

Guidelines FOR

Consumer Representatives

SUGGESTIONS

FOR CONSUMER

OR COMMUNITY

REPRESENTATIVES

WORKING ON

COMMITTEES

PREPARED BY THE
**Consumers'
Health Forum
of Australia**
4th edition





Guidelines for consumer representatives

Consumers' Health Forum of Australia Inc. (CHF)

The Consumers' Health Forum of Australia Inc., formed in 1987, is a national consumer organisation which represents consumers on health care issues. It provides a balance to the views of government, manufacturers, service providers and other health professionals.

CHF establishes policy in consultation with its membership and other consumers. Over the years CHF has been active in developing consumer focused policy in many areas including health financing, chronic pain management, mental health policy, rational prescribing of medicines, and consumer rights.

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Introduction

Consumers can actively promote consumer issues through a range of activities, such as lobbying, media campaigns, participating in surveys and consultations, and as members of committees. This publication concentrates on the work of consumer representatives on committees. Your role as a consumer representative in this capacity is an important one!

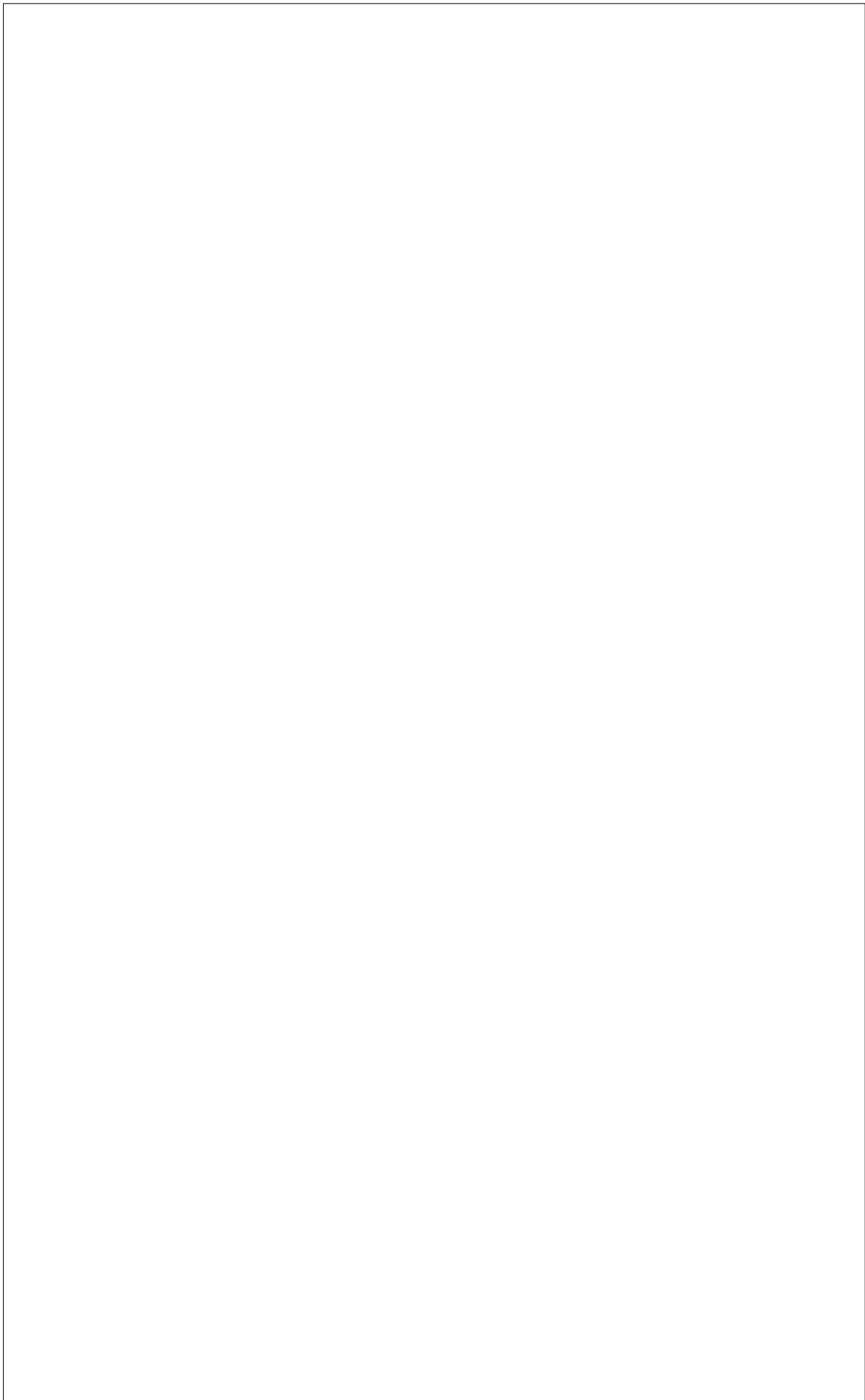
Working on a committee requires consumer representatives to understand all about meeting procedures, agendas, minutes and lots of jargon! These guidelines, which include a glossary of meeting terms, will help to de-mystify committee work and provide practical advice for dealing with difficulties and problems.

Committees are called a number of different things: councils, working groups, working parties, tribunals, boards, reference groups and so on. The term *committee* is used throughout this publication to cover all the different titles currently in-vogue.

Consumer representatives come from a wide variety of backgrounds, have a range of skills, experience and knowledge, and serve on many different types of committees. The wealth of experience gained from committee work means that we can all learn from each other.

This publication is designed to give you useful information to empower you in your representation role. In particular, the guidelines are aimed at consumer representatives who are nominated onto committees by a consumer organisation.

We hope that the information in these guidelines will ensure that you are better informed and better able to utilise your skills and knowledge to represent consumers.



Consumer representation the big picture!

What is a consumer representative?

A consumer representative is a committee member who voices the consumer perspective and takes part in the decision making process on behalf of consumers. This person is usually nominated by, and is accountable to, an organisation of consumers.

But isn't everyone a consumer?

Consumer representatives often hear other committee members say 'I'm a consumer! Why do we need a special position for a consumer representative?'

Of course everyone is a consumer, but not every committee member can represent consumers. Other committee members such as service providers, researchers or professionals are usually placed on the committee to represent those perspectives. They cannot possibly do this and represent consumers at the same time. Only those people whose primary experience is as a consumer can represent a consumer perspective because their judgement is not clouded by another perspective.

What is the role of a consumer representative?

The role of a consumer representative is to provide a consumer perspective. This often differs from a bureaucratic, service provider, industry, academic or professional perspective. The role of a consumer representative involves:

- ★ protecting the interests of consumers;
 - ★ presenting how consumers may feel and think about certain issues;
 - ★ contributing the consumer experience;
 - ★ ensuring the committee recognises consumer concerns;
 - ★ reporting the activities of the committee to consumers;
 - ★ ensuring that you are accountable to consumers;
 - ★ acting as a watchdog on issues affecting consumers; and
 - ★ providing information about any relevant issues affecting consumers.
- To remind yourself of your role as a consumer representative, you need to constantly ask yourself:
- ★ what are the views of consumers?
 - ★ what are the needs of consumers?
 - ★ what does my experience as a consumer contribute to an understanding and identification of issues? and
 - ★ how will consumers be affected by this committee's decisions?

Why is your role as a consumer representative important?

The consumer representative plays an important role on any committee. Due to a greater public recognition of the need for consumer representative involvement in decision making processes, there is greater public confidence in those committees which have a consumer representative. The consumer perspective is seen as critical and their presence often gives the committee credibility it would not otherwise have. Consumer representatives provide a broader perspective rather than a narrow, specialised interest.

