

Comparative Testings of Products as a Source of Reliable Information for Consumers

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Summary:

The article examines the role of independent comparative testings of products to create reliable consumer information in theoretical and empirical terms. The aim of the paper is to make a chronological analysis of the existing research studies in this area, and to present the results of quantitative research in a selected group of Bulgarian consumers. For the purposes of the survey the method of the focus groups is used and interviews with 69 young consumers - university students were conducted. The opinions of the participants about generating and providing information to consumers on comparative testings of products in Bulgaria are analyzed and summarized. On the basis of the expressed opinions (content analysis) conclusions about the role of consumers' organizations, the products groups which should be subjected to comparative testings and how to present such information in Bulgaria are made.

Key words: independent comparative testings of products, consumer protection, reliable consumer information, Bulgaria.

JEL classification: L1, L15, Z1, Z18

1. Introduction

Comparative testing of goods and services is a scientific approach used to provide impartial information about the characteristics of products and to create conditions for making informed consumer choices. The product can be tested against a number of pre-defined indicators (criteria) for quality and compliance with environmental protection or safety requirements. Typical indicators for testing of products are functionality, convenience and comfort, durability, safety, etc. Their choice is influenced by the conditions in the social environment, the country, the region (the existing legislation, traditions, etc.) or by the specifics of the researched market (Ayeni, 2001, p. 49–50; Kleinschmidt, 2010; Mallard, 2000; Rischkowsky and Döring, 2008; Round and Tustin, 2005).

Comparative testing of products is one of the most important activities of consumers' organizations around the world. The results are widely disseminated and accepted

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by both consumers and the supply side of the products (producers, distributors, retailers, etc.). They play an important role for the consumer to make informed choices regarding their purchases and their use.

Testing of products can be done by: *consumers' organizations; independent bodies for testing; government agencies.*

Comparative testing is an essential piece of information for consumers and a key moment in the protection of their rights, creating a strong link between consumers, governments and producers. They can be useful for consumers as they provide information that may lead to financial savings when looking for products on the market (Mallard, 2000; Rischkowsky and Döring, 2008; Round and Tustin, 2005).

These testings have two main characteristics:

- *Comparative testing:* Testing by producers aimed at evaluating their own product by not taking into account the analogues of the same kind purporting to offer similar or better features. In this regard, comparative testing provides the consumer with much more holistic (complete) and meaningful information;
- *Independence of testing:* The independence of testing of products means that the testing body has no personal interest in the product or services inspected. Independent bodies bear public responsibility, make legitimate the product claims and offer opportunities for greater transparency during the testing process. Testing during the production process is not considered independent because it often improves the competitiveness of the product on the market and is made in the interest of producers. The testing done by producers is aimed to achieve superiority of the

product which increases the market share of the brand through marketing activities (advertising, promotions, sales, etc.).

In order to harmonize the conditions for comparative testings the *International Organization for Standardization* and the *International Electrotechnical Commission* issued a special ISO / IEC Guide 46: 1985, which presents the basic principles of comparative testings of products and services (ISO/IEC Guide 46,1985). The recommendations of the Guide can be applied by consumers' organizations, independent testing bodies and government agencies that conduct comparative testings of products.

Vasileva et al. (2012) explore the possibilities of establishing a System of independent comparative testings of products in Bulgaria with the participation of stakeholders interested in the provision of consumer information. Some conclusions are made about the purpose, scope and the prerequisites for establishing a system for independent comparative testings of products, as well as about the opportunities for European and international cooperation in this field (Vasileva et al., 2012; Vasileva et al. 2013).

This article examines the role of independent comparative testings of products in creating reliable consumer information in theoretical and empirical terms. The aim of the paper is to make a chronological analysis of the existing research studies in this area, and to present the results of quantitative research in a selected group of Bulgarian consumers.

