

# Research the buying decision to understand brand choice

Spring's **Steve Phillips** and **Lucie Holliday** describe Snakes & Ladders, a research method which tracks the ups and downs of the consumer's purchase decision

**W**HY DO PEOPLE buy the things they buy? If you asked that question about someone's recent purchase, they might say something about buying brand X because it was the best value for money.

So that means brands have it easy - all they have to do is create the best quality product at the right price point. Of course, if that were true, brands in markets from holidays to soft drinks, face cream to trainers, wouldn't spend millions researching their markets, trying to identify new ways to move their products out of stores and into consumers' homes.

Anyone can ask a question about purchasing and get a 'quality and price' type answer, but it is only through understanding the subtler triggers and barriers at work that a brand can hope to differentiate itself in the marketplace and move beyond price and quality considerations.

This article is about a depth interviewing technique called Snakes & Ladders, which maps the whole purchase process from beginning to end. It uses a non-directed, regressive interviewing structure that gets people to reveal the real motivations behind decisions. Only then can we analyse what their purchase journey looked like and where a brand can potentially intervene.

The approach works in a different way from most research - it puts the decision instead of the person in the centre of the investigation and then treats the buyer as a 'witness' to this decision. This structural shift allows us to look at decision making (typically, but not exclusively, purchase decision-making) in a whole new light - to uncover subtle influences, such as the impact of word of mouth, service, reviews, recommendations, whims and accidents on purchase decisions.

## How it works

The study of purchasing heuristics (see *Brands on the Brain*, Wendy Gordon 2002) shows that many decisions are far from a rational trade-off of different product or sendee features. Instead, the decision may be a kneejerk reaction to one simple product aspect or even the reliance on the heuristic of biggest brand. However,



**What process does the consumer go through before buying an iPod or a Mercedes A-Class?**

add in any more details they can think of.

We have found that the longer spent going over a story, the more trust is built between interviewer and respondent and the more it becomes apparent where pertinent life events have come into play.

when asked directly how a decision is made, consumers tend to default to what they consider a rational process - what they feel they should have done, rather than what they did.

Snakes & Ladders uses a non-directed interviewing approach that avoids providing the interviewee with a set of thoughts and ideas that are our own and not necessarily theirs. For example, if one asks the question "what brands did you consider during your purchase journey?", implicit in that question is the value judgement that considering other brands is good.

To minimise this questioning effect, we create an environment in which respondents tell their own story entirely in their own words. We begin by asking people to describe every step along their purchase journey, from initial first thought about the product to the final decision about what to buy. Without directing them, we probe back and forth to see if anything else happened. Once we reach the end, we start again and get them to

## Emerging need versus desire

The traditional funnel approach to decision-making suggests that before purchasing, the consumer will have an emerging need that will cause them to start considering the brand or category. According to this theory, they will have a 'long-list' of brands in mind and will do research of some kind to whittle down their options to a shortlist before choosing a product.

Our research refutes this on two counts. First, in most categories or circumstances, we do not see a need - with implied time constraints - but a desire that can be fulfilled now or-at any time over the next few weeks, months or even years. We find that people can leap into and out of being 'likely purchasers' several times before buying something. The purchase process can go on for months or longer until something happens - a review is noticed, a recommendation made, an ad seen - and then suddenly the purchase is on again.

Second, we see much less concurrent brand comparison than expected. Brand

consideration tends to be monadic - a consumer will consider purchasing a particular brand, then will either buy or reject it. Take the iPod, for example. It's unlikely that the millions who have bought one felt an emerging need for a portable music device, researched the category and compiled a list of available M?3 players. No - they just wanted an iPod and bought one. This is key for marketers, in that it reduces the importance of ads that extol the benefits of a product over its competitors. Instead, messaging around products that fit an individual's needs, or around objects of desire, are more likely to have the required effect.

From these insights, we started to see the purchase process as being more like the children's game of snakes and ladders (hence the name). Every now and then there is a stimulus to fast-track toward making a purchase decision (a ladder) and equally something could happen that set the prospective purchaser back (a snake).

### Roundabout route

When we spoke to Gary, he had recently bought a second car for his family. He told us that it had taken just two weeks to make a decision. This was true - the decision to choose the car to be bought was short. The decision to actually buy a car took more than two years and many brands were discarded along the way.

Eighteen months previously, Gary had considered buying a Land Rover. He had always liked them and believed "you can get a second-hand one very cheaply". He was chatting about it with a friend, who told him they were expensive to maintain so he went off the idea of the Land Rover and of purchasing another car altogether.

Six months later, he was browsing a friend's *Auto Trader* when he spotted a Toyota Rav 4 and liked the look, styling and price. However, just before buying, he heard from an acquaintance who drove one that it had gearbox problems. He again went off the idea of buying a car.