Eight consumer rights

Consumer organisations world wide use the eight consumer rights to lobby on behalf of consumers and validate the views of consumers. Some consumer organisations have adapted the rights to their own areas of interest, such as the Consumers' Health Forum's, *Consumer Health Rights* pamphlet. (Consumers' Health Forum, 1990)

Many consumer representatives use the eight consumer rights to remind them of their commitment to consumer issues. These rights are often useful for bolstering your argument or putting forward a consumer perspective when there are no clear views from consumers, or if there are differing views amongst consumers.

These rights outline the basic needs of consumers:

The right to satisfaction of basic needs - food, clothing, shelter, health care and education.

The right to safety - protection against products, production processes and services which are hazardous to health or life.

The right to be informed - given the facts needed to make an informed choice, and protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labelling.

The right to choose - to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality.

The right to be heard - to have consumer interests represented in the making and execution of government policy, and in the development of products and services.

The right to redress - to receive a fair settlement of just claims, including compensation for misrepresentation, shoddy goods or unsatisfactory services.

The right to consumer education - to acquire knowledge and skills needed to make informed, confident, choices about goods and services, while having an awareness of basic consumer rights and responsibilities.

The right to a healthy environment - to live and work in an environment which is non-threatening to the well-being of present and future generations.

You've just agreed to be a consumer representative - now what?

Consumer representation is often complex. This chapter aims to clarify the issues which can cause confusion at the start and, later on, in committee work.

Who do you represent?

Before you attend your first meeting you must make sure that you are completely clear about who you represent.

Consumer representatives represent consumers at the grass roots level: those who are the end users of products and services.

Your particular constituency may also depend on what committee you are on or who nominated you to the position.

If you have any doubts, clarify your position with your nominating consumer organisation or other consumer representatives that you know.

What are your obligations?

It is important to understand the circumstances in which you were appointed before you can assess your obligations. You should clarify whether your appointment is:

- ★ in your own right;
- ★ as a representative of a consumer organisation; or
- ★ as a ministerial appointment.

Depending on your nomination you may have obligations to a range of organisations or individuals. For example, if a consumer representative is a ministerial appointment, the representative is accountable to:

- ★ the Minister as his or her appointee;
- ★ the consumer organisation who put forward the nomination to the Minister; and, often
- ★ the member group who put forward the nomination to the consumer organisation.

If you are representing a consumer organisation you may wish to ask them:

- ★ are you expected to carry forward the policies of the organisation?
- ★ what do they expect of you? and
- ★ how will they keep you informed about their work and provide you with support?

'I was nominated by a consumer organisation to a committee to represent consumers. When I got onto the committee they told me I was an expert with no relationship with my nominating organisation. This made it very difficult for me to maintain my role.'

I found the committee members were very friendly, they always included me by asking for my opinion. They really took notice of what I said!

Expectations

Typically, consumer representatives are often expected to fill a number of roles and perform different tasks.

Your nominating organisation will expect a number of things from you, the committee you are on may have expectations of you, and you will have expectations of yourself and of the committee.

Expectations of the Nominating Organisation

Often, consumer organisations expect their representatives to regularly report and to consult with them and others in the consumer movement. The organisation should inform you of your obligations to them.

The Committee's Expectations

Sometimes, committee members have a limited understanding of the role of consumer representatives. Committee members may believe that the consumer representative represents minority groups, women or even the entire community. Consequently, consumer representatives are placed in an unenviable situation where they are asked to speak on behalf of these groups!

Consumer representatives must keep in mind that they are nominated by consumers to represent them. Try not to get into the trap of speaking on behalf of other groups not represented on the committee.

I found myself being asked to 'represent' all the under-represented groups aboriginal people, migrants, the poor. I had to be very clear in my own mind who I really was representing and who I was really accountable to.

Your expectations

There are a number of things you should expect as a committee member. They include being:

- ★ treated as an equal member of the committee;
- ★ heard, listened to, and understood by the rest of the committee;
- ★ able to ask for clarification and more information, especially if jargon is used;
- ★ given all relevant information and an agenda for the meeting with enough time to read, understand and consult consumer groups and other consumers before the meeting;
- ★ able to ensure that the committee procedures allow you to return to your support system;
- ★ entitled to disagree with the rest of the committee and have this recorded; and
- ★ able to talk to others about information from the committee and its deliberations and processes.

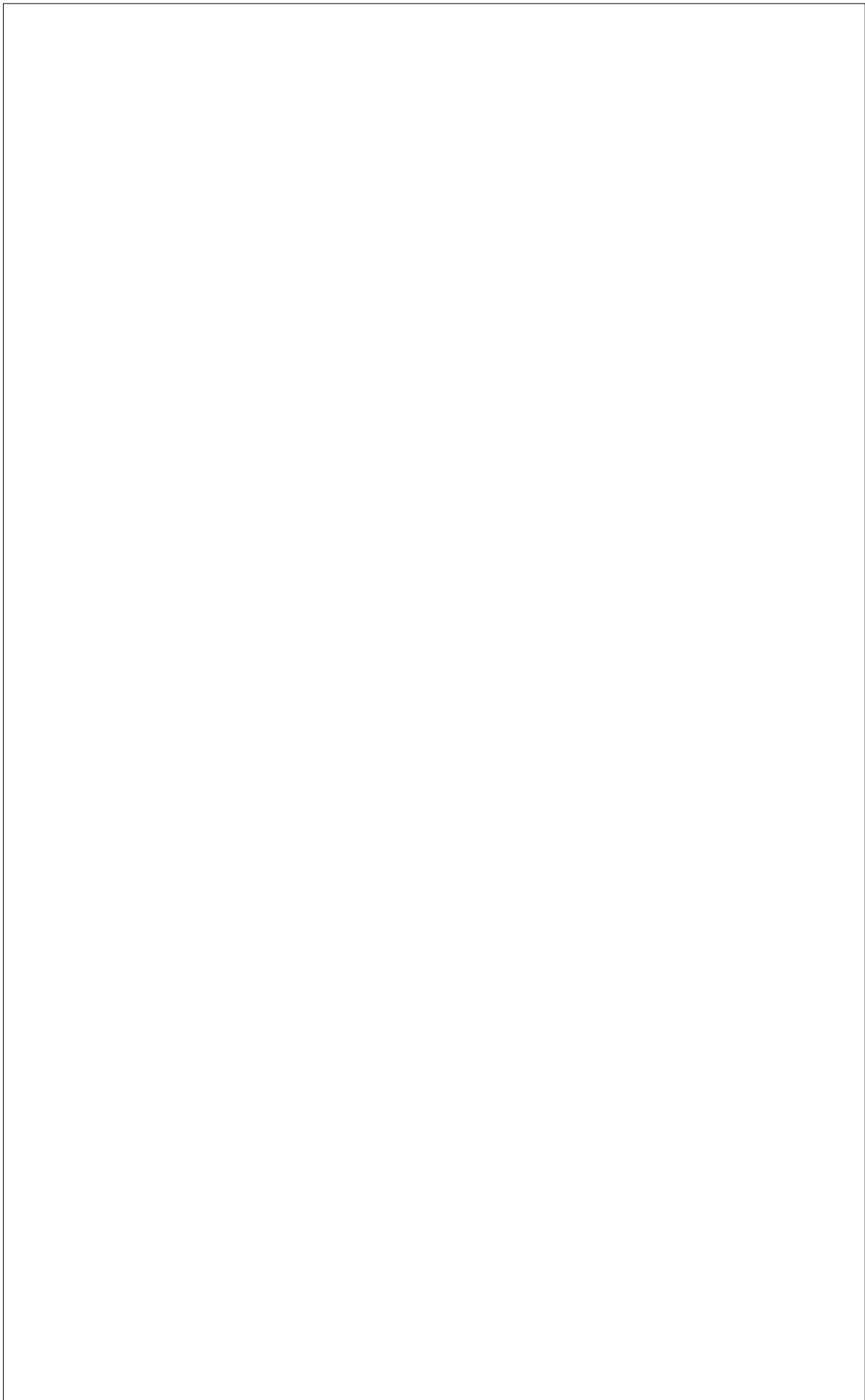
What are your entitlements as a consumer representative?

