Professional service alternatives

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Tom Voice elected vice chair of Consumer Reports board of directors

Of the three main things university professors do – teaching, research and service – service is not normally thought of as the exciting part of the job. Now picture an educator wearing a crash helmet speeding around a vehicle test track collecting stability and safety statistics or sporting a traditional white lab coat as he examines bubbling pots of pasta sauces at a national home products testing lab.

As the College of Engineering’s associate dean for administrative affairs and a professor of civil and environmental engineering, Tom Voice has done his share of traditional professional service: reviewing papers and proposals or serving on professional committees. But his service-related passion for the past 10 years has been sitting on the board of directors of Consumer Reports (CR).

CR is an independent, nonprofit organization with seven million members, a website with an average of 15 million visitors each month, and an iconic magazine that is the fifth largest by circulation in the country. Founded more than 80 years ago, CR helps people make informed purchase choices through evidence-based product testing and ratings, rigorous research, public education, and advocacy. At more than 500 employees and headquartered in Yonkers, N.Y., CR is the country’s largest organization focused on consumer issues.

In October, Voice became the vice chair of CR’s board of directors. He previously chaired CR’s audit committee and has also served as board secretary through the years.

“‘I’m coordinating the board’s role in working with management on partnerships as we rethink how to engage with the marketplace in an age when consumers are much more interactive,’” Voice said. “‘I’m the board lead on asking, ‘How do we maintain our organization’s independence as we move to a different business model?’”

“Tom is an indispensable presence on our board,” said Marta L. Tellado, CR’s President and CEO. “His insights and
perspective are deeply valued by our testers and advocates alike, as well as by his fellow board members. He effectively champions the independent and rigorous inquiry which lies at the heart of what we do at Consumer Reports, while also encouraging innovative new products and services that can serve consumers in the face of a dynamic ever-changing digital consumer marketplace."

His dedication to effecting change started at an early age.

"I grew up in a CR household," Voice said. "I was raised by a family where we valued both the independent buying advice and advocacy championed by Consumer Reports.

"When I was 12, I was so incensed by a full-page ad in the Grand Rapids Press for a beer proclaiming that it was top rated by my favorite magazine -- which did not allow its findings to be used in marketing -- that I wrote CR a letter to let them know.

"Then, as a young engineer, I thought I’d like to work for them testing audio equipment. That didn’t happen," Voice explained, “but when the opportunity to become a board member in 2008 arrived, I felt it was a privilege to be asked.”

Voice said his role with Consumer Reports allows him to blend his technical skills and consumer interests with public service to improve people’s lives.

"It’s not all board rooms and conference calls, either," he noted. "The test track is a blast," he said, grinning.

CR’s Auto Test Center in Colchester, Connecticut, tests a variety of auto-related issues. So when he had a chance to crawl into a test vehicle with a professional driver, he donned a safety helmet and away he went.

“Testing automobiles is about more than just driving a car and writing an article about your likes and dislikes,” Voice explained. “It’s about rigorous testing under controlled conditions to give consumers the information they want about safety, fuel economy, performance, reliability, and ease of use. And over the years, this has been coupled with advocacy campaigns on issues such as seat-belts, stability controls, and back-up cameras.”
At MSU, Voice specializes in the behavior of pollutants in the environment and how this can lead to human exposure and health consequences. His research and teaching are largely focused on the role environmental chemistry plays in drinking water quality, sites contaminated by hazardous materials, and engineered treatment technologies. He said he finds his CR work very similar to university research.

“They are both about using objective evidence to answer questions and then acting on the results,” he added. “And both continue to evolve. Today’s consumers have new concerns involving things like digital security and autonomous vehicles, and new ways of exchanging information. We need a state-of-the-art approach to consumer protection and CR is on the front lines of developing this. I am proud to play a small part in the effort.”

Related Website: Consumer Reports
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