Soon after, his wife complained about having to share the car, so he decided to become more pro-active. He visited the two dealerships closest to him (Citroen and Renault) and spotted a Citroen Ci that he liked and that was within his budget. He decided on the Ci and went home to consult his neighbour, who "knows all about cars". The neighbour put him off the Ci, Citroen and Renault by saying that he "should avoid all French cars".

Six months later, he was at a friend's house, browsing a copy of *Parker's* guide, when he saw a price ad on the back for a Mercedes-Benz A-Class. With no further encouragement, he went to the nearest dealership for a test drive and, just before buying, checked with his neighbour 'expert', who approved, so he went ahead and bought one. As he said: "A nice, simple purchase."

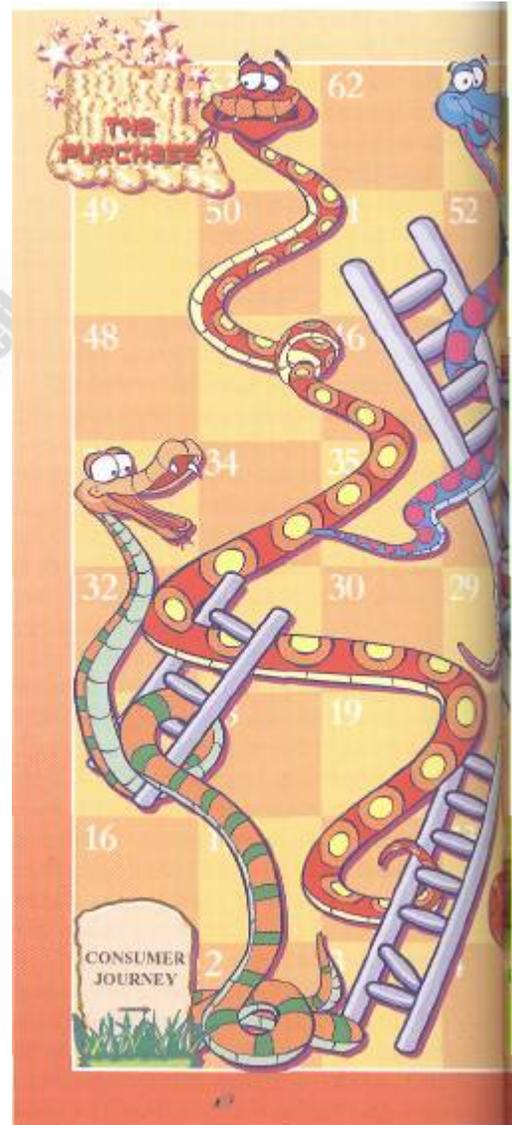
### Networked interviewing

Few decisions are made in isolation. Instead, they happen within social groups and the influence of that group must be understood if the purchase decision is to be viewed holistically. For this reason, when we conduct a Snakes & Ladders interview, we identify anyone who has had an influence and speak to them as well. In this way, we speak to multiple 'witnesses' and gain a fuller understanding of the decision.

Alison had owned her Ford Fiesta (bought second-hand) for only seven months when she bought a brand new Mercedes A-class. She had been happy enough with her Ford, so what happened?

During the course of our interview with her, we found that she'd originally visited the Mercedes dealership with her husband, Nick, who wanted to look at the new C-class model. They went to the dealership together, where she noticed the A Class, Nick suggested she took a test drive, and two weeks later they took delivery of the car.

When we spoke to Nick, we found that his boss (a bit of a role model for Nick)



recently bought his wife a Mercedes A-Class as a surprise. Only after talking to us did he realise that his boss's decision may have played a part in his desire to visit the Mercedes dealership and his enthusiasm for getting his wife an A-Class.

We also spoke to Alison's mum. She mentioned that Alison's sister-in-law had purchased a new car recently and that Alison had been a little jealous as her car was second-hand.

This networked interviewing approach allows us to identify the various types of influencer who might have an effect on decisions, and thereby develop communication techniques to target

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directed interview in an online or telephone environment?

The quantitative approach has three separate phases and is designed to allow people to relive their purchase story and create their own purchase journey but within a quantitative setting.

The first phase is used to anchor people within their own story (not our view of the world), so it is a purely open ended question about how people made their purchase decision, modelled on the qualitative approach. In neuro-linguistic programming terms, we are getting people to associate with the purchase journey itself and not the interview process.

The core of the interview follows, in which they 'build' their own journey. We present them (in the online format) with a purchase journey line to fill in. Having completed a qualitative phase, we take the elements of the journeys we have seen and put them into boxes on the screen. Respondents can then drag and drop these boxes onto their journey line to build a picture of everything that happened along their journey. So, for instance, there will be a box saying 'spoke to friend', which they can click on and place within their journey (potentially multiple times).

