JULIE McCROSSIN: It gives me great pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker Helen Wellings. She's going to talk about consumer advocacy, why we need it and why it works. Helen is Australia's leading crusader for Australian rights. She's national editor with Seven Network's daily news. Something she's done reporting nationally on trade practice issues for over 20 years. To survive in this industry for 20 years, do the initial clap. (APPLAUSE) She first gained national attention on ABC TV's watchdog program 'The Investigators'. You've got more about Helen in your program, but I'd like to mention her book, 'Buying Power: A Guide for Consumers in Australia'.

HELEN WELLINGS: Thank you for that amusing and flattering introduction. It's been more like 40 years, unfortunately. I suppose that's why ACCAN has asked me to do the keynote speech today, because I can draw on a huge past of advocacy and trials and tribulations, the sort of things that ACCAN has to trudge through every day and bring results, which it's done superbly. So, ACCAN has asked me to talk about my advocacy role and then sort of segue into ACCAN's advocacy role. So, here we go. Back in the '60s... well, I was only a child then, but consumers didn't have a voice, because they didn't know that they could have one. There were some contract laws such as the Sale of Goods Act, but without a statutory body to basically administer the protections they offered, consumers needed to resort to the courts to fight their case or put up with it. Consumers were passive, consumer rights were unheard of. Commerce and industry had a massive balance of power. The mid to late '60s saw the advent of the independent consumer lobbyist Choice. It goes back that far to I think '64, as well as the formation of State consumer affairs bureaus administering consumer protection legislation, very fledgling legislation I have to say at this stage. 1974 heralded the Commonwealth Trade Practices Act heralding consumer protection with penalties for non-compliance. Consumer advocacy had started with an extra push from US Citizens rights advocate Ralph Nader. He conducted a tour in 1972, exposing the built-in dangers of the American car, the Chevrolet and the reluctance of the manufacturers to fix or redefine faults or listen to technically-based criticism. Someone was at last giving them hell, standing up for customers. My father was a civil engineer and complete extrovert. He attended all of Nader's lectures. He detested the design features of American cars. It was his mission. Their performance and their features, and he kept getting in my ear, so his influence and Nader's unbending agitation spiked my interest and sealed my fate unbeknown to me at the time, because I set out as an English history teacher.

JULIE McCROSSIN: Another teacher!

