

# Advocacy For Consumer Protection

**Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act, Sale of Food Act, Copyright Act – What do these Acts have in common? The Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE) played a crucial role in advocating for these laws to protect consumers.**



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Scan here to access the Fair Trading & You booklet

## 01 • Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act

The Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act is the result of years of advocacy by CASE to promote a fair and equitable marketplace. In 1979, Mr Ivan Baptist, then-president of CASE, first urged the government to consider a fair trading legislation in Parliament. The result: the Act was finally passed in Parliament in 2003 and took effect in 2004. Since then, the Act has become the cornerstone of consumer protection legislation in Singapore.

## 02 • Sale of Food Act

The Sale of Food Act is the result of CASE's advocacy to protect consumers from misleading advertisements and labelling of food products. It requires sellers to provide adequate information by compulsory labelling. This ensures that food for sale is safe and suitable for consumption. In 1978, upon advocacy by CASE, the Act was amended to include mandating expiry date marking on certain perishable pre-packed foodstuffs.

## 03 • Copyright Act

The Copyright Act became law after CASE's campaigning. Following the passing of the Act, CASE organised a forum to share with consumers on the impact of the Act on them. CASE also published an informational booklet as a guide to the copyright system and distributed it to CASE members, libraries, community centres and educational institutions. In September 2021, changes to the Act allow creators of photographs, portraits, engravings, sound recordings and films to be the default first owners of the copyright, even if they are commissioned to make them.



Consumers at the Consumer Redress – Small Claims Tribunals Seminar

## BEGINNING OF CONSUMER ADVOCACY

In the early days, there was no standardised labelling for essential items such as rice and coffee. Items were also mislabelled. CASE then called for the enactment of consumer protection laws which proposed compulsory use of standard quality units and truthful labelling.

Other issues that plagued consumers included false descriptions appearing on products as well as those given in the course of enquiries, advertisements and oral statements. To protect consumers from false descriptions, CASE played a key role in the drafting of the Consumer Protection (Trade Descriptions and Safety Requirements) Act passed in 1975.

## LEGISLATION TO PROTECT CONSUMERS

To provide consumers with a quick, inexpensive and simple avenue to seek redress for small claims disputes, CASE actively lobbied for the establishment of the Small Claims Tribunals (SCT).

After the SCT Act was passed in 1985, CASE held a seminar Consumer Redress – Small Claims Tribunals. The seminar sought to inform and educate consumers, traders and participants on the availability, role, processes and powers of the SCT.

The initial monetary jurisdiction of the SCT covered claims not exceeding S\$2,000. It was increased to S\$5,000 in 1995, and S\$10,000 in 1997. Today, the SCT can hear claims up to S\$20,000 by default (or S\$30,000 if both parties are agreeable).



Seminar to educate businesses on the Lemon Law

## INTRODUCING A FAIR TRADING ACT FOR SINGAPORE

In the 90s, CASE formed a committee to look into the possibility of introducing a fair trading legislation in Singapore. The committee made study trips to Australia and New Zealand and compared the different models of consumer protection.

After an extensive study, we produced a report that laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the Consumer Protection (Fair Trading) Act (CPFTA). The CPFTA accords rights to consumers to seek civil redress against suppliers engaging in unfair practices.

A key pillar in protecting consumer's rights, the CPFTA has been a useful law in promoting a fair marketplace without errant practices. In recent years, notable players in the beauty industry have agreed to cease false claims about its products and treatments, and to stop pressure selling practices in compliance with the CPFTA.

Even though the CPFTA was passed, CASE did not rest on its laurels. We continued to push for stronger protection for consumers.

One problem was that there was little protection for consumers in respect of defective goods. This spurred CASE to push for the Lemon Law which was enacted in 2012. Under the Lemon Law, consumers have the right to request for repair, replacement, reduction in price or rescission of contract for goods which do not conform to the contract.

