MANAGEMENT RESPONSE
Evaluation of the Contributions Program
for Non-Profit Consumer and Voluntary Organizations

February 2005

Background:

This evaluation study was undertaken by TNS Canadian Facts on behalf of the Audit and Evaluation Branch of Industry Canada. Evaluation issues of the study were grouped thematically reflecting the Program’s:

• Relevance (rationale, need, and avoidance of duplication).
• Success overall and for separate research and development components.
• Alternatives considering cost-effectiveness, lessons learned and suggestions for change.

The Contributions Program for Non-Profit Consumer and Voluntary Organizations is intended to create a more effective consumer voice and thereby encourage a fair, efficient and competitive marketplace.

The evaluation study confirmed that the objectives of the Program remain relevant. Evidence suggests that the need is expanding and there is some evidence that the Program is not keeping pace with this need. More generally, the Contributions Program was felt to add credibility to non-profit consumer and volunteer organizations. Organizations are now better able to present research-backed arguments that are the equal of arguments by industry. As a result, they are more effective consumer representatives and better able to protect the interests of consumers.

This evaluation study will be very helpful in making recommendations to guide decisions for the future of the Program.

Program management is committed to addressing each of the recommendations found within the evaluation study as set out in the detailed Management Response below. The management of the Contributions Program accepts and will act upon other suggestions for change listed in “Other Items of Note” in the evaluation study.

Management Response to the Recommendations

1. Find a way to increase the available funds

The Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA) should actively lobby for additional funds for the Contributions Program.
Management Response

Agreed. Program management strongly supports this recommendation.

Demands for funds for useful research activities exceeds available contributions. The Program only supports two out of every five applications and provides, on average, one out of every three dollars of support requested.

Program management plans to build a strong business case in the coming year in support of additional funds for the Contributions Program. However, increased funding will depend upon IC and federal government strategic priorities for the coming years.

In situations where a government organization will benefit from the research activities supported through the Contributions Program, the government organization should be encouraged to pay for or share in the costs of the research. The OCA should facilitate access to support through the benefiting government agency and thereby "free-up" Program contributions for other worthwhile activities.

Management Response

Agreed. Program management strongly supports this recommendation. Some of the supported research activities benefit government organizations such as those with a mandate to consult consumers.

OCA will discuss with Treasury Board Secretariat how best to support this recommendation through existing TBS policies.

2. Improve Dissemination of Information and Institute Tracking of the Impacts of Information

Require all recipient organizations to produce a short summary of the project report and to post the summary, at a minimum, on the web site of the organization or on the OCA website.

Management Response

Agreed. OCA recognizes that project results are of little value unless decision makers and interested stakeholders are made aware of them.

Major recipient organizations currently house on their respective websites research briefs, and/or executive summaries, and/or the whole report of projects funded under the program. OCA will strongly encourage all recipients to post reports on their websites.
In June 2004, the OCA launched the Consumer Policy Research Database accessible through its website Consumer Connection. The database contains short summaries and hyperlinks to project reports produced by recipient organizations under the Contributions Program, and to consumer research documents undertaken by university researchers, and governments. OCA will continue to post and actively promote this database.

Require all recipient organizations to capture and to provide to OCA contact information for those who obtain the full report on the project (by download or in hard copy) or who participate in enhanced dissemination activities. This information should be used for performance measurement and evaluation purposes.

Management Response

Agreed. The degree of communication of project results by recipient organizations ranges from a little to a lot. No organizations follow-up to assess the impact of project results. Organizations could do more to disseminate information and to help assess the value of that information.

Recipient organizations will be required to provide with the final project report a communications report on dissemination activities of project results, list of stakeholders distributed copies of the report or executive summary, website access of project report, press conference, press release, media coverage of findings, etc. The communication report will be reviewed by the OCA, and any omission of interested stakeholders will be reported to the organization for remedy. This information will be used for performance measurement and evaluation purposes.

When circumstances warrant special efforts to disseminate results, organizations should be eligible for a follow-on contribution agreement to provide enhanced dissemination of project results. Organizations should submit an application covering the enhanced dissemination and, after approval, should conduct and document activities and provide a full reporting of preliminary impacts and contact information for those who receive the enhanced information dissemination.

Management Response

Agreed. While there are currently provisions in the Program for applicants to claim the cost of communication activities during a project, there are some project results of particular value which warrant increased dissemination efforts in the year following project completion, and for which the organization has no financial support to undertake.