HELEN WELLINGS: It's true, isn't it, so many of us started as teachers. By 1973 circumstances -I'd love to tell you, but don't have the time -saw me at the NSW consumer affairs bureau essentially as its senior education officer, but I knew there was an agenda behind that title. I was writing pamphlets, addressing consumer and industry groups, on the beat explaining consumer rights and responsibilities quickly took on a different exciting magnitude. The media began making huge demands on me as a commentator. It was self-propelling with consumers speaking up, writing complaints, seeking justice. The few hundred cases a year that we looked at, at consumer affairs bureau became thousands a year and so the momentum built. You give people education, and they will do something with it. I became a passionate crusader working around the clock, weekends included, naming products, unscrupulous companies and unconscionable practices. The public and the media's interest in issues had me commissioned to write newspaper columns, radio talkback, radio and evening television... remember, this is in the '70s. It was relentless. The effect was in two or three years, staff size at consumer affairs bureau had increased 10-fold. A few acts of Parliament that we administered became around 55. We became the Department of Consumer Affairs, not "the bureau". What was happening in NSW snowballed to all States and Territories and so I kept expanding. Within a few years the consumer affairs movement in Australia had become a monumental force. Interestingly, to allow me free reign to name shonky products and companies, the consumer protection act was amended to give me legal immunity when making public comments classifying them as "in the public interest". That allowed for much more effective advocacy and education and quite a quirky move if you can see the point. A highlight then was working with Ralph Nader in 1980 which gave me the impetus to push on in Australia. There was a lot to do. I hosted the ground-breaking ABC's 'The Investigators' program from 1986 to '95, 10 years which continued to be the highest rating locally-produced weekly show on TV for over 10 years. It pulled no punches, often involved dangerous strategies in order to expose baddies and defend consumers. I copped a Molotov cocktail over the fence at home, literally dodged bullets and assaults from tradespeople, did harrowing walk-ins on the CEOs of banks. We would walk in there, cameras rolling. This is before privacy laws kicked in. Then, while the program was still rating its pants off, the ABC decided to axe it, asserting that "consumers now knew it all". There was no more that we could do, no more we could tell consumers, and how wrong that proved to be. I then continued the same no holds barred stories hosting Seven's Today Tonight before joining news. Channel 7 has proved a consistent and potent form of consumer affairs issues. Its news department has a firm policy of separating editorial from marketing and it did from day one. When I went there, I was assured that was the deal when I started there. So, journalists can present the facts without fear or favour. I thought it was only possible at the ABC, but in fact Seven absolutely has kept to that, and I can do so much without lawyers bothering me too much, which was happening. Fast forward to the 21st century and we have multiple authorities now representing all manner of consumer interests from the ACCC and State agencies, offices of various ombudsman, consumer health groups, APRA, consumer action law centres and, of course, ACCAN. Arguably ACCAN has what's turned out to be I think the most complex gig of all, because its parameters are ever-widening in an area that's quickly evolved into an integrated collection of essential services for every Australian. The phone, the Internet, nbn. ACCAN is a constant supporter for gold standard telecommunications identifying problems and inadequate safeguards to push for better services and legislative protections, to be the people's voice for home and Internet users is a challenging charter which it manages superbly. I thought I knew all about ACCAN from Teresa's interviews and so forth with me, but I looked on the Internet and delving into what ACCAN actually does it's absolutely mind-boggling what they get through and the way they have looked at this broad scene they need to address and have addressed. There are many areas to demonstrate ACCAN's advocacy role. I've collected a few major initiatives. First, the nbn. The nbn roll-out has been a major focus in recent years. We had 160% rise in 2017 in consumer complaints about phones and Internet and that was small business people, as well who were complaining, driven by nbn problems. ACCAN has been unrelenting in addressing the nbn's roll-out which has been dogged by confusion with consumers having to bear the brunt. Many going without essential Internet service, up to months in some cases. In many instances, the reason is the split responsibility between nbn and the telco providers which has caused the major confusions and delays and I absolutely agree with Matt, where he explained that nbn now is up and running a lot of the problems have disappeared. A lot of them haven't, but to go for nbn 100 service is the thing, because there was such confusion about people being told "Oh, all you'll need is 25". They got on to that and thought, what's wrong with the nbn? What's wrong with my Internet? The system's rotten. In fact, they were ill-advised and I know that advice changed. But some felt it was too late, that they'd signed contracts and couldn't afford -anyway, I'll get on to that. But ACCAN agitated for a government scheme to test and monitor nbn broadband and the result was that the ACCC set up such a scheme a few months back which allows consumers to compare speeds and performance between nine different providers. That will be the key for so many people to find that out. Other education tools are available on ACCAN's comprehensive website and it's what people need to know about the nbn, what affects its quality, how to choose an ISP and the relative costs. It's a really great piece of education, if you can look it up on the website, the focus on ACCAN's role in the nbn education. Another example is ACCAN's use of the media. Central to any organisation's success in advocacy is effective public liaison and most importantly, leaders who are engaging media talent. ACCAN's Deidre O'Donnell, Teresa Corbin, they do fit that description. Interviewing people all the time, CEOs and heads of organisation, it's the same-day story. We ring up, "Are you available? " Teresa is always available. Other people are not. I can tell you so many people put out press releases and then go overseas. Oh, where's the expert that can talk about this? They're just not available. I had this yesterday, I had it the day before and I was doing -last Friday when I was doing health stories. Professors and so forth do this marvellous work for Australia, we're at the forefront... slightly digressing here, but then when they put out the release, they're not available to speak. They may have spoken to the newsprint, but they forget about television. Teresa never forgets about our role and how important it is for the advocacy role of ACCAN to express it through the media, especially television. So, also, I used to regularly interview Teresa when she headed up the Consumer Telecommunications Network and always noticed her passion for the rights of telecommunications consumers shone through. She was and is always available as I said for a story, putting the case for ACCAN firmly and coherently, communicating in snappy news-style grabs. That's another thing. A lot of people do not know how to do that -she does. In the early days, we did stories on householders being grossly overcharged for landline bills. I suppose that's all gone now, hasn't it, Teresa? At one stage there was a complaint who said he hadn't made calls to sex chat lines. There were phone calls made around 4 pm each day the company told us, and that story ended a life-long relationship when we caught him red-handed making the calls. He was paying thousands of dollars in his mate's bills. So, lately Teresa has been involved in a number of consumer stories from kids iPhone usage to cost of iPhones and Internet contracts and privacy issues, so alerting the public and arguing for better protections. The number of media mentions ACCAN has received has really expanded over the years. In the past 10 years, 7,735 media mentions, but in the past year 1,447 media mentions. Not bad. I thought we'd go to one example from Channel 7 news where we interviewed ACCAN, Teresa on the affordable broadband issue.

