

Would a search of the regulatory agencies reveal information on the comparative performance of companies whose activities they regulate—information that would be of great value to prospective patrons of those companies? For example, is there information on the accident records of various transportation companies, railroad companies, airlines, bus companies, and so forth? Do Government agencies have information on companies, by name, similar to the dossiers maintained by better business bureaus, of regular and persistent infractions of laws or regulations?

My conclusion is that there is enough evidence to show that the agencies of the Federal Government now have and are presently equipped to get vast amounts of information which, if made available in proper form, would be of untold value to consumers and to the Nation. Proper form will, of course, depend on the subject and the kind and amount of information available. My experience in advising consumers tells me that the more specific the information the more useful it can be.

The best information describes the characteristics that the consumer needs to know for the brands and models he encounters in the marketplace, in simple enough form to make his choice easy and intelligent. And there are a number of products about which we already know the Government has enough information to do just this.

Another form involves less specific, more general information about types or categories of products. For example, gas versus electrical appliances, AM versus FM radio, alkyd oil paint versus water-soluble paints for interior and exterior use. Much of the consumer information now disseminated by the Federal Government is of this kind. But there is much more buried in the files of various agencies who don't think in terms of making it available to consumers or who don't recognize it as useful to consumers. There is also the care, maintenance, safety-in-use kind of information, sometimes disseminated to consumers by Federal agencies, but often not.

Because the information is at hand in a public document, it is possible, and I think useful, to examine in somewhat more detail what could be done in the case of one important consumer product to help the consumer by giving him information now obtained regularly by one Government agency. I refer to hearing aids and to the Senate report on the prices of hearing aids previously mentioned.

Dr. Causey, a consultant to the Veterans' Administration, described the VA testing program:

The Veterans' Administration issues more than 5,000 hearing aids every year. In the existing program, the Veterans' Administration submits to the National Bureau of Standards all makes and models of hearing aids obtained for testing purposes. The National Bureau of Standards tests each instrument for a number of electroacoustic factors and transmits the results to the Veterans' Administration. Upon receipt, these data are subjected to statistical and comparative analysis. In the hearing-aid test program, no attempt has been made to set up specifications. Actual performance is emphasized in order that we may take advantage of the hearing-aid industry's continuing research and development activities toward providing better hearing for those individuals having hearing deficiencies. Only clinically acceptable hearing aids will be considered for these tests. Clinically unacceptable hearing aids will be based on poor physical characteristics as related to use in a clinic situation or poor physical characteristics of an instrument as related to its use by the wearer.

The raw scores obtained in each test item are treated and assigned weighing factors determined by a group of nationally recognized audiologists and physicists serving the Veterans' Administration on a consultant basis.