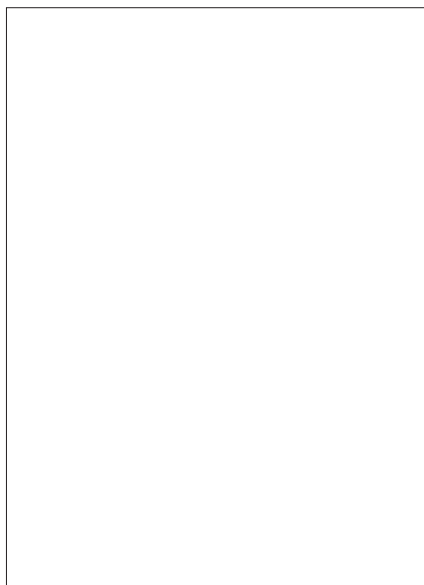


Safer products — everyone wants them, so why don't we have them?



▲ Mr Robert Hershman, Managing Director, Pacific Brands, speaking at the product safety forum.

Design defects and product malfunctions cause an estimated 650 000 injuries in Australia each year. Product recalls average one a day.

In November 1998 the ACCC organised a forum to discuss ways to improve these disturbing figures. The day achieved the ACCC's purpose of bringing together the different sectors. Participants included leading figures in manufacturing, importing, and retail as well as government, consumer and community groups and the private and legal sectors.

Identified were the key strengths and weaknesses in Australia's system, as were the current impediments to, and opportunities for, change. All participants voiced their commitment to promoting product safety issues. The ACCC expects this forum to be the start of an ongoing process of collaboration and development to provide safer products.

The speakers

Speakers at the forum included Allan Asher, ACCC Deputy Chairman, who said that although Australia has a good legislative base that includes product liability provisions, mandatory standards, and systems for the removal of unsafe goods from the marketplace, he feels there is a complacency unsupported by facts. He believes a culture of ignorance exists, especially within small and medium sized enterprises, that needs to be overcome.

Dr Ellen Beerworth of Ellen Beerworth and Associates, drew on her legal experience with businesses that supply consumer goods, citing ignorance and lack of management commitment as two leading impediments.

She said government hasn't seen the issue as a priority and that, compared with occupational health and safety and the environment, there is limited incentive for company directors and officers to take positive steps.

Robert Hershman, MD of Pacific Brands, said that product safety is a significant issue for manufacturers and importers. He believes the moral, business and financial responsibilities should be the reasons for ensuring the safety of goods, irrespective of legislative requirements.

Injury prevention and research consultant Jerry Moller's concern was that too many companies manage the issue of safety post, not pre, event.

He said companies focus on the aesthetics and durability at the design stage; safety should also be a component so that hazards can be designed out.

Weaknesses of the present system include Australia not having the product safety resources of larger nations, although it carries a similar number of product lines; much of the production being done off-shore, leading to reduced availability of local expertise; and the fact that there is no central product safety organisation.

Strengths include Australia, as a well-educated nation with a sound system of government, having the capacity to give proper consideration to product safety; the increasing collaboration within the private sector and potential for greater cooperation with government; and the increasing availability of injury data which has begun to be used in risk management and design.

Impediments to change within the private sector include a general lack of business will, with good product safety and overall risk management perceived as costs; limited sources of advice and guidance; and small business being preoccupied with business issues.

Generally, impediments include no national research agency and no general safety directive prohibiting the sale of unsafe goods.

Opportunities for change include a greater use of risk management; a closure nexus between shareholder value and product performance; communication strategies, including the Internet; learning from occupational and environment safety management strategies; and putting product safety on the same side of the balance sheet as marketing.

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