(Video plays)

>> The roll-out of broadband into Aussie homes has created new groups of haves and have-notes, those who can afford it and more than a million households who can't. Now a communications actions group is calling on politicians to adopt a plan to halve the cost.

>> For one or single-income households especially growing families, the cost of broadband is often prohibitive.

>> It's not even a luxury anymore. You have to have the Internet to exist and adding this extra money to our weekly bills is a real strain.

>> With more than one million households missing out on broadband, communications action group ACCAN wants no one left offline.

>> If people don't have access to the Internet, they can't seek jobs, they can't even access health services or tax services.

>> The cheapest unlimited 50-megabit plans are currently around $60 a month from Click and Exetel. ACCAN wants the same broadband for $30 a month. Half the price. It would be government funded redirecting tax concessions meant for other industries to these broadband consumers. >> The proposal that would cost about $600 million and this would be offset by the fact that something like 20 billion is saved when people move to on-line services.

>> I think that's fantastic, anything that can help Australian families is fantastic.

>> ACCAN is lobbying both sides of politics to give a pre-election commitment to the Internet for all proposal. Helen Wellings, seven news. (APPLAUSE)

HELEN WELLINGS: Teresa, very good. See what I mean. Nice, snappy grabs there from Teresa and a lot of people really can't do that, so I think it's very important to ACCAN's role that that is happening here. Just the upshot of that affordable broadband initiative -no Australian left on-line -ACCAN attracted over 35 organisations supporting its call and the issue is widely recognised as a problem by the industry and last month a report by Infrastructure Australia agreed with ACCAN that home broadband is unaffordable for many households. So, that's something that is continually being dealt with. Other highlights of ACCAN's initiative, advocacy of youth issues. ACCAN's targeted younger telecommunications users really effectively. The key being messages via social media, also videos warning them about the hidden costs of inapt purchases, iTunes purchases, exceeding monthly data allowances, and the benefits of SIM cards over contracts so that they don't get into trouble with their bills. There is a tonne of exciting subject material on ACCAN's website that is really tuning in to the youth market. It's also been quick to identify and publicise Internet crimes and antisocial behaviour of all kinds. For example, the emerging problems of tech-based abuse where a spouse or a partner can be tracked via an app enabling them to pick up their location. ACCAN has devised great educational material on that to upskill partners to know what can be done to them and how to deal with it. Evidence gathering is another highlight and this is an interesting one. ACCAN measured consumer wait times in a report called "Can You Hear Me? ". The idea was to calculate the cost of delays to consumers in resolving problems with telcos. You know, waiting on the phone to speak to someone, waiting for a connection to be restored via a chat window, or in a shop, or on the phone. ACCAN commissioned an economic consultancy to put a dollar figure on wait times. The result was a powerful way to make a point, to quantify the time commitment. Overall, ACCAN in this case proved how advocacy can be strongest when it's evidence-based and that evidence can be used by consumers to try to redress their problem and to be able to quantify what it's cost them in that waiting time. The good news is that that's part one of that project. It's still in the works, so watch that space. I have to mention the standing advisory forums, because that mentioned ACCAN's advocacy role first in 2015 as part of its critical consultation strategy, IV standing advisory forums replace what used to be called committee. Forum is an interesting way, they're a key strategy that allows for more active exchange of ideas. In ancient the forum was the people's marketplace, the nucleus of community and consumer affairs, the heart of democracy. As such, ACCAN forums invite interest groups and individuals from disability, Indigenous and small business sectors to say what they need, evaluate what they have and push for change. There's also a member advisory forum which assesses ACCAN's own activities, and that's Choice, The Benevolent Society, CWA, National Council of Women, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Privacy Foundation et cetera, are all members of that advisory forum. To ensure they're being heard and properly serviced to make sure ACCAN is fulfilling its charter. This feeds into ACCAN's role in influencing government and industry to provide the best telecommunications possible for every Australian, thus completing the loop in its advocacy role. I also want to talk about how the grant scheme is a very important key to ACCAN's advocacy. It's a corollary to empower consumers funding groups and academics and it's a clever way of picking up on hidden problems, discovering solutions and getting to every corner of the community. You know, remote communities, Indigenous communities and so forth. So ideally no Australian is neglected. The grant scheme certainly enhances ACCAN's advocacy function in a very broad and democratic way, so all in all, ACCAN deserves congratulations for the effectiveness of its advocacy responsibilities. It's led very important advances in telecommunications and continues to, so consumers are better off. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

