

'Facilitation' In Consumer Affairs

BY MARK LAWSHE
Sentinel Staff Writer
Last of 3 parts.

Facilitation, a new approach to getting people together to solve a problem, seems to be catching on in Santa Cruz County.

The first article in this series dealt with what might be called "textbook" facilitation. In the Soquel Elementary School District it's practiced pretty much in the same form as the method was developed, with emphasis on room arrangement and recording of ideas on big sheets in front of the group. Facilitation is seen as a better way of running meetings.

The facilitator acts as a neutral but supportive leader, guiding the group around time-wasting pitfalls to reach a consensus.

The second article explored facilitation as practiced within the Museum Without Walls program, where freewheeling ideas spin about and "County Spirit" is generated. Three facilitators connect people interested in the arts with information and other people they need to get projects rolling.

In both of these examples, the people being facilitated usually have common goals, but there may be some distrust. Parents unsure of an administrator's fairness, or artists impatient with the measured pace of bureaucrats, need to find common ground with those they see as potential adversaries. Once the people begin truly to listen to each other, they can begin working toward mutually acceptable solutions.

This is the main focus of the county Office of Consumer Affairs, where irate consumers come fuming through the door to lodge complaints about faulty merchandise and other fallout from the world of commerce.

Facilitation of settling consumer - business disputes will be examined in this article.

Gloria Lorenzo is coordinator of the Consumer Affairs office, which is a division of the county Weights and Measures Department. Both are located in the same building at 640 Capitola Road.

When a consumer comes in, Lorenzo related, he usually is in "condition red" — madder than a wet hen or rooster.

"We serve as analysts, trying to pick what appears to be the most natural or direct approach



Facilitation comes in different forms at the county Office of Consumer Affairs. Coordinator Gloria Lorenzo, right, works primarily with other government agencies, while Kathie Mabie, left, and Marie Lohns more often deal

directly with consumers and business people. Interestingly, Mabie and Lohns both have husbands working as public health sanitarians with the county environmental health department.

"not even the tip of the iceberg" since the county has nearly 29,000 seniors in residence.

He and Lorenzo worked out plans for making the conference a social event as well as a communications session.

Among plans expanded over last year's conference is the compiling of a summary of panel discussions being set up by the local district attorney's office. This permanent record will serve somewhat the same function as that produced by a recorder in a facilitation session — a "group memory" to be communicated to a wider audience than those physically present.

Other modern techniques noticed in Gallagher's and Lorenzo's planning include the use of color - coded graphics and the careful development of an agenda by a steering committee.

SCOUT, Consumer Affairs, the district attorney and the attorney general all are represented on the steering committee.

Another bow to facilitation is seen in the theme of this year's conference — "Seniors Be Aware", which Lorenzo said is more positive than last year's "Seniors Beware".

customer to write down what each would like the other to do. The salesman wrote that he'd like the woman to drive the car for awhile. She wrote that she'd like another similar car or her money back.

Each took home the other's suggestion to think about. Said Mabie, "She took the car on a long trip and has been happy with it since."

Before the mediation process, the two "sides" were unable to talk to each other, each fearing loss of some kind.

"We were able to get the emotional content out and get to the facts. Each was describing the same condition, but they were using different words," said Mabie.

"That's why we tell customers in their letters to businesses to describe exactly what would satisfy them," Lohns said. "And we tell them to send the complaint by certified mail and to ask for a response within 10 business days. We tell both sides in mediation to leave room for compromise, which is sometimes hard for people to do.

"But most of the time people are pretty reasonable," she

directed to working with Don Gartner of the district attorney's consumer fraud division, and she thinks more time should be spent in consumer education.

This draws her more away from the front counter, putting a bigger case load on Lohns.

Mabie also is secretary - treasurer of the Northern California Consumer Affairs Assn., a group newly formed by local governmental agencies in the northern part of the state.

One of the association's main goals is to find group solutions to common problems, and translate them into literature which can be used by all member agencies.

Mabie spends some of her time reviewing legislative bills for the association. Founded by consumer - oriented people from Santa Cruz, Monterey and Santa Clara counties, the association will hold its summer quarterly meeting in Santa Cruz in early August.

Tenant - landlord relations and advertising have been the main topics of the first two meetings this year, she said.

From con schemes to honest misunderstandings, state agencies to browbeaten individuals,

"Then if we can calm them down to 'condition yellow', they can begin to see options. We start to talk about what can be expected by following through on one or more of the options."

She continued, "Finally we get to 'condition green' where the complainant is ready to act on our referrals."

Lorenzo brought to the office a background in journalism and public information teaching. A San Jose State graduate, she did graduate work at UCSC in communications and psychology.

She worked for the Associated Press and for KSCO and the Register - Pajaronian before joining Consumer Affairs.