Consumer representatives are typically overworked and underpaid.

Consumer organisations have fought to change this situation.

Your nominating organisation should have details of your entitlements. Typically consumer representatives are entitled to:

- ★ **Sitting fees** - are often controversial entitlements because both government and industry can be unwilling to incur this type of additional expense.
- ★ **Travel costs** - often includes airfares and taxis. Most committees will cover these costs but, sometimes, seeking reimbursements is a problem.
- ★ **Other costs** - this miscellaneous category covers accommodation, childcare, carers for people with disabilities, phone calls, faxes and photocopying.



Before you start

Preparation is the key to becoming an effective consumer representative. It is crucial to do some preliminary homework before you attend your first meeting.

Obtain information about the committee

Make sure you know as much as you can about the committee! Committees vary in:

- ★ **the scope of their activity** - some are extremely broad in their scope, for example, the National Health and Medical Research Council; while others have a very narrow focus, for example, the asthma working group of the National Health and Medical Research Council.
- ★ **their purpose** - committees are established, for example, to: advise on policy; review a particular program; plan a survey; control pricing; prepare material; or to hear complaints or appeals.

★ **their authority** - committees can have: advisory authority only; power to recommend but not to decide; and authority to regulate or control or to set standards. Their area of authority, or jurisdiction, will also vary from national coverage, to the state or territory level, or to local areas.

★ **their method of operation** - committees may have regular and ongoing meetings or exist until a task is completed. Venues for meetings may vary or are fixed.

The same person may always chair meetings, or members may rotate this duty. Committees may have formal regulations which are governed by legislation or their operations can be informal or semi-formal.

Sometimes committee members are given work to do, and sometimes they advise or direct a secretariat to do their work.

Even though committee titles are used loosely, they can give you a clue to the scope, purpose, authority and method of their operation.

Usual Meeting Procedure

Stage one: committee members are asked to add items to the next meeting's agenda. If draft minutes of the previous meeting are sent out to committee members, this may be the opportunity to propose any corrections you may have. An agenda is sent to members before the meeting.

Stage two: at the meeting last minute agenda items are added, apologies are made, minutes from the last meeting are adopted by the committee. Be aware that if a committee meets infrequently any

corrections to the minutes are often made as out of session changes and it can be very difficult to change the minutes at the next meeting.

Stage three: the agenda items are dealt with by the committee and if there is time for other business you can bring up a new item if you did not get to add it to the agenda. Other business is usually the last item on the agenda and once it is dealt with the Chairperson usually closes the meeting.

All committees rely on meeting procedures to function effectively. These procedures are usually standard but can vary to some degree. You should find out the particular procedures used for your committee.

Meeting Records

The minutes of meetings record the date, time and purpose of the meeting. Who is present, any apologies, the previous minutes, business arising, new business, the date and time of the next meeting, and the time that the meeting has closed are also in the minutes.

You should also find out:

- ★ the committee's terms of reference and objectives;
- ★ the committee's task or expected outcome;
- ★ what financial assistance you are entitled to and how you get it;
- ★ who the other members of the committee are and what groups they represent;
- ★ if the committee has produced any reports or reviews, if there is any background material you should read;
- ★ the meeting timetable;
- ★ the meeting procedures;
- ★ who the committee will report to;
- ★ past decisions and actions of the committee;
- ★ if there are past agendas and minutes that you can read;
- ★ the duration of the committee;
- ★ the frequency of meetings, usual length of meetings, and the expected workload;
- ★ where the meetings take place;
- ★ whether proxy or alternative representatives are permitted;

Some Terms Used In Minutes

Present: the names of everyone present.

Apologies: apologies from people who were unable to attend the meeting.

Previous minutes: the minutes of the previous meeting are presented to the meeting. Committee members need to ensure that they are a 'true and accurate' record of the meeting.

Business arising: the discussion of any business arising from decisions made at the last meeting to keep everyone up to date is useful for checking on the progress of projects and to remind members of tasks they undertook to do.

New business: new items for discussion.

Date and time of the next meeting: the date, time and venue of the next meeting, and the chairperson.

Close: the time and date that the chairperson officially closed the meeting.

NB: Recording the time of opening and closing a meeting can be important to ensure no business is conducted in your absence.

- ★ whether the committee has the power to make decisions or simply to make recommendations to another body;
- ★ if the committee is part of a structure or hierarchy;
- ★ if the committee is well resourced such as having a secretariat or support staff; and
- ★ what support the committee can give you.

In some cases, your nominating organisation can provide this information. If you do not have a nominating organisation supporting you or they do not have the staff to support you adequately, ring the secretary of the committee or the committee chair and ask them to provide the answers.

Both the committee chair and the secretary are people worth getting to know and contacting frequently.

Plan and establish goals

In conjunction with your nominating organisation, establish any long-term goals you hope to achieve. By doing this, you will actively pursue the consumer agenda, and not simply react to someone else's agenda.

Don't be over-ambitious! If your committee is not used to having consumers represented, simply broadening the understanding of policy makers is probably the most appropriate and realistic goal.

Long-term goals may also include resolving a difficult issue or problem, developing a new program, or formulating new legislation.

Remember that lasting change often comes in small incremental steps. Many consumer battles were won over years of patient lobbying and representation. Have a clear, long-term agenda which is realistic. Unrealistic goals will only lead to frustration.

Committee Roles

Committee Chairperson:

The Committee Chairperson is often a powerful figure on the committee. They are responsible for:

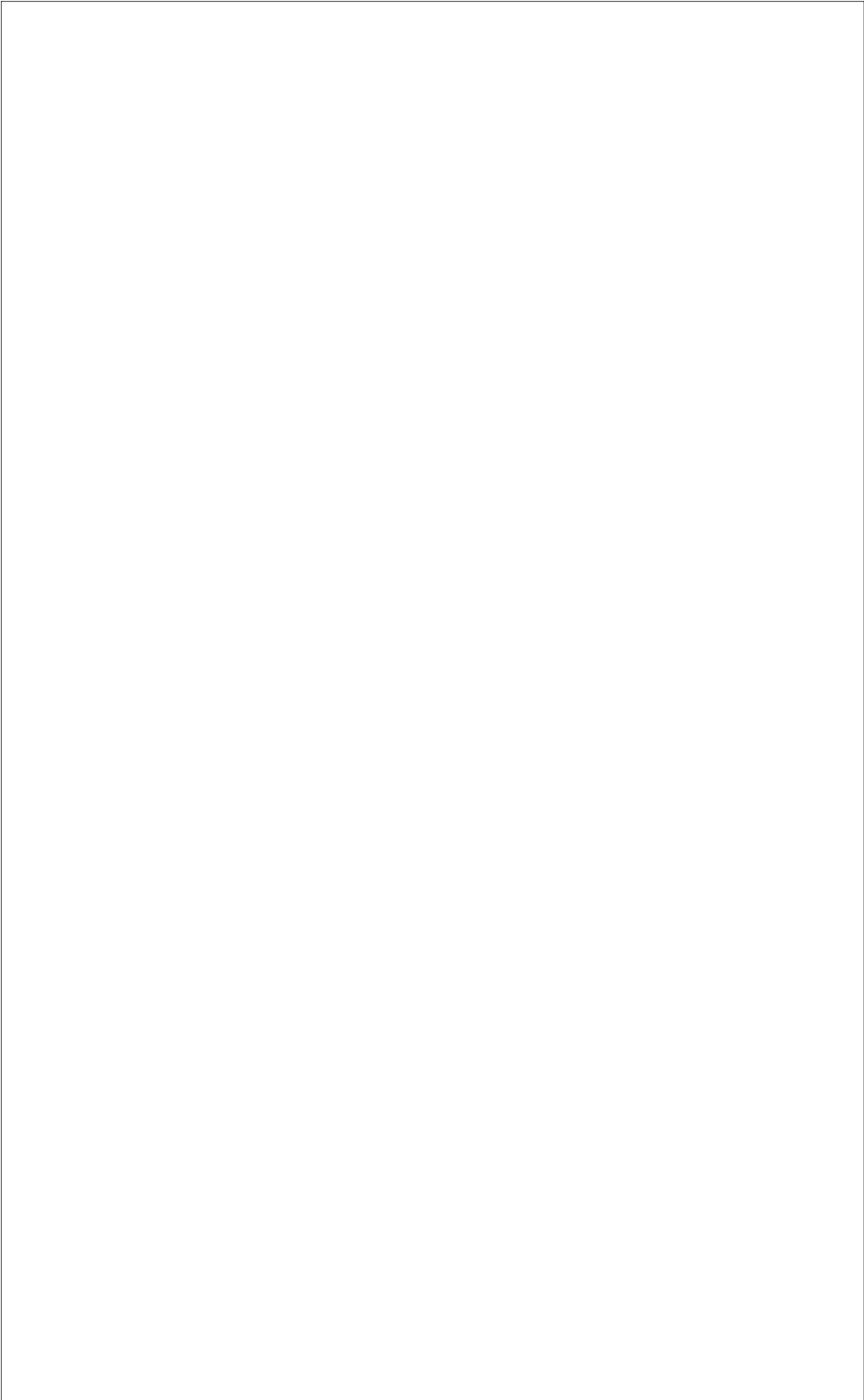
- ◆ *facilitating meetings;*
- ◆ *ensuring all committee members participate in committees tasks; and*
- ◆ *ensuring that the work of the committee is completed.*

