



ISO and the consumer



- ISO standards support the development and trade of products and services which better meet consumers' expectations for safety and health, fitness for purpose, environmental protection and other qualities.
- Consumer representatives participate in the development of ISO standards and help define product and service specifications that meet consumers' needs.
- When the end product or service meets the consumer's requirements, this creates a win-win situation – both for consumer and manufacturer or service provider.

Participation of consumer interests in standardization builds confidence in the products and services developed according to specifications ... and ensures that they are adapted to the end-users' needs.



Why ISO values consumers' input

ISO seeks to ensure that its standards are market-relevant and meet the needs of the end user, frequently a consumer*, exposed to an increasingly global offer of products and services.

Whether or not consumers are direct users, they are often concerned with the wider implications of the production and trade of products and services. Issues include ethical manufacturing practices, environmental impact, implications of technological change and systems to provide information to consumers or to address their complaints.

When a product is a component of some industrial equipment, or a service, an ISO standard can define the necessary safety and performance characteristics. The end user in this case is a manufacturer or a service professional. However, in other cases, the end user belongs to the general public: the consumer. Consumer products and services affected by ISO's standards range from bicycles, baby carriages and bank cards to newer areas such as the management of complaints within a business or services associated with tourism, drinking water or financial planning.

As a result, consumer issues are at the heart of ISO's 2005-2010 Strategic Plan, its Code of Ethics and its current standards development work.

* ISO defines the consumer as an individual member of the general public, purchasing or using goods, property or services, for private purposes, *Source: ISO/IEC statement, Consumer participation in standardization work*

What matters to consumers?

Standards often define the characteristics of products and services, and the way to measure or test them. Consumer representatives wish to influence these characteristics so that products and services provide higher levels of:

- quality and reliability
- protection of safety and health
- compatibility between products
- consistency in the delivery of services
- choice of goods and services
- transparency in product information
- fair competition, hence lower prices for consumers
- suitability of products for vulnerable populations (children, the elderly)
- environmental protection.

How ISO involves consumers' views

ISO organizes and encourages the input of consumers' views on two levels:

- in standards development work, through the participation of its national members and Consumers International;
- at the policy level through ISO member participation in its Committee on consumer policy (ISO/COPOLCO). The members of COPOLCO are national standards bodies (NSBs), or consumer organizations mandated by the NSBs. COPOLCO also solicits views from industry specialists and public authorities.

A major challenge is to increase consumer participation in standards and policy work at all levels, particularly from developing countries. COPOLCO organizes international workshops, publishes informative brochures and provides other training material and programmes for this purpose.

The ISO brochure, *Your voice matters* explains the reasons why consumers need to participate in standards-making and how they can become involved.

ISO's partners on consumer issues

The International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) which produces standards for electrical consumer goods, also participates in ISO/COPOLCO to develop ISO/IEC Guides dealing with the inclusion of consumer aspects in the development of standards.

COPOLCO has liaison with Consumers International (CI) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). COPOLCO also cooperates with regional consumer organizations.

How standards benefit from consumer input

When consumer representatives participate in developing standards, they are able to offer valuable perspectives. They can provide data on safety aspects and ensure that these are properly addressed, give examples of how products and services are actually used (or misused) in practice and give advice on communication issues.

COPOLCO organizes the participation of consumer representatives in ISO and IEC standards projects currently under development. Priority areas include:

- issues related to safety and performance of household appliances
- services (generic guidelines, tourism, financial services, water supply and wastewater disposal)
- fire safety
- second-hand goods
- the elderly and people with disabilities
- environmental issues (environmental management, energy use, climate change)
- water safety – drowning prevention
- graphical symbols and public information systems
- global marketplace issues (codes of conduct, complaints handling, dispute resolution systems, privacy, e-commerce and social responsibility)
- child related products
- contraceptive devices
- furniture
- health informatics



Consumer-driven initiatives within ISO

ISO/COPOLCO holds an annual international workshop that focuses on a consumer-oriented theme, leading to recommendations which ISO takes on board in the form of new standards work. Examples are:

- services – such as standardization in tourism and financial services
- social responsibility – Guidelines on ethical management practices
- "customer service" standards: codes of conduct, complaints handling and external customer dispute resolution systems
- general guidance – policy statements on consumer participation and needs of the elderly and people with disabilities
- guides for standards-writers (packaging, product information, instructions for use, and graphical symbols), used by experts involved in standardizing products or services which consumers use.

Looking towards the future: consumer and societal interests

With the advent of the Internet, other information technology breakthroughs and globalization, access to information is becoming increasingly open. There is a growing demand for more transparency and participation in the structures that determine today's economic and political landscape. Thanks in part to the input from consumers, ISO's standardization programme extends beyond traditional product standards to encompass societal concerns such as the environment, social responsibility and standardization of services.

ISO places great value on stakeholder input. By providing precious feedback and a "reality check" for such characteristics as safety, ecology, reliability, efficiency, compatibility, customer service, transparent information and reasonable cost, consumers play a vital role in ensuring ISO's global relevance and market responsiveness.



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Two URLs to remember :

ISO Online : www.iso.org

ISO Café : www.iso.org/isocafe

Two magazines to read :



ISO Focus, a panoramic view of standards and related issues : what is being done, why it is being done, what will be done and how it affects you. Published in English

www.iso.org/isofocus

ISO Management Systems,

Worldwide coverage of ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 developments. *Plus* new standards initiatives for important business and societal issues such as social responsibility, sustainability, occupational health and safety and conformity assessment. *Plus* sector developments and national initiatives. Published in English, French and Spanish.

www.iso.org/ims

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