

Decisions, decisions ...

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CONSUMERS' DECISION-MAKING is a hideously complex and difficult subject. The range of influences that may lead to almost any individual purchase is wide, and the ways in which they interact can be literally unpredictable: the same consumer, faced on two separate days with exactly the same choice, may well make a different decision.

Behavioural analyses, such as those of Andrew Ehrenberg, have shown that in fact there are recognisable - and predictable - patterns in brand choices, across a whole range of markets, over time. But for those who are hoping to shift the patterns, or to understand why and how they occur, this merely demands further investigation. Why? How? What are the processes involved? How did these patterns get there, and how can we hope to create them?

There is, by now, a whole encyclopaedia of tools and methods that enable us to pry into the corners of consumers' decisions, and at least a few signposts to how the process works. But to suggest that we are in a position to approach the task of influencing any particular decision with any confidence would be, simply, to demonstrate our arrogance and ignorance.

A range of components

A buying decision is made up of a range of components: a need (recognised in advance, or not); a mood (very variable); familiarity with the market/category and some of the brands in it; the particular retail environment; company (or its absence), and who this is (friends? children? parents?); price, or price level (high or low cost); the complexity of the product; the buyer's values; the buyer's personality; the buyer's economic standing... and so on.

As a very general rule, more complex and/or expensive products tend to be more thought-through and considered processes, while cheaper products - typically most fmcg products - may be purchased almost on autopilot. Yet it is perfectly possible to walk around any supermarket and see shoppers studying the back labels of products with great intensity - and the UK Government's food labelling regulations are evidently predicated on the idea that this should be routine behaviour, rather than the exception it undoubtedly is.

In the same way, more expensive products, at least, are routinely thought of as being subject to a 'customer journey', conceived of as going through a series of logical stages. While, certainly, an extended decision process may well be involved,

the 'journey' is by no means as structured as this model presupposes, being frequently non-linear, characterised by steps being retraced, and with apparently key stages often omitted (i).

Heuristics

Even for these expensive products, people routinely use a range of shortcuts to arrive at a decision. For cheaper lines, we tend to call these 'heuristics', and researchers have identified nearly 20 different types. Faced by what Tariq Krim described as 'over-choice' at this year's ESOMAR Congress, we all have strategies for eliminating at least some of the candidates for our cash (2). One way or another, we develop, over time, brand consideration sets, which we would not usually look outside; we respond (favourably or negatively) to a store ambience, or the approach of an employee; we use our experience of the category concerned to set up criteria (which we may hardly be aware of) that any brand we buy must offer, and others that must be absent. Our filters may be rigidly rational and based on actual experience, or the fruits of prejudices derived from almost any source.

This is because, while this is going on, we will inevitably find - if we manage to introspect that far - that our mental processes are at least as much emotional as rational. It is by now well accepted among cognitive scientists that we cannot actually take decisions in the absence of emotion, however rational we are trying to be.

Part, too, of this emotional (or, more broadly, subconscious) influence comes from those around us. At the most overt level, our children may pester us to buy a particular product, or a particular brand. More subtly, as Mark Earls has worked hard to demonstrate, we are influenced by what those around us are buying. If there's a queue outside a store, we are all tempted to join it, because if they are queuing, it must be worth standing in line for. Fashions, fads and crazes - and a great deal more of our consuming behaviour - are all rooted in our innate 'herdness'.

Myth of 'economic man'

What this all adds up to, of course, is a major problem for marketers and researchers. It is one thing to recognise that we are not the mythical 'economic man', whose decisions are wholly rational and based on more or less complete knowledge. Yes, to be sure, we can go into Google and find out all the facts about all the brands in the category we want to buy in, complete with user reviews and critiques. But is this what most of us actually do?

Certainly, it is becoming increasingly common for store staff, especially in hi-tech fields, to be faced by shoppers whose product knowledge, fuelled by the internet, is superior to their own. But this is still minority behaviour, in a relatively small range of sectors.

Most of us, most of the time, have not the time, and do not feel the need, to be só perfectly informed. What's more, at least in the more developed western societies, most of us are not too fussed. This means that we can - and do - give our prejudices full rein, and this means, in practice, that we are actually very vulnerable to being influenced.

The way that we acquire and build brand knowledge is a combination of actual experience and of taking in brand information from a wide range of sources. These include advertising and other marketing Communications, stories in the media, comments from our friends and acquaintances ... While we routinely tell researchers that word of mouth, especially from our friends and relations, is the key influence on how we buy and how we perceive brands, we would say that, wouldrft we? Come on, you're not going to admit that you actually believed the ad you saw on TV last week, are you?

Point of purchase (POP)?

From a practical viewpoint, ali this tends to emphasise the importance of the point of sale as the key to decision-making. The closer we can get to this (which may be hard) with an appropriate message (which is difficult to define), the better our chance of influencing a sale. The oft-quoted 70% of our fmcg purchases that is determined in-store is still subject to our heuristics, só it is not as totally open to influence as the statistic implies. And it's interesting that studies in less developed markets show that shoppers' purchase decisions are far more likely to be determined before a store is entered thanis the case in the fully industrialised markets.

In practice, however, you have to recognise that our brand choices depend at least as much on what is wired into our brains before we ever enter the store. Unless we have at least some sort of predisposition to buy a brand, we are quite unlikely to try it purely on the basis of an in-store experience. The POP activity may manage to act as a 'decider' between brands on our consideration set, but unless a brand is already part of that set, it is usually not going to be a serious candidate inside the store.

In the last resort, most of our brand choices depend critically on at least a degree of familiarity, and a degree of emotional affinity with the brand. And these are things that we acquire from exposure to the brand, usually over a period of time.

The role of marketing Communications, of ali kinds, is to create, sustain and build that familiarity and affinity. •

1. *N Watkins and M Comber: Pilgrim's Progress? How the Consumer Makes Complex Decisions. MRS Conference, 2006.*
2. *M Yee et ai: Surviving the process ofelimination. The Advertiser, August 2005.*

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