2. The role of comparative testings in providing reliable information for consumers

There are a limited number of scientific publications related to the role of independent comparative testings of

product quality in providing information and their impact on consumers, producers and the market. These studies are clearly separated in time and place - in the 80-90-ies of the 20th century in the countries with developed application of these testings on the European continent (Germany, the Netherlands, etc.) and in the beginning of the new century in countries with transitional economies (Slovenia, Lithuania, etc.). In recent years, the interest of researchers in this subject has increased again as a result of the globalisation of markets, increase in product diversity and the greater opportunities for on-line provision of information from comparative testings.

Presenting the results of independent testings is an important element of the process of providing information to consumers. The evaluation of its impact is directly linked to the evolution of the testing institutions. Silberer (1979) published a scientific analysis of the *efficiency of the results of comparative testings* (Silberer, 1979). For this purpose, initially a series of criteria for the identification and assessment of the main problems connected with the empirical analysis of the efficiency of the comparative testings was developed. Taking into account the current and potential objectives of the institutions organizing comparative testings, the author offers the following criteria:

- knowledge of the products by the consumer, prices and services;
- improvement of consumer purchase decision in terms of their needs and limitation of the use of resources as well as environmental protection;
- improvement and stabilization of the regulatory mechanisms, in particular the influence of consumers on the marketing system.

Direct and indirect impact of the testing results on the market of products (on traders and producers) and on the consumer interest leads to a real impact on the marketing system as a whole. The study presented two groups of performance indicators of the impact of the comparative testings results:

- **Performance indicators in relation to the consumer:** (1) perception of needs, (2) perception of the respective products (quality, price, etc.); (3) simplification of the purchase decision, (4) expression of needs; (5) results in the context of negotiation of prices and services; (6) quality and satisfaction with products and services; (7) subsequent decisions and expression of dissatisfaction and complaints; (8) external effects of consumption, limitation of the use of resources and environmental protection;
- **Performance indicators in relation to the impact on the market:** (1) products; (2) prices; (3) distribution channels; (4) communication and information. Moreover, the structural variables such as the impact of competition and awareness are considered.

The study takes into account the following limitation in such analyzes of performance: in today's complex social systems the cause and effect relations could hardly be traced, which is related to the control of these experimental situations. However, the developed indicators represent a scientific foundation for creating future policies for provision of consumer information and in other areas of consumer policy.

2.1. Impact of information from comparative testings of products on consumers

Despite the important role of comparative testings of product quality for decision-

making by the consumer, there is little research aimed at establishing the factors that may affect the perception of consumers to such information.

The study of Sepstrup (1978) considers the impact of information derived from the comparative testings of products on consumers. The interviews conducted with the buyers aim to reveal: the characteristics of consumers, the planning period of a purchase, the way they use information, the effects of information from comparative testings (Sepstrup, 1978). On this basis, the author discusses the implications of this on consumer protection policy. He discusses the role of *independent comparative testings* of products and the requirements of *the regulations (rules) for production and sale* in terms of consumer protection. The author proposes some of the quality indicators used in conducting comparative testings to be included as mandatory requirements for the production and presentation of this type of products.

The study of Box (1981) was conducted in the early 1990s in the Netherlands, where comparative testings of products and services had a growing popularity and development compared to other Western European countries (Box, 1981). It analyzes the actions of the government, the suppliers and consumers on the market and the role of information in consumer choice.

The conducted empirical study deals with the impact of comparative testings in light of the theoretical model of consumers and information during purchase. It involved a total of 900 people divided into two groups: a group formed by randomly selected members of the Dutch consumer organization "Consumentenbond" and a control group of participants, not members

of the organization. The behaviour of participants in both groups when buying some (durable) products is analyzed and the results of comparative testings were published in the "Consumentenbond" consumer magazine of the organization immediately prior to the survey. The study examines a number of factors responsible for the process of purchase such as: *situational factors - the circumstances of the purchase; cognitive factors - knowledge of the product; informational and behavioural factors; choice when buying; satisfaction.*

According to the author, the study participants as members of consumers' organizations have similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics and shape the so-called "*informational and media elite*", known as "*consumers seeking information*". They typically have higher than secondary education and higher income than the rest of the population and often occupy leading positions in their workplace. These are *rational consumers* who know what they want, can contemplate their purchase and look for useful information on the products.