The chairperson may cast the deciding vote if the committee is split on an issue.

Committee secretary/secretariat:

Your relationship with the secretary/secretariat will often decide whether:

- ◆ *you can get information photocopied;*
- ◆ *your items make it onto the agenda;*
- ◆ *you receive all the papers;*
- ◆ *you can access the committees' resources such as phone and fax; or*
- ◆ *you are included in informal discussions.*



Before, during and after meetings

This section investigates the various strategies which consumer representatives can use to prepare for meetings, and to continue to work effectively throughout the course of a committee's life.

Before meetings

Doing some simple tasks before your committee's meetings will enable you to appear relaxed and to effectively represent the consumer perspective.

Gather views on issues

Ask your nominating organisation for a list of consumer representatives who can advise you on various issues. Listen carefully to what everyone has to say, ask questions, clarify issues and principles. Don't make promises unless you are sure you can keep them. Your job is to understand the whole gamut of consumer viewpoints, and to try to present this diversity. Look for the principles and interests in common among the people or groups you are representing. If you cannot reach a consensus you can use material such as the eight consumer rights to express consumers needs and a broad perspective on a range of issues.

Obtaining a briefing

If you need to, examine the agenda with your nominating organisation or other consumer groups. Determine which issues concern consumers and are relevant to them.

It is sometimes impossible to prepare well for all agenda items. If this is the case, prepare three or four items which are pertinent to consumers and do not worry too much about the other agenda items.

Remember: the secretary can often advise you on which are the key issues, or the controversial ones.

Submit agenda items

On joining the committee, find out when agenda items are required, and in what form. A formal committee will require items in writing, while a more informal committee may accept items verbally. Committees which send out agenda papers in advance often have a deadline for putting items on the agenda. Find out these protocols so you can contribute effectively. The committee chairperson or secretary can advise you on these protocols.

Look at the agenda and minutes of the last meeting

Check to see whether significant decisions or comments were correctly recorded in the minutes. If you want an important decision or comment recorded or changed, ask for an amendment at the next meeting. Even if meetings are six months apart, don't let it pass.

Check to see what action was recorded at the meeting, and remind yourself whether you agreed to follow up any matter, or obtain any information.

Remember: Where an item is placed on the agenda is often important. Early items are sometimes glossed over before all key people arrive, and items on the bottom of the agenda may receive quick approval because committee members are tired and want to get home.

I used to worry about sounding dumb when I asked questions. Then I realised that half of the rest of the Committee didn't understand the answers either. When everyone is an expert in different areas, each of us on the committee has things we don't know or understand.'

Set your goals for the meeting

Set short-term goals (the small steps towards your long-term goals) for each meeting.

Your short-term goals may include ensuring that:

- ★ a certain point is understood, and get agreement on it;
- ★ a certain question is included in a planned survey;
- ★ a certain issue is raised;
- ★ an issue is clarified; or
- ★ an item in the minutes is corrected.

Tackle any achievable goals early on because this will give you experience and confidence.

It's a good idea to write down your short-term goals as this will help you to refer back to them and use them as a guide to evaluate your achievements.

Never expect to achieve all of your goals or win all of your battles! Prepare to make a few ambit claims as you will always make some compromises.

At meetings

It is at the meeting that the bulk of the formal work of the committee is done. This is your chance to influence the committee and to make some gains for consumers.

Requesting an amendment to the minutes

Ask at the meeting, before the commencement of the first agenda item, to have amendments to the previous meeting's minutes made. Don't let matters slip as it may become critical

later whether a point was noted or not.

Adding to the agenda

You can add items to the agenda at the beginning of a meeting, but you may need to confirm this. If items get dropped, use other business to have them put on the agenda for the next meeting.

Using your newness

As the 'new kid on the block' you can use your ignorance to your advantage as no one expects you to know everything. Use the opportunity to ask basic questions such as:

- ★ would you mind defining that term for me?
- ★ I don't know the background to that decision - could you fill me in briefly?
- ★ why didn't that plan work? and
- ★ what was the original intention?

Keeping the committee to its objectives

While a good chairperson will keep the discussion as close as possible to the agenda items, any member of the committee can do this. Try and keep the committee to its objectives, especially if there is a tendency for members to wander off on tangents.

Recording dissent

At times, it is necessary to have your dissent recorded in the minutes because you will not agree with every decision reached by the committee. Use your right to disagree sparingly, usually when decisions taken are not in the interests of consumers.

Taking notes

Keep your own notes of major decisions, and a summary of useful discussions. Remember to: note who makes significant points; remind yourself of anything you have agreed to take action on; and jot down any ideas.

Making your point

If you wish to make a point, make it strongly, then leave it. Don't worry if it is not picked up straight away. Let it settle! If someone else picks it up later, then your point was made twice, and you have discovered an ally on that issue. Be confident that your perspective is relevant and valid!

Using the lunch-break to advantage

The lunch break is an important opportunity to develop trust and to identify allies. Chat informally to other committee members and use phrases such as: 'I was interested to hear you say ...', or 'What's your view on ...?', and ask people to fill you in on details and background information.

‘When the Chairing is not done well or when something seems to be pushed through, I have found it useful to ask 'I'm sorry Mr/Madam Chair, but could you clarify for me just what has been decided?'

Between and after meetings

This is your chance to re-charge your batteries and get support from your nominating organisation and other consumers. It is also time for you to fulfil some of your obligations to inform others about your work. It is also between and after meetings that often some of the informal work of committees is done.

It is important for consumer representatives to be aware of the informal discussions that are taking place amongst committee members.

Reporting to your organisation

Write a report as soon after the meeting as possible. Include in it the details of issues important to consumers; the decisions made; and a list for follow-up action or information.

Feedback is an important part of representative work and you should work with your nominating organisation to decide what information they need and to seek their support and advice.

You may be required to: write a report after each meeting; send them copies of agenda's and minutes; write monthly updates for a newsletter; and/or give a report at meetings of the organisation.