JULIE McCROSSIN: Give her another clap. (APPLAUSE) That was so interesting and I'm always grateful when people give us the historical perspective, the development of a movement such as this. Questions or comments ladies and gentlemen, and I'll come to you. Who would like to ask a question or make a comment? Thanks, Teresa. Teresa does media training, by the way.

TERESA CORBIN: I wanted to ask about the ABC's role with regard to consumer programs. Certainly, we saw the Check Out checked out which was very sad. I don't know if you obviously think there's still a role for that sort of thing. Often the same perspective, it's interesting to hear that was the same reason that 'The Investigators' was stopped, that consumers know it all. Unfortunately, the problems are always morphing, but yeah, I'm just interested to hear whether you had reflections about that change and hopefully that won't be forever.

HELEN WELLINGS: The Check Out was very effective and it also drew in all age groups and I appeared on it a number of times myself, but it was axed I suppose because it was pretty heavy on resources. It did a lot of graphics, dramatisations and so forth. It was theatre. The message was dressed in this sort of theatrical costume if you like which took a lot of resources and days to produce, but the result was very potent and I think there definitely is a window for a consumer affairs program, however, if you look at Channel 7 news and Today Tonight is in Adelaide and Perth now, so I file for them, as well. The thing is as you would have noticed about that bulletin there, it's a 1.5-minute bulletin and it's very powerful. You get the information across quickly. Anyone who speaks slowly is not going to use that time very well. Teresa has this rapid sort of delivery which is great for it, and that's why we continue to use ACCAN in so many of these telecommunications stories. Getting back to the question, I think that people are looking for easy ways to do television now, because it's so expensive to produce so there are a lot of forums, a desk of people and a couple of cameras and picking up the comments and that's a relatively cheap way of doing it compared with say the Check Out. It all would have come down to money. It's such a shame and, of course, the ABC can't accept sponsorship so that's not going to help there either. And a consumer show shouldn't have any sponsorship whatsoever, it shouldn't be influenced, no fear or favour.

>> Hello Helen, I'm Patrick O 'Neil. We go back together at the ABC.

HELEN WELLINGS: You remember those days. >> Do you think that the ABC axed your program because you were causing them too much trouble? Like, too many lawyers, too many companies getting in touch. As we both know, it's a familiar refrain.

