



**SERVICE STANDARDS FOR
CONSUMERS WORKSHOP**

2008

BSI Service Standards for Consumers Workshop 2008

‘Setting Standards for Effective Consultation and Stakeholder Involvement’

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There is little doubt of the importance of getting consulting right with an article in the Times casting doubt on the need for a standard on tree safety – the accusation being that such a standard was another manifestation of the nanny state imposing yet more burdens on householders.

All present at the workshop brought an experience of consultation. One definition is the phrase 'Nothing about us without us' or the longer one from the Consultation Institute;-

Consultation is the dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, and normally with the objective of influencing decisions, policies or programmes of action.

Peter Hatto then talked about the live issues associated with nanotechnology and the best ways of consulting about this new and disruptive technology. [A full copy of his presentation is available].

The fiasco that haunted those who sought to introduce new technologies was that of GM foods, which engendered a great deal of public hostility and fear and had hindered development of the product. (Peter reminded us that the trajectory of a technology was

not fixed.) The presentation set out the issues of concern around the topic and asked amongst other things whether this sort of technology needed a different approach to consultation. Certainly, the issues were important:

- many and huge potential benefits;
- some significant potential problems;
- some significant ethical and legal questions;
- acceptability, even lauding, of scientific ignorance amongst society at large;
- poor appreciation of hazard and risk and risk “aversion”;
- the whole of society would be affected by this “disruptive” technology and not just a limited number of “stakeholders”;
- need for “informed consent”.

There had been a wide variety of approaches used such as:

- Citizen Jury - Greenpeace, the Guardian and the University of Cambridge, Which?
- Nano Cafes - the University of Wisconsin
- A web dialogue on nanotechnology - Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
- "Consumer Conference on the perception of nanotechnology in the areas of foods, cosmetics and textiles" - The Federal Institute of Risk Assessment in Germany
- Nanologue - dialogue between experts, members of industry and civil society in order to support dialogue on the social, ethical and legal implications of nanoscience and nanotechnologies (EU project);
“Small Talk” project website - provides a vast array of resources, data, and advice, to help science communicators plan and deliver *“successful”* dialogue events (UK project).
- In addition there was a BSI initiative with a committee NT/1 established and a number of PASs, including terminology and labelling, and PDs on safe handling and (nano)materials specification developed. A guide was planned “Guide to good practice in societal engagement on emerging technologies”.

The discussion that followed sought to extract effective principles whatever the topic of consultation.

The important question was one of intent on the part of the consulting body – was there a commitment to entertain all solutions or was the consultation a sham because the important decisions had already been made – which made consultations not so much an example of 'evidence-based policy making' but 'policy-based evidence making'. There was an important difference between processes of public engagement that sought to win acceptance for a course of action and one that left all options open with no pre-determined outcome. Was there a middle way perhaps – we heard about examples where a consulter, e.g., a Minister in a government department, could establish that some issues were not for discussion while others were.

Other questions arose about the basis for understanding and a meeting of minds between consulter and consultee, with the latter being driven more by emotions such as anger and fear rather than objective facts and figures. The consulter had to acknowledge this before the discussion could move on to matters of fact and reasoned argument.

Questions of balance were also important when the consumer interest was involved. The imbalance of resource must be acknowledged in the way consultations are set up to manage the situation whereby the limited resources of, for example, small consumer organisations in developing countries could not hope to match those of institutions and large corporations. Those representations either went unmade and unheard or were overlooked or ignored. There were also questions of legitimacy and authenticity when it came to choosing consumer representatives. The motives of those who participated in the process would not be disinterested. They might be seeking to promote their own interests or those of their market sector or activity, or simply deciding that, if organisation X were there, they must be there as well.

Competence was a key issue as well as intent. Badly run consultations were all too common and it was no defence to claim that the organisers meant well. However, it was accepted that different topics and different purposes demanded different consultative processes. The BSI process had grown out of the history of participation by engineers in developing standards for their work and remained a process for the most part focussed on a particular standard moving through a controlled process. New

challenges in the area of social and citizen engagement would entail different, more open and indeed more untidy and difficult to manage processes. New technology would play a part and experiments in the way opinions were solicited were already underway at BSI.

We were reminded of the second half of the workshop title – stakeholder involvement – which was much wider than the consumer interest.

Dialogue with these different communities should be continuous and it was necessary to acknowledge contribution and report back on what had happened. All too often, those who had contributed at some cost to themselves heard nothing. This was a contributing factor to consultative fatigue.

No detailed discussion about how best to reflect this in a standard took place, but the group held the view that, while the topic was a difficult one with a variety of perspectives and purposes to be assimilated, that was no reason why a standard should not be discussed and developed.

Some COPOLCO papers on the topic were circulated at the end of the meeting, as was one of the first articles on citizen engagement: "A Ladder of Citizen Participation - Sherry R Arnstein. Originally published as Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," JAIP, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224. No copyrights claimed."

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14 July 2008