Regarding the cognitive factors, there were no major differences between the members of the two surveyed groups and they all try to *reduce the risk in purchasing products* (by adherence to specific brands, shopping in "better" stores, etc.). For consumers who use the results of the comparative testings, this information constitutes an additional means of reducing the risk during purchase.

The published comparative testings in the journal are the most common source of product information among the members of consumers' organizations. However, other sources are mentioned such as advertising,

advice from friends and direct information from traders represented at an appropriate level. The use of this information depends on the type of purchase. The members use the test results when it comes to expensive purchases, leisure products, especially when they are interested in a *summary assessment of the quality of the products*. In the group of consumers who are not members of organizations, the most important is the commercial information such as product ads.

In studying the impact of the brand on the choice, depending on the total number of factors, and the results of comparative testings, the following results have been obtained: half of those who are familiar with comparative information buy "branded" products, and one-fifth of them buy the brand recommended in the consumer magazine; even those consumers who are not familiar with comparative testings, choose with high-frequency precisely these brands and models that consumer organization recommended. The author explains this with the fact that consumers buy a well-known brand, because they believe it is a guarantee of quality. On the other hand, comparative testings usually include famous brands of the tested products, leading to a greater likelihood of purchasing the brand recommended by the consumer magazine. The study shows another interesting trend – the products with a lower rating from comparative testings have greater impact on consumers familiar with comparative information than higher ranking products.

In a sense, the results related to *customer satisfaction* are unexpected. Members of consumers' organizations who have chosen to buy a registered trademark

were less satisfied with their purchases compared to the participants in the control group who have chosen the same product. Such "mismatch", at first glance, is probably due to the higher critical perception of those familiar with the test results. Higher expectations about the product are created in consumers with this information, so after buying it satisfaction in them is lower than in those who are not familiar with comparative testing results.

The author concludes that the impact of comparative testings is significant, but the brand is the key priority during purchase, compared to comparative testings. The study shows that comparative testings are an important source of information about the product, which leads to more rational purchases. At the same time, the use of commercial information by the consumers is reduced. The data verifies the hypothesis that comparative testings, conducted by consumers' organizations, contribute to improving the quality of products.

Empirical results on the use and impact of information for a product tested by consumers are presented within a research project aimed at testing the consumer goods in the Federal Republic of Germany carried also in the 1990s of the last century (Silberer, 1985).

The analysis is based on the assumption that the testing of products has a wide range of impacts on consumers. It is emphasized that the main task of comparative testings, published in *Stiftung Warentest* (a publication of the German consumers' organization) is *the provision of information to consumers*. To this effect consumers should be ensured access to information and as a result there is a *market transparency* and *mobility of demand*. This means that consumers

using comparative testings must be well aware of the market to be able to make the right decisions when buying (purchasing a product that best meets their needs while allowing optimum spending of money and time).

It should be noted that the results were obtained by self-evaluation of consumers. This involves two consumer groups: the group of those who *have been guided in the purchase by the results of comparative testings* and a second group of consumers who *have not used* such information (this was used as a control group).

The study found that the respondents have a positive attitude to the results of comparative testings, especially those consumers who want to know more about the product before they buy it. The most common source of product information is friends, relatives, colleagues, followed by the "Stiftung Warentest" magazine. The ads, suppliers and information on packaging are referred to as the third credible source of information and in the final place come media outlets (newspapers, radio, and television). These data indicate that the consumers' organization fulfils its basic mission - to inform consumers.