HELEN WELLINGS: Okay, well, can I say that there was a program on the ABC that was found for contempt of court. It wasn't us, okay. That took up something like $1.5 million of the ABC's funds. From that decision in court, I had lawyers hovering over when I was writing my scripts and it became very difficult, every story was just trodden all over and I was becoming increasingly frustrated. There was another issue, too, if I can sort of speak out of school in that there were people at the ABC who were involved with companies and doing jobs for them and there was veiled advertising going on. People like me and Karina Kelly, Quantum was axed as well, we kicked up a fuss about it. We said, we have to be pure. The ABC cannot be getting into bed with any companies or people who are going to influence our editorial, and especially 'The Investigators'. We were going to management about that. I think that's part of it, definitely, and that was sort of like year nine. But yes, I think you're right that the lawyers were told "Just pore over this, we don't want to be sued." I had to take the risk. With Channel 7 I hardly go through a lawyer, as well. I read all my own stuff; I know if I've done something that's not right. I'm naming companies. The first program I did on channel seven was against Ford motor company who were advertising on the show. I'm always doing fast food companies, breakfast cereal companies. If it rates, do it. Do it. The most important thing is to get the bums on the seats watching the TV or going through social media which is our big boon now. Yeah, look, I think people sort of tend to be in the habit of watching certain things, but I think that there are other stations and I think Channel Nine's 'A Current Affair' does a good job on consumer affairs issues, as well which sort of matches what we used to do on 'Today Tonight", so we're still doing it in that sharp bulletin form and let's face it, a lot of people out there only have an attention span of 1.5 minutes anyway. They're likely to remember and then we say, "Go to our website for more information, it's all there."

>> Robert from Telstra, a long time in consumer affairs, as well. Thanks for your work. I'm just wondering about do you have a theory of change in terms of consumer protection and so on. It takes five or six things to all come together at a particular serendipitous time and that will be good research and consultation, a bit of regulator pressure, media attention perhaps and if you've just got one of those things nothing happens. Two, nothing happens. If you've got three nothing happens. If you've got four.

JULIE McCROSSIN: What's the fourth?

>> ACCAN doing something. I'm wondering over your long history and time, are there some critical factors that are missing or not in terms of getting change for consumer protection purposes?

HELEN WELLINGS: I think you've got to be dogged. You can't give up the first time you're knocked back. You've got to come back with another strategy. I know we got a lot of Acts of Parliament through in the '70s, Labor got into power in '76 and Sid Einfeld became the minister. "Helen, we've got to get children's nightswear labelled. Kids are buying in front of heaters, because pyjamas are going." He used to take materials home and time their ignition rates and how they burnt, nylon being different from wool being different from cotton. There was all that passion and you've got to have passion to get things through and he'd say, "Right, go on TV now and tell people about this and what's needed is better protection." That would enable legislation to get through much more easily than if we just put it through Parliament coldly. But I think a lot of things do have to come together. Some things can be accidental, other times it's a collection of things that produce that result, yeah. >> Hi. Just wondering your thoughts with the increasing speed of communications and capabilities and, therefore, the pressures on news organisations and not so news organisations to get stories out quickly as we saw, how do you think we can balance the need to get the story out with the accuracy and the facts behind it and related to that, is there a role for some body or an ACCAN-like organisation to go back and look at who got stories right and wrong so their credibility is looked at over time?

HELEN WELLINGS: You mean ACCAN's credibility?

>> No, the news organisations.

HELEN WELLINGS: Okay. Well, it's imperative that we get the story right and it goes through, the journalist writes it, there's a producer that looks over it and there's a head producer that then subs it absolutely meticulously and will question any figure, "Where did you get the figures? Who gave them? " What happens is that if we're unsure of something, we will pass it through someone like ACCAN, "Is this right what I'm saying? " You can read it out over the phone. "Is this correct? " It's a matter of checking data. We do have to work at incredible speed and sort of red faces and beating hearts most days in that newsroom. It's just absolutely mad, but journalists are checked, and double checked with their stories, so that they -I can't even remember not getting it right, ever. JULIE McCROSSIN: Helen, can I just ask you, that process you concisely summarised which is the traditional mainstream news process, you're obviously competing in a world of social media where inaccurate or unchecked information or sources are checked can get very high levels of exposure. I suppose I'm interested in your comment, if we were looking forward 10 years, this is all about 10 years, where will free-to-air news be? Where will be that checking process? Do you think there is a next generation of Helen Wellingses coming?

HELEN WELLINGS: I think we were just discussing this with our new CEO James Warburton the other way. Where are we going to be in 10 years' time, and I think a lot of programs now free-to-air may be struggling to stay alive. I think news will. People want a journalist they can trust as opposed to, say, a robot. Going out to the scene, like there was a fire out in Leichhardt. We just heard and immediately we had someone who was out that way going to it with a camera and I think this is what happens in a newsroom that we can organise people and news to get to places and that's what the public like to see. They're still watching their news, albeit ratings aren't quite what they used to be. But we find ways and social media has been a terrific way of getting the message out, as well, using that as sort of the corollary, because a lot of people will watch catch-up. My son never turns the television on, he watches everything on a laptop, so we have to cater for the growing majority of people who are doing that.

