
Marketing: A Key Factor in Consumer Decision Making

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the intricate process of consumer decision-making, elucidating the intricate interplay between conscious and unconscious elements. The findings demonstrate that marketing stimuli exert a considerable influence on the formation of associations and emotions, which frequently operate subconsciously to shape consumer choices. Marketing plays an essential role at various levels, from the creation of needs to the provision of objective information and the personalisation of offers. By understanding these mechanisms, companies can develop more effective marketing strategies to reach their target audience, positively influence purchasing decisions and create lasting bonds with their customers.

KEYWORDS: consumer, decision-making, process, purchase, marketing, the unconscious and the conscious.

INTRODUCTION

The purchasing process represents a fundamental aspect of the consumer's daily routine, commencing with the identification of a need and culminating in a series of actions undertaken to satisfy it. This process, which is characterised by its complexity, is influenced by a multitude of factors that traverse the boundaries between the unconscious and the conscious. This dynamic interplay between the unconscious and the conscious in making purchasing decisions represents a central focus of consumer psychology and marketing research.

The pivotal question, therefore, is how marketing affects the transition of individuals from the unconscious to the conscious in their purchase decision-making process. In order to respond to this question, it is necessary to examine the various stages of the purchasing process, from the initial identification of a need to post-purchase satisfaction. This will entail a detailed analysis of the complex interplay between the unconscious and conscious elements of decision-making. Furthermore, we will examine the influence of marketing at each stage of this process, demonstrating how it can stimulate consumers' awareness and facilitate informed decision-making. Ultimately, this analysis will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors underlying purchase decision-making and the pivotal role of marketing in this context.

I. The Buying Journey: from Need to Post-Purchase Reflection

Any decision-making process commences when a consumer experiences a need, which then prompts the adoption of purchasing and consumption behaviours in response to specific stimuli. This behaviour automatically activates the individual's psychological system, encompassing cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects (Mollá, A., Berenguer, G., Gómez, M.A. y Quintanilla, I. (2006)). The purchasing process comprises a series of actions and steps that ultimately result in the customer making a purchase. These actions and steps evolve progressively in accordance with the consumer's preferences and needs (Fischer, L. & Espejo, J., 2011). For example, impulse buyers proceed directly from the perception of a need to the actual purchase, without intermediary steps. In general, regardless of the type of buyer, they will invariably progress through one or more of the stages of the purchasing process described below.

1. Near-purchase: the process of detecting and recognizing a need through the development of beliefs and attitudes

The initial stage of the purchasing process is to identify and recognise the need that the consumer is experiencing, which can be conceptualised as a state of tension. Subsequently, the individual attempts to satisfy or alleviate this tension (Fischer, L. & Espejo, J., 2011). In order to make a purchase, it is first necessary to recognise the existence of a need, whether functional or emotional. Functional needs are associated with the utility of a product in fulfilling a particular function, whereas emotional needs originate from the consumer's aspirations, gratifications, and emotional inclinations, which product consumption is designed to gratify (Hawkins, 2004). (2004). At this juncture, the individual identifies their needs, searches for information, examines commercial offers, visits stores, evaluates and selects available alternatives (Mollá, A., Berenguer, G., Gómez, M.A. y Quintanilla, I. (2006)).

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Indeed, a need can be defined as "a recognition of a gap between an ideal and an actual situation" (Guichard N. and R. Vanheems, 2004). Alternatively, Vernet (1988) posits that a need is "an uncomfortable situation caused by a physiological or psychological deficiency". A necessity arises in response to stimuli that can initiate a purchasing process. These stimuli can be classified as either internal "inputs", which may include physiological needs such as hunger and thirst, or external "outputs", which may take the form of advertising and promotional messages. The latter serve to emphasise the attributes of a product or brand, including factors such as weight, size, potential applications and the characteristics that are perceived by potential purchasers. Subsequently, the reception of these messages gives rise to the formation of consumer beliefs and attitudes towards the product.

