product/service category the government actions that consumers view as priorities.

As indicated in Figure 13, the only priority applicable to grocery problems is for increased requirements for standard information regarding contents. For clothing problems there are two potential priorities: product quality standards and product information requirements. Both of these are manufacturer related. For furniture and appliances, product standards and information requirements again apply. In addition, consumers feel that warranty and service requirements should be established for both manufacturers and retailers and that retailers should be subjected to stiffer penalties for unfair sales and advertising practices. Finally, for automobile and home services all priorities for government action are retailer focused. Consumers feel there should be stiffer penalties for unfair practices, warranty requirements and business licensing requirements that cover major problem areas. Greater detail regarding consumers' preferences for government action was presented in Part III of this summary report.

Implications for Manufacturers and Retailers

This study provides two types of suggestions for the suppliers of products and services. At a very specific level, suppliers of the five products and services (groceries, clothing, furniture and appliances, automobile repairs and home repairs) can review in detail the problems and suggestions stated by consumers in the main report on the pages indicated in Figure 14. Analysis of these consumer statements represents an opportunity to focus on business practices that will be perceived by consumers as extremely desirable. For example, in furniture and appliance retailing it is clear that many consumers would be attracted to an outlet that is noted for well-informed, concerned sales staff. Retailers who are able to explain the differences between products and to show a genuine concern for each customer's interests are clearly proceeding in a manner that will attract a major segment of consumers.

Figure 13: FRAMEWORK FOR GOVERNMENT
ACTION: CONSUMERS' PRIORITIES

	Major Shopping Problems		Consumers' Action Priorities Applicable to Problem	
	Manufacturer	Retailer	Manufacturer	Retailer
GROCERIES	- Many minor concerns	- Many minor concerns	- Require standard information (product contents)	
CLOTHING	- Product quality concerns		- Product quality requirements - Standard information requirements	
FURNITURE AND APPLIANCES	- Product quality concerns	- Sales staff concerns	- Product quality requirements - Standard information requirements - Warranty and service requirements	- Warranty and service requirements - Stiffer penalties for unfair sales and advertising practices
AUTOMOBILE AND HOME SERVICES		- Concerns re: - competence - integrity - warranties		- Stiffer penalties for unfair practices - Warranty requirements - Business licensing requirements

Figure 14: SOURCE REPORTS FOR MAJOR
FINDINGS BY PRODUCT/SERVICE CATEGORY

Product/Service	Consumers' Initial Problem Statements	Summary Problem Themes	Suggested Solutions
Groceries	Vol.2, pp.16-31	Vol.1, pp.42-45	
Clothing	Vol.2, pp.2-14	Vol.1, pp.39-41	Vol.1, pp.105-106 Vol.1, pp.116-118
Furniture and Appliances	Vol.2, pp.33-42 Vol.2, pp.44-53	Vol.1, pp.46-49	Vol.1, pp.107-112 Vol.1, pp.119-124
Automobile Repair and Servicing	Vol.1, pp.55-67	Vol.1, pp.50-52	Vol.1, pp.113-115 Vol.1, pp.125-127
Home Repair and Renovation	Vol.2, pp.69-78	Vol.1, pp.53-55	
<hr/>			
General Reference:	Existing shopping aids that consumers find useful - Vol. 1, pp. 71-73.		
<hr/>			

As another example, garage operators should recognize that most consumers continue to be highly suspicious about the quality and cost of automobile repairs. Consumers have the feeling that mechanics do not know what they are doing, that not all of the repairs performed are really necessary, and that charges are excessive. It is evident that a highly desirable marketing strategy is one that concentrates on dispelling these feelings.

At a more general level, this study suggests that suppliers should expect continuing consumer pressure for government regulation to solve their shopping problems. Whether or not this is the "best" solution is not particularly relevant - it is the direction in which governments will be pressured by consumers. Therefore, unless individual firms and industry associations take initiatives to reduce consumer dissatisfaction and to permanently facilitate the channeling of consumer discontent, these pressures for further government regulation can be expected to increase.

The Government's Role

The implications analysis session helped to highlight a number of factors that add to the complexity of finding solutions. Several of the major complexities were as follows:

- Problems are specific to major product/service categories.
- Solutions must be consistent with existing industry structures.
- Government departments do not tend to be organized on the basis of major product/service categories. As a result, individuals in many departments will be expert in limited aspects of the problem area.
- The product/service categories have problems that span the jurisdictions of more than one level of government.
- A number of industry representatives and consumer interest groups have potential expertise to help with any particular product/service category.

The first conclusion that results from the review of these complexities is that the search for solutions must proceed on a product/service category basis (automobile repairs, home repairs, major durables and others not studied here such as automobile purchases, home purchases and personal insurance).

The specific approach endorsed here is to draw further attention to consumer shopping problems through a series of seminars focussed on specific product/service categories. The people invited to each seminar should be the 20 to 30 "concerned experts" in the particular product/service area, selected from a cross-section of product/service suppliers, federal and provincial government experts, members of consumer interest groups, and academic specialists.

A high degree of preliminary organization and preparation should result in a one-day seminar that made major steps towards the following objectives:

- Exchange and review of evidence of shopping problems as supplied by the various seminar participants.
- Identification of major potential solution alternatives.
- Identification of methods of communicating findings and actions to a more general consumer/industry/-government audience.
- Suggestions for the structure and membership of an operational task group to follow through on seminar initiatives.

In summary, it is our view that the key government role at this point is to act as a catalyst to stimulate remedial actions. Considerable progress has been made in identifying prepurchase shopping problems and in assessing their severity. Furthermore, a number of suggestions have been put forward for reducing these problems. However, because of the complexities discussed earlier, there are no obvious "best" actions. It is not clear what actions should be taken or who should be responsible for these actions. What is clear is that consumers have identified a number of areas that present serious shopping difficulties. For each area there are several groups with an interest in reducing consumer problems and with the expertise to be of assistance. Government can provide a key leadership role by bringing these groups together and facilitating the search for solutions.

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CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF PR
EPURCHASE SHOPPING PROBLEMS
AND SOLUTIONS : MAJOR FIND

