

A SUMMARY OF THE YEAR 2003

The changing operating environment poses a challenge to consumer research

Today's consumer society is becoming increasingly diversified, both economically and culturally. Factors like market concentration, internationalisation and large-scale adoption of new technology have a marked effect on the whole economy and people's everyday lives. The expanding markets are keeping a watchful eye on developments in the household sector and changes in consumer behaviour. Consumption in itself has grown into a power that upholds the economy and people's well-being. The knowledge resources of various administrative branches and keen collaboration between them are needed in order to anticipate changes and solve upcoming problems and to develop market functionality, product development and service quality in a way that meets the requirements of consumers. All this increases the demand for consumer research. Current change trends often stress the consumers' own activity, knowledge and skills. Moreover, their age structure and operating practices are changing, and traditional socio-economic development models are losing their importance in predicting changes in consumption.

A successful consumer policy requires expertise and collaboration

One of the roles of consumer research is to strengthen the consumer viewpoint among decision makers and experts. The National Consumer Research Centre (NCRC) fulfils this role by producing new research data to enhance consumer well-being. This goal cannot be achieved without interaction and collaboration between the actors in several policy sectors and in the economy. Besides major areas like household operations and consumer behaviour, NCRC conducts multidisciplinary research on the quality of consumer goods and services, structure of the market and changes in society. The findings can be used to influence decision making, but they also bring added value to consumer-driven product development and market creation by the business sector. To increase the visibility of consumer affairs we co-operate closely with numerous different stakeholder groups.

An important objective for 2003 was to improve the effectiveness of consumer research within the administrative field of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and elsewhere in the administrative sector. We have managed to accomplish this goal by implementing joint projects funded by various ministries. Collaboration with other research institutes was also intensified to undertake more comprehensive projects as well as to strengthen our own research know-how. NCRC personnel were actively involved in the preparation of a new national

consumer policy programme for 2004–2007. The programme underscores the importance of co-operation between the actors in different policy sectors and in public administration both at the central, regional and local levels. The visions presented in the programme encourage collaboration on the part of the business sector, non-governmental and consumer organisations, as well as individual consumers and households.

Extensive research agenda

The research agenda for 2003 covered topics regarding changes in consumption, service needs of households, consumers' possibilities to influence decision-making, consumers' role in developing the food economy, assessment of user-driven technology, and co-operation between consumers and the business sector in the fields of new technology, innovations and environmental issues. Other projects focused on the currency changeover to the euro, competitiveness in various industries and the distribution sector, and price structures with particular reference to the food sector.

The results of NCRC research were presented in many international and national conferences and seminars, lectures and meetings, as well as in the media. Our financing partners and other co-operation organisations as well as the users of the research results took part in the preparation of new research programmes.

We were able to improve the dissemination of research knowledge, use of databases and other communication channels by means of the information network. NCRC research findings were presented in our own publication series and on our web pages, but also in other publications and international scientific journals. In addition, NCRC continues to contribute to the maintenance and development of information services on national consumer research.

Increased international co-operation

International recognition of our research activities has grown as a result of wider collaboration and expert activity in the international arena. Participation in multinational research teams and working groups, articles in international publications, organisation of a Nordic workshop and visits by foreign experts were particularly important in this respect. The Journal of Consumer Policy published a theme issue based on the proceedings of the 2002 International Congress on Home Economics and Consumer Issues. NCRC experts were engaged in international co-operation as members of Eurostat's CEIES and other working groups, in the development of a Satellite Account for Household Production and in various committees of the IFHE.

Enhancement of research resources and the working community

The continuous development of the knowledge base of a multidisciplinary research institution calls for active researcher training. To this end we work together with different departments of various universities.

During 2003, NCRC also established its data administration strategy, renewed its consumer panel and continued the development of a new payroll system.

I want to thank the personnel as well as the board of directors of NCRC and all our co-operation partners and stakeholders for a successful year. It provides a sound basis on which to build our future operations.



Eila Kilpiö