

What are my consumer rights?

 By [Howard Badler](#)

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Consumers have rights and as an employee or customer, it is your responsibility to ensure that these rights are adhered to at all times. But what exactly is Consumer Rights?

Consumer rights can be defined as being in agreement with what is just, good or proper when dealing with consumers as well as ensuring that the consumer is protected from harm or wrong doing when dealing with a provider of a service or a distributor of a product.

The South African National Consumer Union (SANCU) has documented eight key rights and they are as follows:

1. **The right to be heard** - The retailer, supplier or anyone else involved must listen to the consumer when they complain. The complaint should be addressed with the person at the top or a manager of a particular store.
2. **The right to safety** - Consumers must be protected against flaws or hidden dangers in products or services that they buy. They also have the right to physical safety while they are buying.
3. **The right to redress** - When you are sold an inferior product or service, you have the right to go back to the seller and demand a replacement or a refund. In some instances this right is protected by law and consumers can take their cases to the courts to exercise their right to redress.
4. **The right to a healthy environment** - Consumers have the right to a physical environment that will enhance the quality of life.
5. **The right to be informed** - Consumers have the right to be given all the information they require about a product or service. For example they have the right to request a list of ingredients that go into making a particular product that is being sold, detailed information of a contract that they might sign, etc.
6. **The right to choose** - Consumers must insist on a variety of products and goods to choose from based on personal taste, quality or price. Competition in the market place allows you to buy what suits your particular circumstances.
7. **The right to consumer education** - Consumers have the right to demand education in consumer affairs. Both the state and private sector have a role to play in this.
8. **The right to satisfaction of basic needs** - Consumers have the right to basic goods and services which guarantee survival. This includes adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and sanitation.

Principles of Consumer Rights

- Protects the consumer
- Service ethics
- Products / services are fit for use
- Rights violations

Protects the consumer

South Africa has eight key consumer rights that have been developed based on the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection 1985. These eight key rights will be discussed in greater detail under the section titled consumer rights in South Africa. These rights were developed and implemented in order to ensure that consumers around the world are treated fairly when dealing with a provider of a product or service.

Service ethics

Most companies around the world today have based their current customer care practices around consumer rights. For

example establishing customer satisfaction surveys and customer relationship managers to deal with failures in service, ensuring that their products or services are quality assured, ensuring that customer can shop within a safe environment and also educating their customers about the products or services that they purchase. These are just a few of the key services that companies have developed in order to make the experience of the customer with the company, an enjoyable one. If there is a failure in anyone of the abovementioned services, then there is a failure in service ethics.

Products/Services are fit for use

As mentioned in point's number two and three in the section related to consumer rights in South Africa, the consumer has the right to purchase a product that is fit for use and if there are any defects, they can return it to the supplier. All products that are manufactured should have a quality assurance sign off on every product to ensure that it is in working order prior to leaving the manufacturing facility. Service on offer should be quality checked by a quality management function by means of conducting satisfaction surveys, auditing data captured by employees, conducting call assessments, etc.

Rights violations

Any consumer rights that have been violated by a provider of a product or service should be brought to the attention of the relevant authority that governs that particular type of supplier. For example there are a number of medial and consumer journalists that are happy to act on behalf of the consumer, National government consumer affairs departments, provincial government affairs offices, and industry specific councils that govern each specific industry types, medical, dental Ombudsman, The South African National Consumer Union, etc. consumers must do the necessary research to find out who they should approach with respect to a consumer rights violation.

International Consumer Rights

There are 260 consumer organisations in over 100 countries around the world striving to promote a fairer society through defending the rights of all consumers, including the poor and the marginalised, by supporting and strengthening member organisations and the consumer movement in general; campaigning for consumer rights' to be placed at the heart of policy-making to encourage sustainable development. There are eight key international consumer rights as defined by the United Nations Guideline for Consumer Protection 1985. They can be simplified into the following:

- The right to access to basic needs
- To safety
- To information
- To choice
- To representation
- To consumer education
- To redress
- Healthy environment

As you can see from the above, the South African consumer rights have been developed and implemented based on international standards.

Consumer rights forum

Most companies have a direct contact through organisations such as the South African National Consumer Union for consumer related issues which can be used to report consumer rights related issues. There are various forums that can be used by the consumer to report consumer rights issues. For example as mentioned on the previous page, most business sectors have a representing Ombudsman who will investigate the matter further. There are government bodies at national and provincial levels that also investigate cases of consumer rights failures. There are also several media based consumer advice contacts available to the consumer. It is the responsibility of the consumer to find out what organizations govern what industries and record this information for future use.

What must you do as an employee of your company to ensure that these rights are adhered to?

- Ensure that all staff is trained to deal with customer care inquiries effectively.
- Listen to what your customer has to say and ensure that they are satisfied with the result of their query.
- Offer a money back guarantee on all products sold.
- Inform the client of warranties or guarantees and explain them to the client if need be.
- Ensure that your customers shop within a security managed environment.
- Just about every consumable product today already displays their ingredients. Any products that do not display ingredients must be addressed with the supplier.
- Provide copies of the consumer rights booklet which is obtainable from the SA National Consumer Union and display them in your store.
- If you are a member of the SA National Consumer Union, make your customers aware of this by means of putting up a notice that states this.
- Ensure that you have processes and procedures in place for dealing with returned goods and ensure that action is taken to source the reason why this occurred.
- Ensure that you have an elevated query management system in place.

ABOUT HOWARD BADLER

Howard Badler has trained and consulted to the Justice Department of the Northwest Province and a variety of companies in a number of industries. He can be contacted at {{howard@customercaretraining.co.za}}.

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