The results of the survey are presented separately for the different types of products: *products for continuous use* (e.g. electronic, household appliances, etc.) and products for *short-term use* (such as detergents, cosmetics, food, etc.). They show that consumers use the results of comparative testings in 30% of the purchases of durable goods. For everyday purchases this percentage is lower - 10%. The participants usually use the results in making large purchases or purchases of durable goods such as household appliances. This trend

is determined by the higher prices of these products and the higher risk in these purchases. Furthermore, the respondents who say they use the information from comparative testings have a high socio-economic status.

The study identifies the following results in terms of what quality indicators of the product should be tested in the comparative testings: the majority of respondents are interested in the *overall assessment of the quality of the product*; *price* is placed as a second consideration and is followed by the *individual characteristics/advantages of the product*. The results also support the assumption that consumers need to reduce the costs of searching information, which means that information should be accessed with minimal effort. Such a strategy brings several advantages, such as saving time and energy, and also reducing the risk in purchasing.

There is a contradiction between the importance of quality indicators (characteristics) for specific products, which the testing organization sets in the comparative testings, and the consumer attitudes to this issue. Consumers do not regard as significant some indicators of the product for the quality, as they are defined by the experts from the consumers' organization. Consumers and consumer organizations attach different relative weight when determining the relative share of an indicator in the product's overall assessment. *For this reason, this paper holds the view that in comparative testings the quality of products must be presented as objectively as possible, rather than the choice be left to the consumer.*

According to the study, the published comparative results affect purchase

decisions: almost all respondents said that the use of data from comparative testings can affect purchase decisions. Consumers who are not familiar with the test results *remain loyal to the brand*, which suggests that in making purchase decisions they rely on their past experience. It is noted that those who use the results of comparative testings correct their purchase decision, depending on the test results. Silberer (1985) concludes that the more consumers are interested in the test results, the greater the degree of market transparency and the fluctuations in demand: consumers are not so strongly associated with certain brands, they are aware of the alternatives offered and tend more often to choose products based on objective quality indicators (Silberer, 1985).

This research, based on the self-evaluation of participants, does not establish any significant differences in *satisfaction from the product* between consumer using the tests and those who do not use such tests. Here the assumption that consumers familiar with the comparative testings are more satisfied with the purchased product is not confirmed either, which is accounted for by the higher expectations and the greater critical perception of informed consumers.

De Maeyer and Estelami (2011) examine the role of the content of information, provided by organizations assessing the product quality, in consumer perceptions of mobile phones and the rendered services (De Maeyer and Estelami, 2011). It also analyzes the influence of the environment variables (e.g. information about the costs, product category and advertising content). The results show that both *the content and the context of presentation of information from comparative testings* influence significantly

consumer perceptions about the credibility of the source and their intentions to use these data about the quality of the products in the purchase decision.

In recent years there also has been an increase research interest in comparative testings of products in the former socialist countries that are undergoing the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy. The choice of the "new user" in these transition economies is determined by his/her *personality* related to the needs, perceptions of the characteristics of brands, the attitude towards alternatives, as well as to his/her demographic characteristics and lifestyle.

According to the survey of Ruževičius and Adomaitis (2005) in Lithuania, the impact of information about comparative testings of products should be considered in the light of the behaviour of the "new consumer" (Ruževičius and Adomaitis, 2005). The author stresses that two groups can be identified among the modern consumers in the country: *those who are interested in certain products*, and those who at some point *are not interested in certain products or services*. Information about the quality of products is aimed to be provided to the group of "interested" consumers or those who intend to purchase a particular product. These consumers would like to hear objective arguments in choosing one or another product. What is more, they require *independent information*, such as that offered by comparative testings of products. However, advertising campaigns targeted at consumers who are interested in certain products does not include specific quality indicators and often rely on "emotional tactics that tend to grow disproportionately". It is noted that in Lithuania the lack of

systematic information from independent comparative testings increases the impact of the information offered mainly by producers, distributors and marketing groups that shape customer opinion and brand loyalty (Ruževičius and Adomaitis, 2005).