Keeping in contact

Keep in touch with the secretary and other committee members, even if there is a long break between meetings. Don't forget about your involvement in the informal processes. Follow-up is important because it contributes to your legitimacy as a consumer representative.

Reflecting and evaluating

Reflection and evaluation are important tools for effective representation. Here are some tips which may help you to evaluate the progress of the committee and your effectiveness:

- ★ look for themes coming through the agenda;
- ★ look for the main interests of members on various issues;
- ★ are there some interests in common with yours?
- ★ what was not discussed that you thought would be?
- ★ reflect on the role you have played, and on the roles played by others;
- ★ can you identify the results of your participation; or
- ★ how your participation was blocked.

Dealing with difficulties

Many consumer representatives will testify that in dealing with committees their experiences fall into one of three categories; *the good, the bad or the ugly*. This chapter explores *the bad and the ugly* committee experiences.

If you find that you are having some bad or even ugly experiences don't despair, as many consumer representatives have experienced similar difficulties. If these problems are interfering with your work on the committee seek help from the chairperson, the secretary, your nominating organisation, other consumer representatives or other committee members.

Difficulties with the committee

Your agenda papers are incomplete

If you find discussion taking place on papers you have not seen, interrupt the discussion and ask for a copy of the papers being discussed. If an item is important ask that it is deferred until you or others have had time to read the paper and consider the issues. Occasionally papers are circulated to some members of the committee, but not to all.

The agenda papers are late

You need to receive the agenda papers in time to consult properly with your organisation and its constituents. This will vary according to the work of the committee, but you will usually

need at least a week before the meeting to prepare properly.

The agenda is extremely long

Extensive agendas can lead to problems such as:

- ★ the committee's efforts being directed to day-to-day or urgent issues;
- ★ the committee not having time to discuss broader or long-term issues;
- ★ the committee appearing to be very busy and productive, but actually avoids the hard work; or
- ★ the committee not facing the real issues.

It is necessary to assess which items are really worth spending time on, both in your preparation, and in committee discussions.

The committee is insisting on a 'view', but you haven't consulted your organisation - what should you do?

Occasionally the committee will require you to give your opinion, or to vote on a motion, when you have not had time to consult with your constituency. This happens occasionally to all committee members.

- ★ you can give an interim opinion (and state that it is such), pending consultation;
- ★ you can defer the item briefly, to give you an opportunity to consult with your nominating organisation over the phone; or

‘I found decisions had been made the night before at a dinner to which I had not been invited. Now I get invited to dinner, but find decisions are made over port and cigars after (to which I am not invited.)’

- ★ if you feel it is important, ask for time to consult. The item can then be deferred till the next meeting.

Consumer representatives can use the eight consumer rights, other consumer rights statements and consumer principles to explain the consumer perspective to the committee when they have not canvassed the views of consumers or if consumers are divided over an issue.

You are having problems getting heard

This commonly occurs:

- ★ on a committee that has not had consumer representation before. Remember, it takes time to establish your legitimacy and gain acceptance from other committee members; and
- ★ when the committee is primarily made up of technical experts, often talking their own jargon. In this situation you will need to ask committee members to explain the jargon they are using and obtain or make a list of the terms and learn them.

You doubt the evidence

If the facts are misrepresented, ask the person to verify these facts. Always be prepared to verify your own facts!

Occasionally you may wish to bring in an expert to put views on your behalf. Arrange this before the meeting with the whole committee if possible, or at least with the chairperson.

Existing research and data are often used to support an issue. The research can sometimes indicate only part of the story. If this is the case, it is useful if you can demonstrate the larger picture.

You are locked in a battle, or have reached a stalemate

Often if a position is stated, it is tempting to put forward an opposing position. This locks the discussion into a cycle of attack and defence. If your position is attacked, don't defend it, and don't counter-attack. To avoid this situation or resolve it for other committee members try some of the following tactics:

- ★ take the initiative;
- ★ change the game;
- ★ when you are pushed, don't push back;
- ★ invite an independent third party to draft a paper which combines the interests of all parties. Then all parties can examine and criticise the draft, and, hopefully, reach consensus; or
- ★ adjournment is useful if some parties have become locked into a position.

You disagree with a major decision

If you disagree with a major decision of the committee, ensure that this is recorded in the minutes, or even stated in the final report. Your organisation may wish to produce a minority report as a clear statement of its views on a particular issue. Refer to your nominating organisation before providing a dissenting view.

If you are a member of a departmental committee, you may decide to write to the relevant Minister to explain your disagreement with the decision and the reasons for it. If it is a very serious matter you may request a meeting with the relevant Minister. Always seek advice from your nominating organisation before taking any action.

'I thought we'd agreed on that'

When a decision is reached, and everyone is committed to it, it is important to verify everyone's understanding of the agreement and if any action will result from the decision.

You can help to clarify issues by summing up or asking someone else to sum up the understanding of the agreement. The final agreement is recorded in the minutes.

If no minutes are recorded, you should write down your understanding of the decisions for further reference. At some stage you may need to insist that the final decision is recorded in the minutes.

Something 'agreed on' is never carried out

You may feel flushed with success at a committee decision, only to find

six months later that it was not implemented. Follow it up!

Difficulties with consumer representation

Accountability

Accountability is an important part of representative work. Consumer organisations are very serious about having accountable people representing consumers. Accountability consists of:

- ★ belonging to a consumer organisation;
- ★ reporting back to your nominating organisation;
- ★ consulting with the wider consumer movement; and
- ★ loyalty to the convictions and views of your constituents.

When you are accountable to your constituency it means that you are not always free to present your personal view.

Confidentiality

Committees often deal with matters which must remain confidential within the committee. Sometimes a matter is confidential until a public announcement is made.

Clarify the issue of confidentiality early on. Not all issues and decisions arising in meetings are necessarily confidential. If a matter arises and you are unsure if it is confidential, discuss it at the meeting.

Confidential information is likely to become a problem for you where it routinely hinders consultation or where it is used to stifle discussion or compromise the independence of representatives. You must seek advice from your nominating organisation if this is the case.

'Confidentiality issues were very controversial on my committee. I was very conscious of my responsibilities to my constituency and my nominating organisation but I also needed to maintain my integrity by adhering to the confidentiality of the committee. Eventually I ended up submitting a report to the chairperson for approval before sending it to my nominating organisation.'

Confidentiality requirements of the committee do not release you from any reporting or consulting duties. Representatives may need to clear written reports with the committee's chairperson before they are distributed to nominating organisations or other consumers.

Conflict of interest

Consumer representatives are expected to act with integrity at all times and not compromise the interests of consumers. If you discover that you have a conflict of interest you must bring it to the attention of your nominating organisation.

If it is a major conflict, it will make representation difficult. In extreme cases you and your nominating organisation may decide that you need to resign your position on the committee.

Public statements

Representatives do not usually make public statements on behalf of their nominating organisation or in relation to their committee work unless they have approval from their nominating organisation. Always be cautious if asked to make a public statement such as a media interview, speech or to write for a journal or other publication.

Isolation

You may experience the unease of being the only person representing consumers on

a committee. Government and industry typically have several representatives while there is usually only a lone consumer representative.

Break this isolation by keeping in regular contact with your nominating organisation and other consumer representatives in your network. Don't give up! Your presence often raises the level of awareness of those on the committee and may lead to the increase of consumer representation.

Lack of resources

In comparison with most committee members, consumer representatives are poorly resourced. Both industry and government representatives attend committee meetings as part of their jobs where expenses are paid and hours are allocated. Consumer representatives seldom have such luxuries.

In the majority of cases consumer representatives take time out from their paid employment to attend meetings and rely on the good will of their employers to get time off. Sitting fees are not always paid and consumer representatives are seldom adequately compensated for giving up their time and providing their knowledge.

