
Guidance and information

New rural and regional program

The ACCC is currently appointing regional outreach officers in all States and Territories to develop a greater presence in rural and regional areas. They will be part of the Commission's Small Business, Rural and Regional Unit.

Additional funding from the May Federal Budget will allow the Commission to step up its education role, so it can plan and deliver regular and continuing help about trade practices where it is needed in remote communities. Over the next six months it will work with these communities to identify trade practices issues that affect them and ensure the program gets to the problems — so every dollar is well spent.

The Commission's education focus has always been on getting out into communities, through visits, widely distributing publications, and by regular columns in suburban and country newspapers. It was a priority of the former Trade Practices Commission and continues to be a major part of the ACCC's work. In the past the work done in rural and regional areas, although seen as important because of their isolation, was part of an overall strategy. Delivering information via the Internet was a huge step forward in that remote communities finally had the chance for information at their fingertips, but the Internet is not the whole solution, only a small part of it.

This R&R program and the funding allocated gives the Commission the wherewithal to now make a real push.

The Commission will be making use of its already extensive network of contacts which include small business industry associations,

local government associations, area consultative committees and business enterprise centres.

In the past year the Commission has tried a new approach by satellite broadcasting through Sky Channel its Competing Fairly Forums. The two broadcast to date have been successful, the second much more so as people heard good reports about the first.

The first, broadcast on 8 November 2000, went to 28 towns and addressed broad trade practices issues. The second on 1 May 2001 went to 68 towns and concentrated on unconscionable conduct. A video on the subject was produced specifically for the forum.

The feedback is that people like that there is a panel of trade practices experts they can directly put questions to, and also that the panel consists of people such as Allan Fels, the ACCC Chairman, ACCC Commissioners and senior staff such as regional directors.

The third forum is to be held in early October and will tackle advertising and selling issues.

The Commission has a wide range of publications explaining its role and functions under the Trade Practices Act. Part of the R&R program will be to develop more, including videos, specifically for its rural and regional work. It will also target local press with advertisements and articles on trade practices issues.

For more information on the program call the ACCC infocentre on 1300 302 502 or visit the ACCC website <<http://www.accc.gov.au>>. Information on the forums can be found at <<http://www.forums.accc.gov.au>>.

Commission helps launch video for indigenous consumers

This is an edited version of an article written by Townsville Regional Director, Scott Gregson and freelance journalist, Christine Howes.

The Commission recently helped launch the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council's video program for indigenous consumers.

The launch of the program was held at the Wujal Wujal community and attended by representatives of the Commission, the Queensland Office of Fair Trading and the North Queensland Consumers Association.

Commissioner Dr David Cousins, representing the ACCC, said it was vital that consumer education was continued throughout indigenous communities. He advised that the Commission would take enforcement action to protect consumers when needed.

The videos cover buying a car, shopping around, getting finance, warranty rights and what to do if things go wrong. They provide down-to-earth advice on consumer issues that affect indigenous communities.

The Commission and its predecessor, the Trade Practices Commission, have investigated various matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In 1992 and 1993 the Trade Practices Commission took legal action against three life insurance companies, alleging misleading and unconscionable conduct in the selling of life insurance policies to indigenous communities.

As a result the companies gave substantial refunds and were required to implement or improve their education and trade practices programs.

As part of the resolution more than \$700 000 was paid into an education trust fund for the communities affected. Much of these funds was directed towards the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council and their consumer education program which coordinated the production of the video program. The video program itself was funded by the Queensland Government.

While the Commission has investigated indigenous issues as they arise and liaised with local consumers or bodies such as the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council, it continues to develop a more comprehensive program to work with indigenous communities.

When the GST was introduced, Commission officers visited communities in North Queensland, the Northern Territory and the north of Western Australia explaining the role of the Commission and of consumer rights under the Trade Practices Act.

The Commission also published GST information specifically for indigenous consumers and established a 1300 number (1300 303 143) which was staffed by an indigenous person and other Commission staff with training in cross-cultural awareness.

This is now being followed up with continued liaison with indigenous groups and communities.

Commissioner Cousins promised a continued joint approach to solving consumer problems and said the Commission looks forward to continued cooperation with the council and indigenous communities.

The video program was produced by the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council's Consumer Affairs Officer, Mr Andrew Lewis, who has day-to-day contact with consumers in remote communities and provides essential consumer information and advice.