The survey conducted in 2008 in Slovenia, is directed at revealing the role of comparative testings in the purchase decision among consumers (Varagić, 2009). It was conducted by the Association of Consumers in Slovenia and covers a relatively limited number of participants - subscribers of the "VIP" consumer magazine for education and information.

A look at the demographic characteristics of the study participants shows that these are people with a relatively high socio-economic status, who live mainly in the capital and the other major city in Slovenia - Maribor. The study outlines the profile of informed consumers who are aware of their consumer rights. The results of the demographic data for Slovenian consumers of comparative testings (at an average level of education and income) are consistent with the conclusions of the studies described above (Box, 1981; Silberer, 1985).

The analysis shows that most respondents are interested in comparative testings of *food products*, followed by *household appliances* and *electronic devices*. The lowest interest is registered in *testing equipment/ goods for children*. The author commented that it depends on the age and interests of the participants included in the study. Products, such as expensive house appliances do not probably interest all respondents, while food and household needs are important for everyone, regardless of age.

Slovenian consumers search information about comparative testings mainly on the

website of the Association of Consumers and through the only consumer magazine in the country, which publishes independent tests (the "VIP" magazine). A very small proportion indicates that they receive information from the websites of foreign consumers' organizations.

The study revealed the factors with the greatest influence on the respondents' purchase decisions about products: in the first place comes past experience, followed by the technical characteristics of the product, and in third place were the results of comparative testings. Advertising and the advice of the seller have the least impact on the purchase decision. The respondents, who explicitly state that they do not follow comparative testings, placed comparative testings as a factor influencing purchase merely on the fifth place.

It could be said that here again the results of the research conducted in the 1990s in the western industrially developed countries are confirmed: consumers who do not follow the information from comparative testings are influenced more by marketing information from producers and traders compared to the members of consumers' organizations.

3. Comparative testing of products to create reliable consumer information in Bulgaria: qualitative study among a select group of consumers

In Bulgaria there are no consumer surveys on the impact of information obtained from independent comparative testings of product quality. In this article the results of a qualitative survey among a selected group of consumers by the method of focus groups is presented.

Method of study

The focus group study was held in March 2012 in the city of Sofia.

Description of participants. The participants in the focus groups were students at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia. A total of 69 people (31.88% men and 68.12% women) participated. Of these, 68.12% have secondary education, 2.90 percent - have college degree and 15.94% have university degree. These are young people under the age of 25 (92.75%) and only 7.25% are aged between 25-35 years. Married are only 2.90% of the participants in the groups and 1.45% of them have children. The average monthly salary of 17.39% of them is up to 300 leva, 15.94% receive between 301-500 leva, 14.50% - between 501-700 leva, 8.70 % - between 701-900 leva and 10.10% - over 900 leva.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire needed to conduct the survey was developed in two phases. During the first phase of preparation more than 20 questions concerning the topic of independent consumer information were discussed. They were reduced to five in the second phase of development of the questionnaire and intended to cover the most important aspects of the problem. During this phase of the development of the questionnaire the final version was adopted, which contains: *introductory questions*, describing the participants; *basic questions* about the problem; *final questions* connected with recommendations and proposals.

The obtained results were processed using content analysis and statistical analysis.

Results and discussion

The concept of "independent comparative testing of a product's quality":

The majority of the focus group participants associate the independent comparative testings with a tool ("means" or "way") for informing the consumers about the product quality. Most respondents correctly identify them as "comparing the results for products with similar characteristics tested according to certain quality indicators". Some of the respondents give the following definition "testing the same product from different brands for the same characteristics to select the best quality products". Some respondents stress that the testing criteria are determined by the organizers of comparative testings, while others also state that "each consumer pays attention to different quality parameters depending on their searches".

