

Consumers Speak

Consumers don't determine production, say the economists. But according to the Consumer Speaks program, that's only because buyers have never had a strong enough voice to make themselves heard by the manufacturers. This new project is providing that voice—and with results—reports Janet Sutherland.

IS THAT attractive skirt you thought was the prettiest in the rack, now just "that old rag" you wear only to a Saturday morning 8 o'clock?

Or was that new, box-pleated skirt not as terrific on you when you got it home in the light of your father's it-doesn't-do-a-thing-for-you expression?

Every college woman has selected and purchased a skirt for school wear, but far too many have had these disappointing results. Many have resorted to sewing the garment themselves or to simply getting along with what's available.

But now consumers will not have to keep their criticisms to themselves. Manufacturers have become interested not only in selling but also in pleasing customers as they sell. They want to know why Dad didn't like the skirt, or why it wore out after a few months.

The Consumer Speaks project, sponsored by the American Home Economics Association, sets up a nation-wide voice for the American consumer whether she is a mother deciding on children's anklets, a homemaker deciding on living room furnishings, or a college woman talking about skirts.

The name, "Consumer Speaks," might sound as if a panel of speakers and a large formal meeting are needed for buyers to voice their ideas to the manufacturer. On the contrary, informal dormitory or sorority groups and small clubs are the best places for women to discuss what they'd like to have in clothes and home equipment. A trained home economics senior or graduate leads the discussion and records the characteristics the women list as essential.

This year the subject for college discussions is school skirts. First of all, women are asked to list what they think is necessary for a well-made skirt. Ideas may range from size of pleats to proportional lengths, but they must be specific. Instead of saying just "wider seams" they should tell the actual width desired.

Consider Price

Price is an important consideration on the Consumer Speaks ballots. Three price ranges are offered for skirts—under \$3, \$3 to \$6, and over \$6. Some groups discussing the question decided on the last price, probably from \$8 to \$12. Less expensive skirts usually have small, skimpy pleats, raw edged seams and poor quality material, they say. Think of this as you're buying a skirt, and if it seems that you're getting something for nothing, chances are that you're being fooled.

Then, too, the manufacturers are interested in knowing about labels on garments. Do consumers want them at all, they ask. And if so, what do they want on the tags? A special column on the Consumer Speaks ballot is left for women's suggestions on guarantees that they want to appear on labels.

The project as a whole does not stop with college-age women, however. Iowa homemakers too may voice their opinions on several household articles throughout the year. In P.T.A. groups, business and professional meetings or informal sewing "circles," women, led by a county home economist, are discussing easy chairs, canned fruits and vegetables, vacuum cleaners and children's socks and winter playsuits.

Nation-wide Project

This nation-wide project is comparatively new, beginning in 1944 under the leadership of home economists in the country. Since then more than 82,000 American women have given their suggestions to manufacturers through the Consumer Speaks program. Consumers first asked for items in food and clothing fields, and later household equipment and home furnishings were added to the list.

The project is of interest to home economists not only as consumers but also as teachers and workers in the home economics field. By discovering what consumers want, a home economics graduate can serve the public more efficiently.

Chairman of the Iowa project is Miss Louise Rosenfeld, assistant director of the Agricultural Extension Service, Iowa State College. Other state chairmen whom club program chairmen may contact for ballots and information on the project are:

Miss Harriet Allen, R.F.D., Ames; easy chairs
Miss Louise Anderson, Iowa Power and Light Co., Des Moines; vacuum cleaners
Miss Kay Lineberry, Iowa State Teachers College, Cedar Falls; canned fruits and vegetables
Miss Lucille Rea, Extension Service, Ames; clothing
Manufacturers want to make and retailers want to stock what consumers will buy. Until 1944 only purchases determined the type of goods on the market. Now suggestions can, too.

Because women in the United States spend more of the money than anyone else, and are said to do most of the talking, the purchases and suggestions should lead to better-made products.