The OCA will examine funding mechanisms that make it possible to support these activities. The OCA will favour a type of funding that is not cumbersome for applicants or an administrative burden to OCA. If additional funding were provided, OCA may also designate
a certain proportion of the Program budget for this type of funding.

Use contact information on those who receive project reports and enhanced information dissemination to conduct follow-ups to identify intentions and actual impacts.

Management Response

Agreed. As mentioned above, recipient organizations will be required to provide with the final report a communications report on dissemination activities of project results. Stakeholders who received copies of reports could be interviewed during the next program evaluation scheduled in 2010.

In addition, recipient organizations will be asked to provide OCA with any feedback they may receive from stakeholders on project results. The OCA will also take note of any response received directly by stakeholders. These stakeholders will be singled out as contacts for the next program evaluation.

Amend Results Based Accountability Framework to include accounts of projects disseminated, follow-up activities to information recipients, and quantification of intended and actual impacts through the information. Report on performance measures annually.

Management Response

Agreed. These activities will be reflected in the Results Based Accountability Framework.

3. Institute General-Application Development Projects and Communicate their Findings Broadly

Encourage development projects that have application to multiple organizations. Share results broadly with the intent of benefiting many organizations.

Bring organizations together for a one-day session every second year to exchange ideas of common interest and share best practices toward strengthening the consumer movement.

Management Response

Note that projects dealing with issues aiming to strengthen the consumer movement, such as research on the effectiveness of Citizen Utility Boards (CUB), or an assessment of developmental factors for consumer associations, are funded under Research Project Contributions. Research findings for this type of funding are public and shared with all organizations.
Organizational development contributions aim to strengthen an organization's capacity to diversify revenue sources and increase its level of self-sufficiency. While organizations willingly work together to develop common policy positions and action plans to address consumer issues of national interest, they are, however, very reluctant to share results of their development activities with organizations they view as direct competitors when it comes to the limited resources available to them.

The OCA analyses development project results to further the evolution of the consumer movement in Canada, and to shape the Program. The OCA will examine the possibility of sharing the results of this analysis with all consumer organizations without revealing privileged proprietary information or jeopardizing organizational confidentiality.

4. Increase Transparency of Application Approval Process

Conduct a telephone conference annually, open to all potential applicants, to explain the application process, identify changes since the previous year, and address any questions. Use the opportunity to clear up misunderstanding of eligible expenditures identified during the evaluation.

Management Response

Currently, all administrative changes to the program are reported in the “What’s New This Year” section of the Applicant’s Guide. Changes are also reviewed with applicant organizations at bilateral meetings or telephone calls to discuss project ideas for the coming funding year. The application and evaluation processes are explained in detailed in the Guide, and organizations are invited before applying to discuss proposals or funding decisions with representatives of the OCA.

Nevertheless, in order to further assist organizations, the OCA plans to organize this Fall a seminar on consumer priority issues for the coming funding year. The OCA will also take this opportunity to present to attending organizations changes to the Program and review the assessment process. Depending on the success of the event, it may be repeated on a yearly basis.

Management Response

Agreed. Eligible points assigned to each question of the proposal form will be included in the Program Applicant’s Guide (2006-07).
Provide feedback on applications by providing the score per question and overall points calculation. Identify the number of applications received and awarded for the topic area of the application.

Management Response

Organizations are invited to inquire on the assessment of their project proposal, and the OCA provides detailed reports of assessments, including the proposal’s strengths and weaknesses, and identifying areas for improvement if the organization plans to resubmit the proposal the following year.

A detailed assessment report contains information on the number of proposals received for the priority areas, the highest and the lowest scores allocated to proposals in that area, and the score the proposal received. Organizations are provided the scores per assessment sections such as: Relevance, Importance and Timeliness of the Issue (based on 30 points); Methodology, Capability, and Cost (based on 50 points); Intended Uses (based on 15 points); and Communications Plan (based on 5 points).

5. Encourage Greater Self-Reliance through Development Projects

A high proportion of any new funding to the Contributions Program should be allocated to Development Projects and be used to increase organizational self-reliance and thereby reduce dependence on Research Project support.

Management Response

Agree. Over the last five years, less than 40% of the amount requested for research projects was awarded. During the same period, 31% of the amount requested in development contributions was funded.

One in two research project proposals submitted received funding compared to only one in three for development project proposals. Both types of funding would benefit from additional funds. However, a significant proportion of the funds would be allocated to development projects, should the Program receive increased funding.