Some of the participants (merely 7.24%) say they have already used information from comparative testings: one participant has become familiar with the comparative testings of washing machines in the *Stiftung Warentest* journal of the German consumer organization and has been informed about the characteristics of car tyres by another specialized magazine; another participant claimed that in the purchase of a laptop he had used comparative information from a specialized website; a third one chose their camera, thanks to the information in an American website, where "the pros and cons of different brands are shown through videos and the site allows you to post comments and the negative opinions are not deleted". However, they believe that all the information cannot be used by Bulgarian consumers because "the brands available on our market are not included in these comparative testings".

The analysis of responses shows that more than half of the participants *do not realize the element of independence*

during the testing. They cannot say whether the information they used is independent – they do not pay attention to whether there are ads or that the magazine is published by the producer or distributor of the products (e.g. mobile phones, cars, computers, etc.).

The role of consumers' organizations in providing information on the quality of products in Bulgaria: Participants in the focus groups say they do not know well the activities of consumers' organizations in the country. At the same time they believe that consumers' organizations can carry out such testings in Bulgaria, but also would accept the results of testings of the controlling bodies in the country or other associations. Some respondents pay attention to the fact that consumers' organizations in our country lack the necessary resources and own laboratories to carry out such large-scale testings. Their argument is that this activity "requires a lot of money", saying it is "better to cooperate with the government institutions and to use *accredited* laboratories to this effect".

The participants accept the idea of a national system of comparative testings and confirm that such testings are possible in Bulgaria.

Product groups for which the participants wish to receive information about their quality from comparative testings: A number of issues related to the product groups which can be subject to comparative testings in our country were considered during the discussions. The opinion was expressed that "such testings can be done for almost all products, as long as we have money for that", for "mass products", for "products which can serve us

a long time [durable]", for "products with a wide variety of models and brands" or for those "whose characteristics we cannot test such as organic foods".

The concern "for the safety of the foods we eat every day" and "their impact on our health" was noted by the participants as the reason to indicate the main food products (bread, milk, dairy and meat products, and other items). The respondents suggest that a number of non-food products should be subject to comparative testings, noting that they are goods with "complex structure and numerous features, unknown to the consumer", "where there is a greater risk (hazard) to the consumer".

Ways of presenting information from comparative testing about product quality: The prevailing opinion which emerged during the discussion was that the Internet (a special website, a site of a consumers' organization, and other websites.) is the most suitable environment for presenting information from comparative testings about the product quality. The idea of publishing the same information in a magazine of a consumers' organization had fewer supporters. They said they "do not know where to find it and how much it costs" and that they "are not familiar with the opportunities for membership and subscription". Other ways of providing this information offered by the respondents are: flyers of the organizations conducting comparative testings; specialized programs on consumer protection in the media; social networks ("social groups" and "exchange of information between friendly circles) and others.

Three models of presenting information, known from the practices of consumer

associations in European countries, were briefly presented to the participants in the focus groups:

- *English model* - the best product and the worst product in terms of quality / price are distinguished;
- *German model* – ranking of the tested products according to score points obtained from a comprehensive quality assessment;
- *Scandinavian model* - only available data from testings in comparative terms without ranking is presented.

After an open vote (table 1), they gave preference to the German model in presenting information on food products (60.9% voted FOR) and non-food products (55.1% voted FOR), and in second place with 15.9% of those who voted FOR in food products and 17.4% for non-food products, they put the Scandinavian model. No opinion was expressed by 18.84 % of the votes in food products and 13.0% in non-food products, which shows a lack of knowledge about this type of testings.

The future of independent comparative testings of products quality in Bulgaria:

The results of the focus groups show that consumers want purposeful and clear policy on consumer protection and believe that the government should play the leading role in this respect. At the same time they say that they do not have much information about consumers' organizations in the country, and they do not know where to get access to such information, including data about the comparative testings of products (e.g. they ask questions such as "where are such tests disseminated?" "where is this magazine circulated and is it free?").

