

A Selection from:

## CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS

### The Privilege of Choosing, the Hassle of Knowing How To

At lunch time, millions of consumers around the world take a break from whatever they are doing and head out to restaurants. Each of them faces a choice of tens of restaurants within easy reach, and once at the restaurant, they face, again, hundreds of food items to choose from. The same task faces them anew at dinner time. And then again at the supermarket during their weekly grocery shopping trip, at the clothing store, at a flower shop, at their electronics stores, and at the movie rental place. At theaters, bookstores, car dealerships, and farmer's markets, hundreds of marketers compete for their attention and for their wallets. How consumers make their choices determines the fates of all these businesses. Some flourish because consumers choose their products; others vanish because consumers reject their offerings.

If you want to be the company that flourishes rather than vanishes, you have to know two things: What do consumers want in a product and how do they make their choices. The two things are intertwined. They pertain to the thought process going on in the consumer mind when he or she is deciding to buy or not buy your product. We call this mental process *consumer decision making*, the topic of this chapter.

Some decisions are easy to make, and consumers make them in a split second. Others are difficult, and consumers agonize for days and weeks. In this chapter, we unravel the mystery of how consumers' minds work when faced with a marketplace of choices.

#### *Step 2: Information Search*

Okay, so you have, as consumers, recognized the need—like you need to do something about your thinning hair. What do you do next? Next, you search for solutions. This stage is called *information search*. Here, you seek out information, first, about what alternatives are available in the marketplace and then about various features of these alternatives. On the face of it, the process looks simple and straightforward. But there is more to it. For starters, it takes two forms, depending on how novel for you the problem is, i.e., how familiar you are with the solution product category.

### **When you are unfamiliar with the product**

If you are totally unfamiliar with the solution product for your problem, (e.g., thinning hair), then this is how you would most likely proceed: you find out about one alternative, learn a little about it, then come to know of a second alternative, learn a bit about it, then a third, and a fourth, and then you explore these a bit more, learning more about them, going back and forth from one alternative to another. At this stage you might begin to explore yet another, new alternative, or explore the three or four that you have identified. Eventually, there comes a time when you feel that you have explored enough—i.e., you have done enough information search.

For your thinning hair, for example, through information search, you might have discovered (one by one) some special shampoos, some herbal medicines, and the prescription medicine Propecia. You might explore two or three shampoos, or a couple of herbal medicines closely, and so on.

## And when you are familiar

Suppose you want to buy a car. Here, the product category is familiar to you, so the information search focuses on your examining the familiar alternatives in more detail. However, you would rarely perform an information search on all the brands you are familiar with, much less all the brands in existence. Rather, you would consider only a select subset of brands. In fact, consumer researchers believe that brands are organized in your mind as follows (see Figure 11.4):

- First, there is the **awareness set** – which comprises all the brands you are aware of as a consumer.
- Next, at the time of decision-making, you remember only a subset of the brands in the awareness set. This subset is called an **evoked set**. The brands you don't remember at the time of the decision are called an **inert set**.
- Of the brands in the evoked set, not all are deemed fit for your needs. Those considered unfit are called the **inept set** and are eliminated right away. The remaining brands are termed the **consideration set**—the brands you, as a consumer, will consider buying.

Figure 11.4 AWARENESS, INERT, EVOKED, INEPT, AND CONSIDERATION SETS [Figure Omitted]

Try this for yourself. Quick, what brands of low fat candy come to your mind? Which ones would you consider buying? And what can marketers do to make you think of their candy brand when you think of candy bars?

### *Please put my brand into your consideration set*

Initially, consumers seek information about the consideration set of brands--which is a subset of evoked sets. New information can bring additional brands into the awareness, evoked, and consideration sets. It should be the minimum objective of all marketing communications to place the brand in its target consumers' consideration set (rather than merely in the "awareness or evoked set"). This is accomplished by highlighting a feature of the brand that its target consumers will find desirable. For example, *SmartWater* is a brand of bottled water enhanced with electrolytes, so it rehydrates you quickly after, say, a lie-detector test (see [www.glaceau.com](http://www.glaceau.com)). By mentioning it, we have placed *SmartWater* into your awareness set. By mentioning that it is laced with electrolytes, we may have succeeded in placing it into your consideration set as well. Or maybe not. It is for you to decide. If we did, then now you know what it takes for marketers to put their brand into the consumer's consideration set. In essence, marketers have to offer, in advertising and *in fact*, a brand feature that the consumer will hopefully find valuable.

Perhaps you realize that it is easy to find information on cell phones; especially if you are net savvy. But information on other products is not as easy to come by. Try finding information, for

example, on low-carb foods, on remedies for thinning hair, or on tennis rackets with *liquidmetal* frames. And try finding it in the offline world! Where would you begin? How much time and effort would you be willing to expend? And what would that depend on? Your interest in the product? Your mood? Or what?

Fortunately, consumer researchers have addressed these questions. Let us try to understand them, too, in this order:

- What sources of information do consumers use?
- What search strategies do consumers utilize and how much search do consumers undertake? And,
- What factors determine how much information search consumers would perform?

(From *MYCBTextbook*, Chapter 11)

[www.mycbtextbook.com](http://www.mycbtextbook.com)