In 1966, Nicosie put forth a referential model that focuses on how consumers process advertising information, emphasizing that attitudes, according to Nicosie, are at the core of all information-seeking. Similarly, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) proposed that beliefs, attitudes and motivations indirectly influence an individual's adoption of a specific behaviour, depending on their attitudes towards a particular action and the subjective norms associated with that action.

In general, beliefs are formed and attitudes emerge during this phase of need recognition, whereby consumers utilise their beliefs to evaluate a range of parameters. Although beliefs are often perceived as "rational," they are not always so, due to the systematic biases observable in their formation. These biases emerge due to the utilisation of "cognitive shortcuts," or "heuristics," by consumers to facilitate predictions and estimations (Tversky A. and Kahneman D. (1974)).

In essence, the purchase decision is primarily based on a set of decision-making parameters, including options and product characteristics, even in instances where some of these parameters are not fully known with certainty. At this juncture, the decision-maker is frequently required to estimate or predict the aforementioned parameters in order to make a choice based on their beliefs (Fishbein M. and Ajzen I. (1975)). Moreover, each consumer possesses a clearly delineated system of preferences and beliefs that inform their decision-making process.

2. The process of locating and analysing information. The analysis of consumer options and decision-making methods

A need is the catalyst for action, rendering an individual more receptive to the stimuli offered by companies. In general, an individual's response is influenced by the intensity of their need, with the understanding that immediate satisfaction is not always a possibility. Individuals frequently endeavour to gain experience and a more profound comprehension of their needs over time (Fischer, L. & Espejo, J., 2011).

Consequently, consumers engage in comprehensive research to identify products and suppliers offering solutions that align with their specific needs (Hawkins, 2004). This process entails the evaluation of options in accordance with a range of criteria, including quality, convenience, price, taste and sustainability (Hawkins, 2004).

At this stage, consumers seek product information to reduce the uncertainty associated with their purchase decision. They form opinions about different brands or options based on the information they gather. This information can be internal, relating to the individual and their psychosocial context, or external, coming from their environment. The search for information helps consumers to make the best possible decision. However, information selection is essential as it is often difficult for consumers to process all the information available in a given situation (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998).

However, when the intensity of the consumer's need is very high, two possibilities arise. The first is voluntary attention, where the consumer focuses on the information, he or she considers relevant to his or her goals, based on the concept of accessibility as defined in Feldman and Lynch's accessibility diagnostic model (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). The second possibility is that the environment attracts the consumer's attention through surprising, unexpected or potentially threatening elements, thus facilitating the passive gathering of information about the product (word of mouth, rumours, etc.) (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). This corresponds to Feldman and Lynch's (1988) concept of diagnosability. Through these choices, consumers seek to achieve their goals according to a situation-specific hierarchy that influences the information they receive.

In 1985, Thaler introduced the concept of "mental accounting", suggesting that individuals structure their decisions according to mental accounts. Various studies have shown that small changes in the presentation of options can lead to significant differences in decision outcomes (Thaler, 1985; Pham, 1996). This theory suggests that options are perceived in terms of either gains or losses rather than in absolute terms, and are evaluated in relation to a specific "reference point" (Pham, 1996).

Once options are mentally structured in terms of gains and losses, they automatically enter a "valuation" phase, in which gains are perceived as having a positive subjective value, while losses are perceived as having a negative subjective value. Risk aversion is particularly evident when the stakes are presented in terms of gains, while in the case of losses, consumers tend to favour risk and show heightened sensitivity to losses.

In summary, different goals, situational constraints and different levels of knowledge influence consumers' choice of decision strategy (Pham, 1996). At this stage, the structuring and decision-making process is established, where consumers elaborate a mental representation of the decision problem. Thus, individuals' preferences and choices depend not only on the characteristics of the options on offer, but are also shaped by the decision framework, which determines what seems relevant or irrelevant to the individual.

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3. Evaluation of purchase alternatives: Attribute Analysis and Affective Responses

The alternative evaluation stage of the consumer purchase process is a key area of research (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). It is defined as "the result of an information processing process involving the individual, the offer and the context in which he or she is situated" (Odou, 2000). This stage consists of comparing the different alternatives available in order to narrow down the choice to one that will ultimately be purchased (Amine, 1999).