Pamphlets distributed to members of the public to explain the Lemon Law



# Behind-the-scenes of the Advocacy Process

CASE's advocacy efforts are supported by a dedicated team of volunteers who are experts in their own fields. The Consumer Law Review Committee (CLRC) identifies gaps in the existing consumer protection regime and advocates for changes to enhance protection for consumers.

Looking forward, we will continue to strengthen our partnership with the relevant government bodies to create a consumer-friendly Singapore where consumers rights are well-protected.

We interviewed two key figures in the advocacy work that CASE does.



**MR YEO GUAT KWANG**  
PRESIDENT (2002 – 2012)  
CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE (CASE)



**MR RAVI CHANDRAN S/O THIAGARAJ**  
VICE-CHAIRPERSON, CONSUMER LAW REVIEW COMMITTEE (2021 – 2024)  
VOLUNTEER SINCE 2003

## Tell us more about some of the key events that led to the push for a Fair Trading Act?

When I took over as the president of CASE in 2002, one of the main problems consumers faced was unfair trade practices. There were sellers who were making false claims about their products. Any settlement that we managed to reach was dependent on the business' willingness to provide restitution after selling products that did not live up to their claims.

## What was the process like pushing for the Fair Trading Act in Parliament in the early days?

In 2002, we gathered feedback from consumers on the ground and the stories we heard spurred us to push for legislation such as Australia's Consumer Laws where unfair trading is a crime. However, I realised that we could not copy their act wholesale into the Singapore context. We realised that what consumers want is to get the money they paid for goods or services back. This helped us chart a way forward for consumer protection laws. We collated these views and presented them to the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI). The CPFTA was officially launched on 1 March 2004, providing consumers with the choice to take civil action against retailers of unfair practices if no restitution has been made. I feel pride and satisfaction at this achievement.

## How has the consumer landscape changed since the implementation of the CPFTA?

With the CPFTA, consumers now have the legal right to seek recourse from companies as they are protected under the law from unfair trading practices such as misleading claims about products and services.

The expansion of the law in 2009 extended the coverage to financial products. The maximum claim amount was also increased from S\$20,000 to S\$30,000, which protects consumers who had purchased big ticket items. Consumers now also have more time to rethink their purchase decisions as the cooling-off period for door-to-door sales and timeshare contracts was extended from three to five working days.

The CPFTA has helped to weed out black sheep in the industry which benefited businesses as well. Besides extended coverage, there have been subsidiary regulations including the Opt-Out Practices Regulation and the Lemon Law enacted under the CPFTA to further strengthen consumer protection.

I am grateful for the support of our many volunteers and various partner organisations who have worked tirelessly to bring CASE to where it is today, to be able to make a positive difference in the lives of Singaporeans by championing their consumer rights when they feel helpless.

## How did you begin your journey of volunteering with CASE?

As a lecturer, I taught about the Sale of Goods Act. However, it was limited in terms of the remedies it could provide and did not really deal with the issue of unfair practices. As a consumer, I encountered my fair share of unfair practices as well and it highlighted how limited consumer protection was. Hence it started my interest in affairs relating to consumer protection.

I started volunteering with CASE in 2003 first as a mediator, and later as part of CASE's CLRC. As a mediator, I was able to resolve disputes, but it did not help to address systemic issues stemming from gaps in the laws or the way they were enforced. By being part of the CLRC, I was able to contribute to the latter part. The CLRC meets regularly to discuss specific issues relating to voluntary compliance agreements or to pick one another's brains on new laws.

## What are your hopes for the consumer protection landscape in the future?

I hope that there could be more active enforcement of good business practices with more manpower and resources. In some countries like Australia and New Zealand, there are criminal sanctions for unfair practices. Unfortunately, this would lead to an increase in business costs. If criminal sanctions are too onerous an obligation, we could consider channelling more manpower and resources into actively enforcing good business practices. Businesses which do not practise unfair trading practices would not have anything to fear.