Conversations with the participants show that independent comparative testings of products have a future in our country, provided this information becomes available to consumers. They expect from comparative testings "impartial information about the brands in Bulgaria" despite having access to other European consumer magazines. They suggest the use of special dictionaries to assist the terms used in comparative testings.

There were also highly pessimistic responses expressed by 4.3% of the participants.

Table 1. Ways of presenting information from comparative testing according to focus group participants

| <i>Presentation of information from comparative testing, according to:</i> | <i>Number of responses</i> | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | <i>Food products</i> | <i>Non-food products</i> |
| <i>English model</i> | 3 | 10 |
| <i>German model</i> | 42 | 38 |
| <i>Scandinavian model</i> | 11 | 12 |
| <i>No opinion</i> | 13 | 9 |
| <i>Total</i> | 69 | 69 |

Conclusion

There are relatively few studies on the role of comparative testings of products quality in the provision of independent information and their impact on consumers, producers and the market.

Comparative testings and consumers

Research studies in Western European countries in the 1990s stressed that comparative testings are an important source of information about the product, which leads to more rational purchases. This independent information constitutes an additional means of *reducing risk when buying mainly durable goods*, and of reducing the costs of searching of information. It was found that the impact of comparative testings on consumers "seeking information" reduces the use of commercial information upon purchase. The hypothesis that comparative testing, conducted by consumers' organizations contribute to improving the quality of products is confirmed.

The few studies in the early 21st century on the impact of information from comparative testings on the "new consumers" from the countries with economies in transition from the former Soviet bloc confirmed the described findings. At the same time, the lack of systematic information from independent comparative testings leads to strengthening the impact of the information offered mainly by producers, distributors and marketing groups that create customer surveys and brand loyalty. However, one can say that the results of comparative testings have expressed influence on the purchase decisions of consumers.

Comparative testing and Bulgarian consumers

The majority of focus group participants understand the correct meaning of the **concept of "independent comparative testings of product quality"** as a means of informing consumers. They assess in their responses the comparative approach in these testings, as well as the wide range of indicators of quality and characteristics of the products. More than half of the participants *do not realize the elements of independence* in the conducted testings. This is related to their minimal experience as consumers of such information - only 5 of the participants examined the results of comparative testings.

Focus groups respondents stated that they **do not know well the activities of consumers' organizations in the country**, but believe that consumers' organizations can carry out such testings in Bulgaria. They accept the idea of building a national system for comparative testings in which state authorities should participate.

The discussions for **groups of products that can be subjected to comparative testings in our country** show that respondents single out the expensive and durable technical products with complex structure in which there is a certain risk for consumers, as well as the "products of trust" (such as organic foods for example.). They also definitely suggest the basic foodstuffs (bread, milk, dairy and meat foods), due to their concerns about the health hazards of Bulgarian consumers.

The most suitable environment for **presenting the information**

about comparative testings of product quality, in the opinion of the participants, is mainly the Internet (a special site on the Internet, a site of the consumers' organization, etc.). The idea to publish the same information in a magazine of a consumers' organization has fewer supporters. Other ideas can also be found, such as social networks, advertising brochures of organizations carrying out comparative testings; specialized programs on issues of consumer protection in the media and more. After the voting on the model of presenting this information, most votes are collected for the so-called "German model" for ranking the tested products according to the score points obtained from the overall quality assessment.

These results are fully consistent with the results of the 2009 Eurobarometer 275 survey about the opinion of Bulgarian citizens with regard to their support for an independent consumer organization (European Commission, 2009). The results of the focus groups show that consumers want purposeful and clear policy on consumer protection and choose the state to play the leading role. At the same time they say they do not have much information about the activities of consumers' organizations in the country. They believe that **independent comparative testings of products have a future in our country**, provided this information becomes more accessible to consumers and proposed a number of ideas for this. A limited number of pessimistic opinions related to the level of development of consumer culture in our country have been expressed.

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