First person to the counter to take a complaint is most often Kathie Mabie, who came to Consumer Affairs in January 1974 as an analyst. On May 23 she was awarded her master's degree from San Jose State University in health education, with emphasis on consumer education.

Home economics is another important part of Mabie's educational background, and she now teaches personal finances at Cabrillo College part-time.

Marie Lohns is the third member of the team, having come aboard in February as a CETA employee. To her position as adviser she brings the experience of supervising 23 people in the Los Angeles County health services department.

Her work here, said Lohns, isn't so different from settling squabbles that arose when people had to wait a long time in the L.A. health services lobby.

The three work independently to a large degree, Lorenzo said. Mabie and Lohns handle most of the new complaints, with Lorenzo coming into discussions when the problem is seen as part of a larger pattern. Mostly, she talks with agency people to coordinate consumer protection efforts with those of other government groups.

These include the state attorney general's office and such local outfits as Project SCOUT. In fact, on the day she was interviewed, Lorenzo was in the midst of planning sessions with these two organizations for the second annual crime prevention conference for seniors.

Last year the one-day conference at the civic auditorium drew about 500 people. Talking to Lorenzo, Frank Gallagher of SCOUT called that audience

where Lorenzo spends most of her time. Her background in covering crime stories gave her the reporter's nose for investigation, which brings us back to the consumer-business interface.

In that context Lorenzo acts as a resource person for Mabie and Lohns, as well as coordinator of their efforts with state and national consumer issues.

"I believe there are not always two sides to a dispute," Lorenzo said. Mabie tied this to the question of neutrality, essential for facilitation.

"We don't favor the consumer," she said. "If there's a question of neutrality, one of us will handle the complaint and another will sit in to make sure the neutrality is maintained."

This role, similar to that of recorder, also involves keeping a sharp eye on the "facts" and helping to put them on paper accurately.

For example, Mabie had just spent a couple of days working on an appliance complaint. She checked out the malfunction in person and talked to both the salesman and the complainant, who weren't talking to each other.

"It came down to the manufacturer's representative having misrepresented the functions of the appliance and the need for other appliances to make the whole 'system' work," she said.

The irate customer was unable to get satisfaction from the store manager, so she came in to the Consumer Affairs office for help in writing a letter to the manufacturing company's president.

"Now all of a sudden," Mabie related, "the store will either sell her another appliance or give her her money back."

At each level the dissatisfied customer should start at the top—the store manager, the company president. "It's a lot easier to go down a ladder than up," smiled Mabie.

Another recent case concerns a widow who bought a new car, which developed a "bug". The dealer fixed it but she still felt the car wasn't safe to drive.

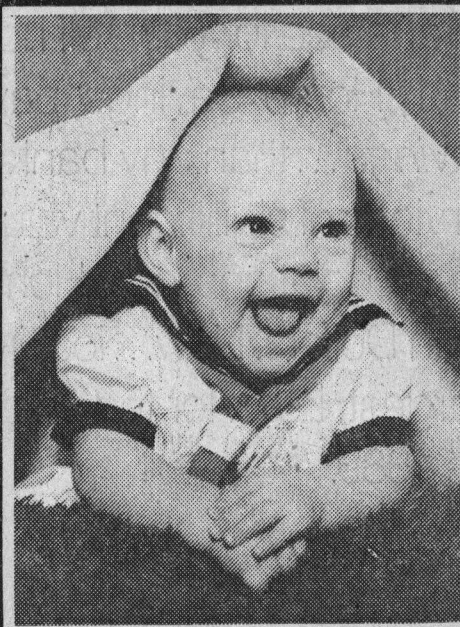
Mabie asked the dealer's representative and the

that Lohns' CETA funding is slated to end in December. Mabie's job is more and more

"Possibly every complaint we handle is a form of facilitation," said Mabie.

Kmart
... gives satisfaction always

NEW
CHOOSE FROM 4 EXCITING COLOR BACKGROUNDS
PLUM BLUEBERRY SKY SMOKE



One 5x7 Color Portrait

- All ages: Babies, children and adults.
- One sitting per subject.
- Additional subjects—Groups or individuals in same family —\$1.00 per subject.
- No proofs—Choose from finished professional portraits (poses—our selection).
- You may select additional portraits offered at low prices.
- Guaranteed to give complete satisfaction or money cheerfully refunded.
- No handling charge.

Only 38¢

June Wed., Thur., Fri., Sat., Sun.,
4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th

Photographer on duty

Daily 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
—Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

2600 41st AVENUE

STARTS WEDS. JUNE 25

Hearts and Minds

"I would sleep a lot better knowing Gerald Ford had seen this movie"

Congressman Andrew Jacobs of Indiana

ACADEMY AWARD WINNER

Best Documentary

NICKELODEON