Guichard and Vanheems explain that the individual first compares products according to their specific characteristics and categories. He then selects and chooses among the different brands on the market, especially those he knows. Product evaluation theory proposes two main opposing approaches: the multidimensional approach and the holistic approach.

• **Multidimensional approach**

From this perspective, the evaluation of purchase alternatives follows a multi-stage process that begins with the perception of product attributes. This first stage involves consideration of the physical and functional attributes of the product, such as quality, design and performance. Consumers then analyse these features to determine their relevance to their needs and preferences. This perception stage is crucial as it forms the basis on which consumers build their initial evaluation of the product.

Secondly, this perception is related to the consumer's pre-existing knowledge and beliefs (Anderson, 1982), where product information is related to the consumer's past experiences, opinions and expectations. For example, a consumer who has had a positive experience with a particular brand may evaluate new products from that brand more favourably. This knowledge integration stage allows the consumer to filter and contextualise the new information received, thereby influencing the way he or she perceives the product in question.

Finally, the evaluation concludes with an overall judgement of the product, resulting from the integration of perceived attributes and pre-existing beliefs. This method requires in-depth analytical processing of information and is particularly suited to considered purchases, where the consumer takes the time to carefully consider the options available. This approach assumes the existence of a well-defined cognitive structure for organising and analysing information. Product attributes are examined in detail, leading to in-depth analytical processing and a more informed purchase decision.

• **Holistic approach**

According to this approach, product evaluation is largely influenced by an affective response generated by the product itself or the decision context. The information used in this evaluation is generally associated with the emotions felt at the time of product analysis, leading to simplified or holistic evaluation processes (Pham & Avnet, 2004). This approach suggests that there is a link between the cognitive and affective aspects of memory. When evaluating product features, memorised categorical schemas (such as beliefs and associated emotions) are spontaneously activated, allowing the product to be evaluated on dimensions that are difficult to grasp prior to purchase (Odou, 2000).

Memory activation can create a contagion effect, influencing the overall evaluation of the product and the valuation of its attributes. For example, the use of the anchoring and adaptation heuristic allows the consumer to draw on pre-existing, memorised evaluations. These evaluations may relate to a previously evaluated product, with judgments based on pre-existing affects associated with the category activated by the product stimuli, or to a product associated with a cognitive category comprising several products. The categorical emotion associated with the brand acts as an anchor to form a first impression of the product and an initial evaluation influenced by the consumer's affective state at the time of evaluation (Levy, 2003).

In summary, the product evaluation stage is an information processing process that can take place by evaluating product attributes (Fiske, 1992) or by activating affect-related categorical schemas (Odou, 2000). Consumers use different evaluation strategies depending on their motivation, their ability to process information, their familiarity with the product and the complexity of the task. They may also use heuristics or cognitive shortcuts to facilitate their choices (Pham, 1996).

4. The buying decision: Analysis of the key steps and variable factors influencing the purchase act

Once the purchase decision has been made, the actual transaction begins, including payment, choice of delivery method and order processing. At this stage, the consumer can either proceed with the purchase or decide not to purchase. If the decision is negative, it may be definitive (no purchase planned now or in the future) or temporary (the purchase is simply postponed) (Mollá et al., 2006). Environmental factors such as psychological changes, the social environment, perceived risk (financial, physical, social, psychological, loss of time) as well as situational factors such as product unavailability or promotions can influence this decision (Stern, 1962).

After purchase, consumers store information and experiences associated with the product that can enrich their experience and influence future attitudes towards the product and the company. The results of the purchase, whether positive or negative, are memorised and serve as a basis for future purchase decisions (Guichard & Vanheems, 2004). In short, the purchase decision involves a careful evaluation of the available options and is influenced by a variety of factors. Understanding this process helps companies to better understand consumer preferences and develop more effective marketing strategies to reach their target audience.

