

More power to the consumer

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■ By Jennifer Gomez

SAVE today, safe tomorrow.

This is the simple message the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry wants to send out to consumers.

According to Consumer Affairs Division director Dr Mohd Mokhtar Tahar this was a progression from the "save and compare prices" campaign it had run over the last three years.

However, realising that people tend to be more receptive to non-governmental organisations and consumer groups, the ministry is asking these groups to promote its sustainable living initiatives.

"We don't want to be the front-liners any more because people may be hesitant if these are seen as government policies. So we are letting consumer groups take the lead instead."

Mohd Mokhtar said the message being put forward was for people to live sustainable lives so that the future of their children and grandchildren would be secure.



TOP 10 COMPLAINTS RECEIVED FROM CONSUMERS

2006		2007		2008 (Jan — April)	
Category	No of Complaints	Category	No of Complaints	Category	No of Complaints
1. Service fraud	1,856	Price fraud	3,212	Service fraud	810
2. Price fraud	1,222	Service fraud	2,333	Price fraud	579
3. Piracy	376	No price tag	592	Piracy	257
4. Hiding price -controlled goods	350	Direct sales	387	No price tag	136
5. No price tag	349	Piracy	385	Direct sales	83
6. Direct sales	327	Imitation goods	271	Imitation goods	83
7. Get rich quick schemes	303	Get rich quick schemes	246	Hire-purchase agreement fraud	63
8. Imitation goods	201	Hire-purchase agreement fraud	192	Hiding price -controlled goods	59
9. Telecommunications service	180	Motor vehicle workshops	181	Sale of petroleum products	56
10. Hire-purchase agreement fraud	173	Hiding price -controlled goods	133	Motor vehicle workshops	51

On this note, Mohd Mokhtar said people should go back to age-old practices like using a basket for marketing.

"At supermarkets we use a trolley, so why do we need plastic bags? And these days, people who hardly cook and eat at home have huge double-door refrigerators."

To get the message out, the ministry is giving out grants to consumer groups to run these programmes.

However, if previously the grants were given to the bigger consumer groups and NGOs on an ad-hoc basis, now these groups can include the grants in their annual budgets.

The idea is to also include smaller NGOs and consumer groups, Mohd Mokhtar said, attributing the approach to Minister Datuk Shahrir Samad.

He said the minister had recently met with 35 consumer groups to discuss how they could take the lead in the initiative.

"Some of the bigger ones have proven their calibre in running such programmes, but we also want to get the smaller ones into the fold, especially at the state level."

Mohd Mokhtar said the minister had pledged to reinvent state NGOs. To do this, a Financial Assistance for NGOs Committee has been formed.

Grants are given based on the cost of running and administering the programmes. For accountability, groups that receive these grants will be audited every six months by the ministry.

The ministry is also giving these groups a free hand to reach out and educate consumers.

Mokhtar said these efforts were in line with promoting consumer self protection. The ministry wants consumers to empower themselves and not expect the government to shoulder all the

Dr Mohd Mokhtar Tahar says the ministry is giving more grants to state NGOs

responsibility.

"We want consumers who can dictate how business is done and not the other way around. Businesses must cater to consumer needs, which means consumers need to build themselves to that level. The government's role will be just to provide the mechanism."

But Mohd Mokhtar said consumer education was a long and continuous process, and it would take some time before Malaysian consumers become as sophisticated as those in more developed countries.

He added that while the ministry was empowering consumer groups, it did not mean that it could wash its hands of educating consumers.

The consumer affairs team has been busy preparing for the Consumer Profile Survey, to be ready by the middle of next year.

Mohd Mokhtar said useful information on consumer spending habits were gleaned from the last survey done in 2002.

"We found that more than half of an adult's expenditure was spent on consumables like food, and of this, 10.32 per cent was spent on eating out," he said.

The ministry's other initiatives include giving talks to non-consumer groups, like Puspanita, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress, Families of Police Association, and Gabungan Peserta Wanita Felda to spread the message.

The ministry was also keeping tabs on consumer grievances. Consumers may report any grouses related to purchasing goods and services

The public may call its hotline at 1-800-886-800, or by emailing e-aduan@kpdnhp.gov.my.



The use of baskets while marketing reduces use of plastic bags and promotes sustainable living. If you use a trolley at the supermarket, why do you need plastic bags?