The final phase focuses in detail on each event identified. So if they "spoke to a friend", we ask a series of related questions: did their friend recommend a brand, put them off something, tell them what shop to use, and so on.

This allows us to quantify all elements within journeys, see the power of each interaction and segment journey types. It helps us to see what brands can do to influence buying decisions in their favour. As Simon Stanforth from Starcom put it: "Spring's innovative approach to understanding customers at the moment of switch has given us new and actionable insights into the decision-making pro-

cess. The findings have gone beyond surface level motivations and have been taken on by both our agency and our client as an important input into future planning."

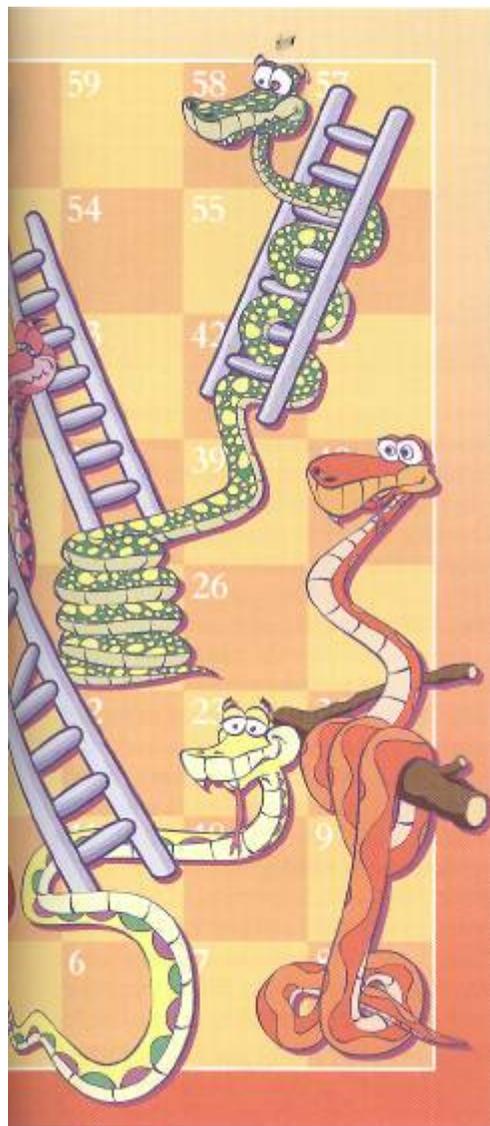
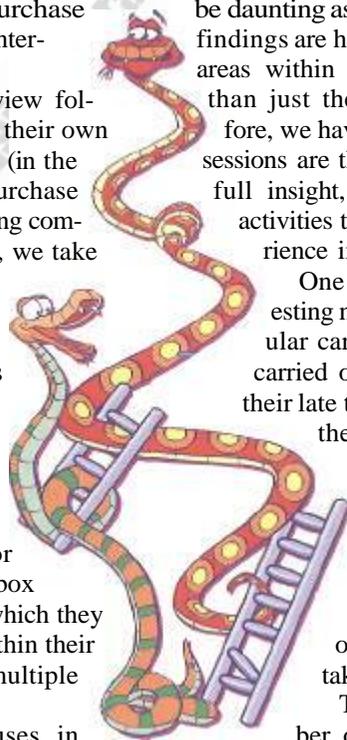
### Output and implementation

Snakes & Ladders doesn't answer a specific question - not in isolation, in any case. When this technique is used for a project, the insights gained will often impact on every aspect of the client's business, from marketing and communications, through product design to sales strategy. This can be daunting as clients need to ensure the findings are heard and bought into by all areas within their organisation, rather than just the marketing team. Therefore, we have found longer workshop sessions are the best way of getting the full insight, often with role-playing activities to get the customers' experience into the heads of the clients.

One project produced an interesting new sales angle for a particular car brand. The research was carried out with young women in their late twenties, who were buying their first new car. Through the course of the interviews, a pattern emerged. On the day these women got their new car, they would immediately drive to each of their friends' houses and take them for a test drive.

This insight made a member of the client team realise that for those first few days, the passenger seat was a sales opportunity and a direct path to the target market.

This methodology continues to surprise us with the depth and variety of insight we gain from it. As we continue to quantify these findings, we're also looking to the future. We believe this methodology could be of great benefit in the social research arena because it gets to the heart of personal issues and individual motivations.



them as well as the buyer. This consumer decision-making reality is very much in line with the arguments Mark Earls makes in his book, *Herd: How to Change Mass Behaviour by Harnessing Our True Nature*. As human beings, we make very few decisions in genuine isolation.

### Quantifying Snakes & Ladders

The next step for us was to find a way to quantify the insights gained in the qualitative research. The strengths of Snakes & Ladders as a qualitative technique are the challenges faced when quantifying it - how can we regress respondents to the point of purchase and conduct a non-