Consumer representatives typically have limited or no access to e-mail and faxes and have to do committee work at home. Networking is done in

'I attended one committee meeting where everyone was in suits and I was the only female at the meeting. At the break-time, the coffee did not come out and a committee member turned to me and queried why I had not brought out the coffee and tea. I was just stunned!'

their own time and usually phone calls are made from home.

The lack of resources means that consumer representatives often receive agendas late or do not receive amendments to the agenda at all! They are often out of pocket for routine committee work such as making phone calls and sending faxes and letters. Reimbursements for accommodation and travel are delayed leaving representatives out of pocket for months. Ask your nominating organisation to support you in lobbying for upfront payments or speedy reimbursements.

Try to find ways to have the committee pay for expenses such as:

- ★ having them ring you back when you call them;
- ★ paying for the cost of your photocopying for you;
- ★ fax machine or modems.

Lack of support

Often consumer representatives lack adequate support from their nominating organisation, or they are isolated from other consumer representatives, or they are the only consumer representative on a committee. Consumer organisations have recognised that isolated individuals have a limited chance of being effective. Contact your nominating consumer organisation for ideas on how they can best support you.

The secretary always booked and paid for my accommodation and looked after me very well.'

I believe travel costs and accommodation need to be paid upfront, it sometimes takes up to five months to be reimbursed - this puts such a strain on my limited resources.'

Consensus

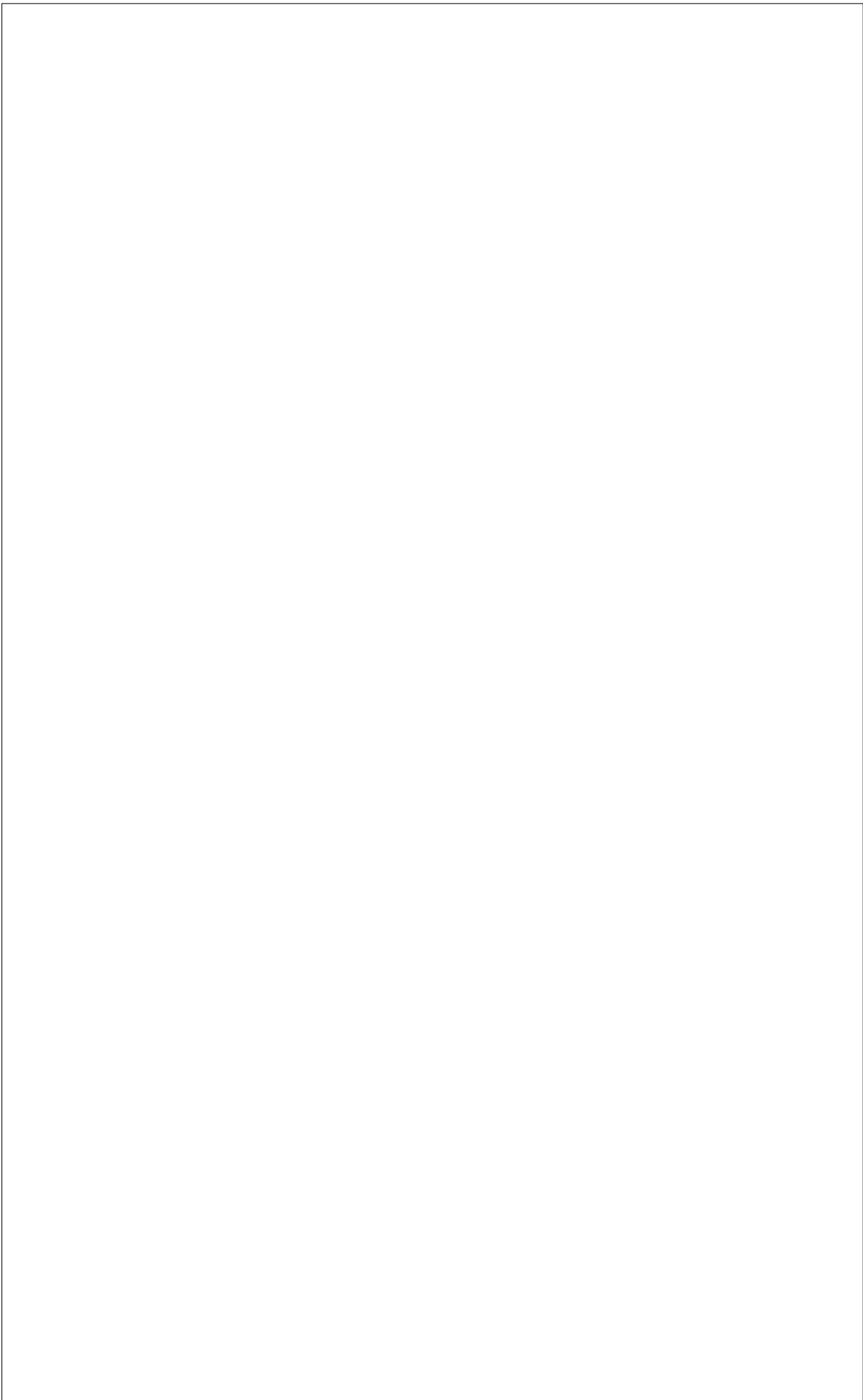
Occasionally more than one consumer representative is on a committee. It is preferable for representatives to plan together (caucus) before each meeting and reach a consensus position on issues. This avoids the weakening of the consumer position on the committee. If a consensus is not reached before the meeting, you should defer that item and contact your nominating organisation so the matter is resolved. If you are unable to caucus before a meeting, defer controversial issues.

If a consensus is not reached you may decide to focus on consumer rights to deal with the issue rather than presenting differing consumer views. On occasion however, you can use the opportunity to point out the range of views held by consumers on an issue and require that the full range be taken into account.

Directorships of incorporated entities

Although not all consumer representatives serve on company boards, increasingly they are filling this role. This places many consumer representatives in the unenviable position of having to assume liability if something goes wrong. It is your responsibility to know your rights and liabilities when appointed as a director.

In particular, you should check whether the company has the appropriate insurance to protect its directors. As with other representatives, those who are directors need to continue with their reporting and consulting duties.



Being effective

There are a number of ways in which consumer representatives can increase their effectiveness and persuade committee members of the importance of the consumer perspective. Below are suggestions which may help you in your work as a consumer representative. Your strength is in your own knowledge and experience and the experiences of others in the consumer movement: this makes your input unique.

diversity of experiences and needs of consumers;

- ★ present an argument rationally and convincingly;
- ★ imagine the consequences of decisions, in the short and long term;
- ★ negotiate; and
- ★ distinguish who you are representing.

'As a consumer representative you need to set aside time to do your job and get things done.'

There is no correct way to become an effective representative, much of it is learnt and practised. Seek out relevant books and workshops, and take every opportunity to talk to other consumer representatives and your nominating organisation to improve your skills.

What qualities make an effective consumer representative?

There are some qualities which are important in ensuring that you are effective. It helps if you have an ability to:

- ★ analyse an issue, and judge its effects on consumers;
- ★ move away from a personal opinion to a viewpoint that takes account of the

'I treated my first meeting like an interview. I arrived 20 minutes early, I was smartly dressed and had all the relevant material with me. It was worth taking the time to be organised and well presented, it made me feel comfortable.'

Create a positive first impression

First impressions are crucial!

Try not to:

- ★ arrive late for your first meeting;
- ★ leave your agenda papers at home;

'Read everything carefully to inform yourself, highlight actual bits that need amending or are amended in the meeting, use short hand to write yourself good notes.'

‘When I first joined the committee, I found there was not enough seating around the table, and I was shown to a seat outside the main circle of existing members. At the second meeting I just shifted the name-plates along and squeezed in an extra chair.’

