Watchdogs and Whistleblowers

A Reference Guide to Consumer Activism

STEPHEN BROBECK AND ROBERT N. MAYER, EDITORS

Foreword by Jim Guest, former president and CEO, Consumer Reports
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Activism for consumer protections and reforms in the marketplace began in the early twentieth century, expanded in the latter part of the century, and has accelerated in recent years in the United States and other parts of the world. Along the way, extraordinary leaders emerged, advocacy organizations formed, and growing numbers of citizens mobilized to move the balance of power in the marketplace away from dominant commercial interests and toward the consumer interest.

*Watchdogs and Whistleblowers: A Reference Guide to Consumer Activism* tells the story of the expanding consumer influence, action, and achievements over this period—especially in more recent years, when the lessons of the past have been reflected in the mounting successes of the present. And it tells the story in the voices of nearly a hundred consumer activists who have been in the trenches day in and day out as individual leaders and heads of activist organizations and as trailblazers in the crusade to protect and empower consumers.

Consumer activists have had a huge and continuing influence on American society, from the early antitrust, food safety, and financial protection laws to reforms passed in just the past decade. Literally thousands of federal, state, and local consumer laws and regulations have been enacted. Hundreds of new institutions—nonprofit organizations, regulatory agencies, state and local consumer offices, and more—have been formed. There is a greater societal consciousness that consumers have interests and rights distinct from those of sellers—and not only that, but that they have the ability to assert those rights, as well as more avenues than ever for doing so.

The press has extensively covered the enactment of these laws and regulations, and during the heat of battle reporters have quoted activists and cited organizations that advocated for the reforms. But beyond that, those in the media have written or broadcast very little about the actual work of consumer activists and their organizations.

*Watchdogs and Whistleblowers* fills this void with inside information on and analysis of nearly four dozen consumer organizations in the United States alone, along with their efforts on dozens of issues. It includes articles on activities such as legislative advocacy, regulatory advocacy, litigation, policy research, grassroots organizing, Internet activism, referenda and ballot initiatives, and other creative ways to secure consumer rights. It also provides information about consumer movements in other parts of the world.

In addition, the co-editors of *Watchdogs and Whistleblowers*, Steve Brobeck and Rob Mayer, give us insightful overview essays that provide context and show linkages between the various consumer groups and issue activism. I can’t think of two people more qualified to develop and edit this one-of-a-kind encyclopedic work.
Both are PhDs—Rob Mayer in sociology, Steve Brobeck in American studies—with numerous scholarly publications. Both have written extensively about the consumer movement. Their publications include *Encyclopedia of the Consumer Movement*, published by ABC-CLIO in 1997. And they are widely known and highly respected as consumer activists themselves. For the past thirty-five years, Brobeck has headed the Consumer Federation of America, comprising more than 250 U.S. consumer groups and related organizations. For many years, Mayer was a leader in the American Council of Consumer Interests, and he is an ongoing resource to consumer groups.

I've had the good fortune to work for nearly four decades as a consumer activist. Among other things, I served for many years as chair of the board of directors of Consumer Reports (formerly Consumers Union, which still advocates under that name) and as its president and CEO from 2001 to 2014. I've also been on the governing council of Consumers International, a federation of more than 250 consumer groups from 120 countries that serves as the global voice of consumers, and I currently serve as CI's volunteer president. So I'm doubly pleased that the passionate and influential work of consumer activists in the United States and abroad has been recorded and analyzed brilliantly in this new reference work. *Watchdogs and Whistleblowers* is a must-read.

*Jim Guest, former president and CEO, Consumer Reports*
Preface

Consumer activism has been a powerful force both in the United States and around the world. Particularly in the past half-century, consumer advocates have created influential organizations, mobilized public support for reforms, and persuaded public policymakers to make these reforms. Just in the past decade, these advocates have played an important role in the establishment of major new consumer protections in areas as diverse as financial services, privacy, and product safety.

This reference work represents the most comprehensive, up-to-date source of information about this activism. In a historical framework, it treats advocacy-related organizations, leaders, activities, and issues. Although the work focuses the most attention on U.S. activism, more than a quarter of the 141 entries discuss consumer movements in nations or regions outside the United States.

This work is related to the *Encyclopedia of the Consumer Movement*, released in 1997, in that it was prepared by the same editors and publisher and contains much of the same type of information. However, the current volume focuses most of its attention on the eighteen-year period after the publication of the first reference work. Furthermore, this book discusses issue activism in much greater detail than the earlier work. This discussion features accounts of this activism by leading consumer advocates.

The entries are arranged alphabetically. To facilitate their location, alternative titles for some entries are listed alphabetically. For example, the cross-reference listing of “Automobile Safety Advocacy” refers readers to the entry “Motor Vehicle Safety Advocacy.” A detailed index is available to locate not only entries, but also specific information within entries.

Entries range in length from about 500 words to about 4,000 words. At the end of each article are cross-references to other related entries and sources for further reading. After the entries, and before the index, is a list of select books on consumer activism, some written by activists themselves, that represent important works about consumer advocacy in the United States. A timeline of important events—such as enactment of major federal legislation and establishment of national consumer organizations in the United States—introduces the articles, and two essays—on U.S. and worldwide activism—provide an integrative overview of the entries.

A unique feature of this reference work is that leading advocates have written many entries. In the dearth of scholarship about specific consumer organizations and issues, these contributions provide new and important information about consumer activism. Any bias of these activist authors is constrained by several factors. The authors are well educated—the large majority have advanced or professional
degrees—and so are aware of scholarly norms of objectivity and balance. The editors instructed these authors to include certain types of information in their articles and to write about their topic as a detached third party. The editors then not only carefully reviewed, and sometimes rewrote, the articles, but also often sent them to others for review. To us, the risk of any remaining author bias is far outweighed by the benefit of first-hand author insight.

Many persons made important contributions to this book. We are most grateful to the authors for making time in their often hectic work lives to prepare their articles, as well as for working with us constructively to make any needed improvements. We are also indebted to two Consumer Federation of America staffers—Sara Cooper, who assisted in numerous ways, and Anna Marie Lowery, who worked with the publisher on its “author website” and facilitated author approvals of the publisher’s contract. We also wish to thank ABC-CLIO. It was a pleasure to work with this well-established, high-quality publisher in the mid-1990s on our earlier encyclopedia. We have been just as pleased by our experience with ABC-CLIO on the current volume. Editor Stephen Gutierrez offered much useful advice as we developed the entries, and Senior Editor Hilary Claggett provided invaluable guidance as we completed the manuscript. Finally, we are grateful to our wives—Susan and Carol—for their patience and support.

Stephen Brobeck
Robert N. Mayer
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