



## A NICE BIG BROTHER?



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The European Union's single market presents a large scenario. It involves over 480 million customers across 27 states, making it larger than the population of the US and Russia put together.

The strides made since the market's formal set up in 1992 have been substantial and current EU regulations now provide a level of certainty both for the business community as well as for consumers, when carrying out transactions across the various countries. It remains, however, a work-in-progress affair with a substantial revision set to be carried out during 2008.

Consumers play an important role. The EU has taken this into consideration and highlights it often, particularly through the European Commission services where, since 2004, a Commissioner has consumer protection as her sole responsibility.

In recent months, the Commission has shown its commitment towards monitoring the functioning of the internal market and analysing whether this is benefiting consumers. Initially work is being done to identify economic sectors that are significant for growth and job creation, or which affect household consumption. Once these are established, data on five indicators will to be collated: prices, level of satisfaction, complaints, factors that discourage

consumers from switching products or services (such as costs), and product safety. Both products and services shall be taken into account.

Other horizontal indicators, such as redress, enforcement systems and barriers to cross-border trade, are set to be included in the so-called Consumer Scoreboard. In the coming months, further collaboration with national authorities is envisaged. For instance, the collection of data across Member States needs to be standardised to reflect reality.

Differences do exist and the European Commission is not all out for harmonisation. The purpose of this far-reaching exercise is to understand and distinguish between what is functioning and what is not. Should the need arise, a more in-depth investigation could be initiated as a second-stage procedure. One has already witnessed the result of a considerably different exercise with the introduction of the Euro-tariff for mobile telephony roaming charges last year.

Will this be the case of a nice pan-European big brother for consumers? Hopefully yes. This extensive project may be able to explain the differences that exist across various EU countries. Some are obvious to justify, perhaps others may be less so. At least it would clear the air and put customers' minds at rest when making their purchases. ■