- ★ slink in timidly as though you don’t want anyone to notice you; and
- ★ talk at every opportunity, even when you have nothing to say.

Aim to create a first (and lasting) impression as someone who is organised, good humoured, open to ideas and confident of your own opinions. On the first day, arrive a little early so that there is time to meet all members, and to chat informally with them. Choose a seat where you can see, and be seen by, everyone at the table. If you want to sit next to a particular person, do so, even if it means just swapping the name plates.

Once you’ve established yourself on a committee you can implement measures to promote consumer issues.

Plan your tactics

If you have decided to win a particular issue, or move a particular issue forward, you will need to plan your attack well. Preparation is the key to a good attack!

Think about:

- ★ how you will introduce that point;
- ★ what facts/research you will need at your fingertips;
- ★ when is a good time to raise a point because inappropriate timing may lose you the point; and

- ★ who is likely to support you, and do you want to discuss tactics with them beforehand.

Sometimes it is useful to write a paper on an issue. Busy committee members will often respond well to written arguments. You may well find your paper forms the working document for the discussion.

Speak with potential allies

It is important to work out any potential allies. Some allies may support you on some issues, and not on others. Anyone on the committee is a potential ally depending on what issues are discussed.

Try sounding out issues with other committee members because this way you can decide if they are worth raising with the full committee.

‘One doctor had dinner with me to discuss the issues further.’

Caucus

Caucusing is discussing tactics with one or more others. You may seek out a caucus, or others may seek you out. If you feel you are compromising your own position by joining a caucus, decide to stand apart.

Beware! More formal caucusing occurs too, when you or others are getting the numbers for a vote.

Consult

Consulting with consumer groups and your nominating organisation is crucial for ensuring effective representation. Through consultation you ensure that you are speaking for a wider group and not just providing a personal opinion. This will increase your credibility and ensure that you are representing your constituents.

Network

It is especially important to talk with any other consumer representatives on the committee, and on related committees, to see what their opinions are on a particular issue. Importantly, you share ideas on important issues, discuss why they are important, and what outcomes are desirable.

If you are on a committee which is part of a structure with many levels of sub-committees and working parties, it is extremely important to have a good network with other consumer representatives within the structure.

Ask your nominating organisation or the committee secretary to supply you with a list of names of other consumer representatives and a chart of the committee structure.

Get a briefing

If you are taking over from a consumer representative who has served on the committee then it is wise to get a briefing with them. Ask them about:

- ★ what wins and losses they had on the committee;
- ★ who were their friends and foes;

I went to the meetings expecting to have problems with two members. They turned out to be allies. The antagonism with the previous representative was personal and not anti-consumer'.

- ★ what issues are the most crucial for consumers;
- ★ is the committee chair sympathetic to having a consumer representative;
- ★ is the committee secretary helpful; and
- ★ did they have any problems with reimbursements.

However, it is important for you to make up your own mind once you have experienced the committee.

Report regularly

Reporting regularly to your nominating organisation ensures that representatives are accountable and credible. This enables the nominating organisation to support the work of their representatives. They can give informed policy advice, and advise you to talk to other consumers in their networks.

Perform positive tasks

Committee members will take on many different roles and tasks. It helps to know what committee duties typically need doing, and when. This ensures that you are a positive force within the committee. Keep in mind whenever you can to:

- ★ bring the discussion back to the relevant issue;
- ★ initiate new discussion;
- ★ summarise major points;

- ★ think laterally when discussion is not getting anywhere;
- ★ blend various people's comments together;
- ★ connect two points;
- ★ diagnose a problem;
- ★ inspire others;
- ★ relieve tension, or create useful tension; and
- ★ remain active even when the issue does not have consumer implications.

Keep control

Play an active part, don't just react to events. Active participation includes:

- ★ preparing for the meetings and actively discussing issues;
- ★ putting items on the agenda; and
- ★ presenting papers for discussion.

Beware of certain group behaviours

Often a committee will develop particular characteristics which are not conducive to effective committee work.

Committee members may have tendencies to:

Groupthink

Problem:

When a group is very cohesive, there is the risk of *groupthink*. This becomes a problem if you are agreeing to decisions that will adversely affect consumers. You may find that everyone is getting along

so well that you or other committee members do not want conflict, so decisions are agreed to too readily.

Solution:

Just keep it in the back of your mind that this can happen, especially when you are most enjoying committee meetings, because things are running so smoothly! Try to consciously assess each decision made by the committee. If you decide that decisions may adversely affect consumers then you must voice your concerns.

Work avoidance

Problem:

Committee members often avoid working on the real issues when the committee is very busy with long agendas. Perhaps time is spent discussing problems which the committee has no scope to change or focusing on trivia and putting the hard issues at the end of the agenda. As with groupthink, this can happen when things seem to be going very well.

Solution:

Remind committee members of the aims of the committee and its terms of reference. Suggest that the committee take time out to reassess its priorities.

Going native

Problem:

Occasionally you may find that committee members are so enthusiastic about the work of the committee that you find yourself caught up in their enthusiasm. This is not necessarily a problem unless it clouds your perspective and prevents

you from voicing problems or blinds you to problems.

Solution:

If you feel that you have 'gone native' then you need to reassess the purpose of your appointment and your goals. If it becomes a real problem then you need to discuss this issue with your nominating organisation.

Putting people into certain roles

Problem:

You may find that as a consumer representative you are placed in the role of complainant or opponent; or that the committee places a member in the role of leader, (often, but not always, the chairperson) and tries to get them to make the committee's decisions for them and to resolve any conflicts; or that one member is made into the committee's scapegoat.

Solution:

Try to avoid this role stereotyping. It is useful at times to surprise others by agreeing with them! Be positive too! Also, beware of the tendency to get one person to do the committee's work. Typically, this person is blamed if the committee doesn't achieve its objectives.

If you notice role casting, point it out to the rest of the committee. Remind committee members that you all must work as a group. The final outcomes are as a group not as individuals.

Please note: These situations illustrate the importance of reporting to your nominating organisation. It is often difficult to assess group behaviours when you are part of the group!

Form alliances and coalitions

Forming alliances with other committee members is a normal part of committee work. Take advantage of them! However, if standing alone is unavoidable, try to win others round with logical argument and evidence.

Deal with any frustration

Being a consumer representative can leave you feeling demoralised. It is worth asking yourself if this happens, what the motive was for having a consumer representative on this committee. Maybe it was to give the appearance of consulting, a token gesture, or to placate the consumer movement? Are you the only one on the committee who feels frustrated or do others share your feelings? If you are alone in your frustrations then you need to assess whether your expectations and goals are too high and if you need training to improve your skills. Talk with your nominating organisation to analyse what is happening. Is it time to ease yourself out and let a new representative take over?

If you feel that your appointment was a *public relations* exercise, you still should try to change attitudes by demonstrating your ability as an effective committee member. Get advice from your nominating organisation if the problem persists.

If frustration is a general feeling of the committee members, again ask why. It may help to bring up your feelings at the meeting, and get the committee to look at itself and why it is failing.

Improve your negotiation

We negotiate every day: with our children about bedtime, with flatmates on who does the housework and with work colleagues on how a job is done.

There are certain principles which can be learnt and practised. They include:

Separate the people from the problem

Even while retaining a clear sense of the differences in positions, and an understanding that there are often real conflicts of interest, avoid projecting an 'us' and 'them' feeling.

If you are working with people on an ongoing committee, it is important to keep up a good working relationship. This is often more important for future decisions than the outcome of one particular negotiation. Talk to other members before and after meetings, think of them as colleagues, rather than as enemies you need to avoid.

Fight over the issues, do not fight because of personal animosity. You will gain respect from people if you present a strong, logical argument without holding any personal antipathy.

Listen

Put yourself in the other person's shoes discuss each other's perceptions. Ask questions so that you understand, and could explain, the other's point of view.

