



Ah, man! Not Ed Sheeran again!

operations include lobbying for changes in laws to protect consumer rights and consulting with industry partners to improve standards in manufacturing and design.

The featureless municipal façade of its headquarters in Yonkers, a small city that borders the Bronx, gives little indication of the labyrinth of product evaluation that lies within. Its 63 labs are fitted out for the testing of a bewildering array of objects. Last year a team of 587 employees contributed to the evaluation of more than 2,000 products and services. In the kitchen lab is a machine that precisely measures the colour of cakes baked in its ovens. Another space might appear, at first glance, to be a typical living room. On closer inspection, however, you'll notice that the floor is made up of seemingly random patches of different surface types. It's only when you realise that it's a lab for testing robotic vacuum cleaners that the room makes sense; the motley flooring assesses the various machines' suction over a range of terrain.

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marketplace involves monopoly platforms shaping your consumer experience," the organisation's CEO, Marta Tellado, tells MONOCLE. "There is an enormous amount of power that needs to be held accountable." Consumer Reports' financial independence allows it to maintain a degree of objectivity that's rare in a world of top-10 lists stuffed with affiliate links. The products that it tests are purchased by a national network of unidentified "secret buyers" from the same shops that ordinary consumers use. This mitigates the possibility of manufacturers supplying unrepresentative, cherry-picked items. Once testing is complete, the goods are sold to Consumer Reports staff through an internal auction.

The most striking embodiment of the organisation's commitment to rigour is its anechoic chamber (pictured). It's built on foundations that are separate from the rest of the building to isolate it from vibrations. The inside of the room is lined with large fibreglass teeth arranged to eliminate sonic reflections; as a result, all of the sounds that you hear inside are direct. To human ears, the effect and, for some, can evoke a similar feeling to the one you can get when descending in an aeroplane. Others have to flee the room, perturbed by the sound of the blood rushing through their own head. Anechoic chambers are often built as part of physics laboratories for experimental purposes or used for hi-tech industrial applications, such as testing jet engines. Consumer Reports uses its chamber to review consumer audio equipment.

Some might dismiss this as overkill but Tellado is not for turning. "Technology is moving so quickly and our rights and protections aren't keeping up," she says. "The balance of power has shifted away from consumers and it's making us incredibly vulnerable. We need to do the work that we do." — (M)

CONSUMER RESEARCH — USA

## Tried and trusted

**Henry Rees Sheridan** visits the warren-like headquarters of a New York non-profit organisation that brings hi-tech scientific rigour to its mission to protect consumers from buyer's remorse.

A spinning metal drum is suspended centimetres above the track of a treadmill. Rubber nubbins protrude from the drum's surface. As the treadmill moves, the nubbins press into the track, simulating the pressure and pattern of a runner's stride. A technician stands by, monitoring the performance and interaction of the machines. The rotating nubbin drum is called Johnny Walker Black. It's the younger sibling of Johnny Walker Red, which does the same job: putting treadmills through their paces as part of an evaluation that takes into account ergonomics, construction and ease of use. When the testing is complete, the treadmills will be reviewed and ranked, and the information made available to the six million members of Consumer Reports.

Founded in 1936, Consumer Reports is a non-profit organisation that advocates for the interests of US shoppers. The organisation is best known for its product reviews, which are available online and in a monthly magazine. Its