JULIE McCROSSIN: I like optimism for the next generation. Let's meet one now!

>> I'm from Consumer Action Law Centre. I don't know if I'm the next generation but thank you. I'm just interested, because you've been in the consumer affairs space for so long, what you've seen as far as consumer protections in a telecommunications industry versus other areas and what your thoughts are on that?

HELEN WELLINGS: Well, I do a lot of stories. We do a lot of stories on Channel 7 about telecommunications problems, because of the fact that they disable people, businesses and so forth so it's one that we do react to very strongly. We get on to it and as I mentioned the split responsibility between nbn and telcos has caused enormous grief, because who's to blame? People will assume nbn when, in fact, it can be the telco. How do we address that? We look at the forefront of the issues we are in touch with, with ACCAN various telecommunications groups to find out what the issues are and cover them in stories which are the latest ones. We've done a lot on things like SIM cards. We regularly do the cost of mobile phone plans -who are doing the best ones, how much should you be paying, what sort of category are you in? Yeah, does that sort of answer it? It's an enormous field. As I said, with ACCAN I think it's just evolving every week. There are new issues that come up and it's never-ending. There'll always be issues to focus on with telecommunications, I think.

JULIE McCROSSIN: We'll just take one last question before we have our break. Thank you. Just whiz over here.

>> Andrew O’Connor. Thank you for your passionate advocacy in this field. Just to add comments to the affordability of home broadband. You talk about the monthly cost, but there's also the connection cost that people are hit with such as the connection fee. From the ISP, but nbn doesn't charge that, they only charge when there's extra work required. I had a case where a friend was going to be charged $330 by the ISP, because they couldn't find the copper line into the house that wasn't active and also the hardware people are obliged to buy from some ISP that ends up being junk. There's hundreds of fees that it's hard to get across in a very short story, but it adds to the cost and reduces competition where people can then remain stuck with a provider, because there's a cost of changing to someone else. So, just how we can get that across, that would be great.

HELEN WELLINGS: The best way to get that sort of message across on telecommunications is to have consumers who have been affected and they tell their story and it's usually put at the top of the bulletin, so the problem with that person, so we humanise it and then we have the relevant experts saying what the problem is and what can be done about it. So, we always need someone. We say to an organisation, yes, we want to do this story, we want an interview, have you got a consumer out of your great vast resources of people who have complained to you, is there anyone there that we could use to be a sort of consumer advocate for our story?

>> Thanks, I can just add, some providers don't charge those connection fees at all and you can activate day by day with some even, because the nbn don't charge those activation fees, so there are some good eggs.

HELEN WELLINGS: There's been enormous confusion.

JULIE McCROSSIN: One last question, Helen, you mentioned the attention span of a minute and a and a half, and I think many would feel that's true in social media as well as mainstream, the incredible brevity of the attention span. Has that changed over time? Like, some people think it's social media that's done that, or do you think human beings have always had a pretty brief attention span when it comes to an issue, particularly a conceptual issue?

HELEN WELLINGS: No, I think it's changed. It's a fast, fast world that we live in, but I think that it depends on the time of the day. If people have had dinner, they sit down to watch television, or listen to music or listen to the radio, they're more prepared to commit their time. But when it's, say, a 6, 7 o'clock bulletin, it's more of a rapid-fire delivery that is the case. People are not prepared to sit down to watch the full half hour at that time. So timing is everything, and attention span is much greater when people have got the kids to bed, the dinner out of the way and they can concentrate. 'Four Corners' is a good example.

JULIE McCROSSIN: What a wonderful experience to have Helen Wellings here. Give her a warm round of (APPLAUSE). Thank you. (APPLAUSE) Ladies and gentlemen, if you don't have a lucky number, when we come back after morning tea, I'll be pulling the first prize and they have got seriously excellent chocolates. We're not talking a Cadbury's bar. We'll start promptly again at 11, but I'll ring a bell. Thank you.

(Morning tea)