Ensure that everyone participates so they will have a commitment to the outcome.

Listening is an important tool as you may need to check that you understood the discussion. Try interpreting and reading back others' statements.

Focus on interests - don't bargain over positions

By locking yourself into a position which you must defend, you will find changing your position difficult without losing face. Early on, try to articulate your interests or principles, rather than taking a position or stand.

Rather than expecting, and looking for, opposing interests, look for the shared interests. This is difficult when people have

different perspectives, or are closed to opposing views. Reformat the debate in your language, your terms, your definition of the problem. Ask questions to identify the other members' interests.

Don't state your solution first. Spend time analysing and discussing the problem, sorting out the common interests, then put a solution, relating it to those interests. Better still, try to work out a solution jointly with your adversaries, so that it is not 'your' solution or 'their' solution, but everyone's solution.

Don't constantly refer to past behaviour or statements (unless it is useful to do so) focus on the present and the future.

Be creative - invent mutually beneficial options

There is no single correct answer. Brainstorming is a helpful way of looking for creative solutions. This is done either within your committee (preferably in a different setting - say over drinks); or you can reach your own idea of a solution outside the committee meeting, using people from your organisation.

Remember to use the 'rules' of brainstorming such as collecting and building on ideas, no matter how way out, don't evaluate them until later.

T ***hink of these wins and losses as twists and turns in a thousand-mile long path, or as single moves in an enormous game of snakes and ladders.***

Use agreed-upon criteria

The costs of making any decision on the basis of who has the strongest will are very high especially as the loser can feel resentful and bitter. If the committee members agree that decisions are made by taking the most votes, then move on whether you 'win' or 'lose' without either crowing or bearing a grudge.

It is similarly unwise to horse-trade - where you take turns with other committee members to give in. Rather, look together for criteria which all committee members can accept as fair.

There are often previous standards and precedents. Always ask 'how did you reach that figure?' or 'how did you come to that decision?'

Ensure everyone is committed to the outcome

This is a final, and most important, stage in negotiation. Once you and the other committee members have reached a decision, make sure everyone knows:

- ★ what is going to happen next;
- ★ who is going to do what, and by when;
- ★ what resources are available; and
- ★ the consequences for not following through on agreements or tasks.

Improve your skills

All these skills can be learnt! You may find it useful to attend a course in negotiating, public speaking, assertiveness, or communication skills.

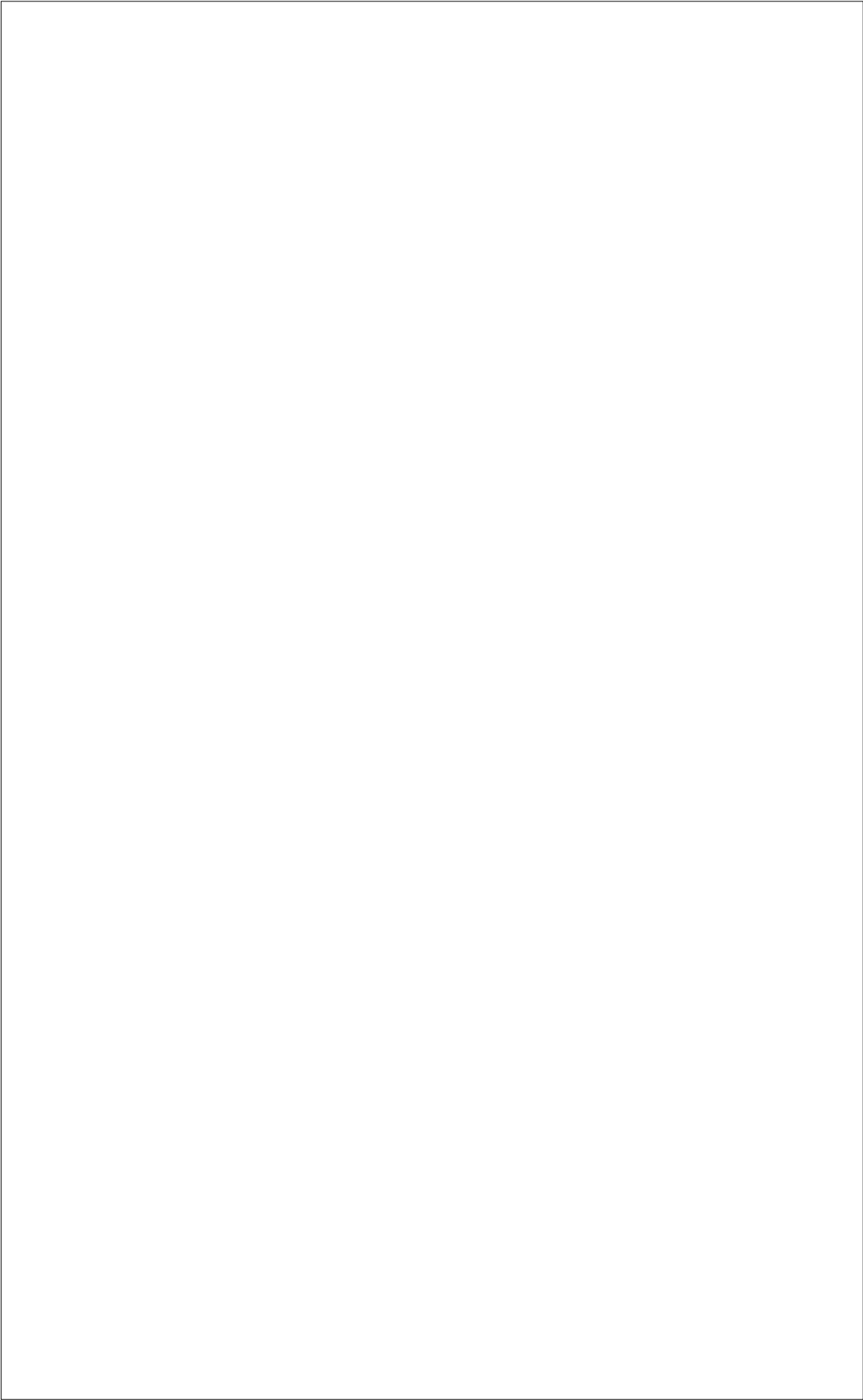
Courses are often available at reasonable cost in adult or continuing education departments or community health centres. It is often useful to get a group together and arrange some training. Your nominating organisation may have some ideas on where good and affordable training is available.

Evaluate your committee

It is important to establish whether a committee is effective. It will enable you to evaluate your own performance in a true light. Evaluation is the key to deciding if a committee is ineffective. Ask questions to help you decide such as:

- ★ why was this committee established?
- ★ does it have any real power?
- ★ what were its long-term goals?
- ★ does it have adequate resources to carry out its work?
- ★ are decisions followed up by action? If not, why not?
- ★ is it a matter of resources? and
- ★ is there anything you as a member can do? Raise your feelings at the meeting? Discuss your feelings with other members informally?

Consider action, such as preparing a definite proposal for discussion at the next meeting or suggesting the committee solve small achievable goals.



A final word

It is worth reiterating that committee work is difficult! You will win some issues but not all. If consumer representatives can change the culture of committees, which are often technical and paternal, into seeing that consumers are legitimate stakeholders, then this is very valuable.

Each small change you make as a consumer representative is valuable as it adds to this attitude and this will benefit all consumers in the long-term.

Sometimes, your gains may not be obvious until many years later. Acknowledge that you have had a valuable and important role in the big picture of consumer representation.

I had a good win - by changing totally unreadable technical papers into something a lay person could understand.'

On my committee they completely under-estimated me because I was the consumer representative but I set myself a task and just kept hammering away. Now we have monitoring guidelines which makes products safer and better for consumers.'

I found out after the committee had finished its work that one doctor thought that the best thing about the committee was having a consumer representative on it.'