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5. post-purchase reactions: product evaluation, cognitive dissonance and brand loyalty implications

The final stage of the consumer decision process concerns post-purchase evaluation, where behaviour is motivated by product use and consumption, generating feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Customers evaluate their purchase according to their pre-purchase expectations. However, even if the product meets the customer's needs, it may create uncertainty or negative feelings, a situation known as "cognitive dissonance". This cognitive dissonance can have two main causes: the uncertainty associated with choosing between several options before the purchase, and unfavourable information or dissatisfaction observed after using the product (Mollá et al., 2006).

If the post-purchase experience exceeds expectations, the customer perceives value for money and is more likely to repeat the purchase. Conversely, if the product does not meet expectations, the customer is less likely to make a repeat purchase and may even share negative opinions (Hawkins, 2004). It is at this point that positive or negative attitudes towards the brand are formed, which influence brand loyalty.

In short, post-purchase feelings encompass all the emotions and impressions after a purchase and play a crucial role in the purchase process, influencing future decisions. These feelings can vary depending on several factors, such as the type of product, its cost, initial expectations, return policy and the consumer's previous experiences.

II. Marketing And The Purchase Decision: From Awakening Unconscious Needs To Optimizing Conscious Choices

The purchase decision process is a complex dynamic combining unconscious and conscious elements, much of which is shaped by marketing strategies. In a world where consumers are constantly bombarded with advertising stimuli, marketing plays a crucial role in creating and awakening needs, often before consumers are fully aware of these desires. Using various channels such as advertising, social media and promotions, marketing helps to create mental and emotional associations with brands and products, building a subconscious foundation that influences future decisions.

As consumers become more aware of their needs and want to make informed decisions, marketing continues to interact with them in a more conscious way. Consumers begin to actively seek information, compare options and evaluate criteria such as quality and price. Marketing plays a fundamental role in this stage, providing objective information and facilitating the identification of specific needs. This stage is crucial as it guides consumers to make more informed choices while reinforcing their perceptions of brands and products.

Finally, optimising conscious choices is an area where marketing is proving its effectiveness. Companies are using strategies such as personalising offers, targeting market segments and creating incentives to motivate consumers to buy. By skilfully balancing the unconscious and conscious aspects of the decision-making process, marketing can not only influence consumers' choices, but also build lasting, positive relationships with them. Understanding this interplay between awakening unconscious needs and optimising conscious choices is essential to developing effective marketing strategies that respond to consumer expectations and behaviours in an ever-changing environment.

1. Marketing's influence on the consumer decision-making process: From awakening needs to creating purchase incentives

Marketing plays a crucial role in consumers' decision-making process, intervening at different levels to influence their choices and preferences (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). It starts by making consumers aware of previously unidentified needs or wants, using different channels such as advertising, social media and blogs to influence this initial stage (Salomon, 2016). Particularly in the pre-purchase phase, marketing is key to building brand and product awareness (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010). This awareness is fundamental for companies to build brand recognition and showcase their products or services, facilitating the identification of needs by familiarising consumers with the options available.

Marketing also has a major impact on how consumers perceive a product or brand. By providing a range of information such as product descriptions, customer reviews, buying guides and comparisons, marketing helps consumers better understand their needs and find appropriate solutions. It also engages consumers through interactive campaigns, social networks, webinars and forums, answering their questions and building their trust in the brand (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2016). This approach fosters a better understanding and stronger engagement of consumers with the brand.

In addition, marketing allows companies to target specific segments of consumers according to their needs, preferences and behaviours. By personalising marketing messages, companies make their offers more relevant and encourage consumers to seriously consider buying. Marketing also creates incentives such as promotions, discounts and special offers that speed up the decision-making process. In summary, marketing plays a crucial role in the pre-purchase stage by facilitating the identification of needs, influencing perceptions, providing information, engaging consumers, enabling precise targeting and creating incentives to guide purchase decisions (Dahlen, Lange and Smith, 2010). It continues to influence purchase decisions through loyalty strategies, word-of-mouth and personalisation, enabling companies to better reach their target audiences in a competitive marketplace.

2. The buying decision process: Balancing the unconscious and conscious in the context of contemporary marketing

Purchase decision making is a complex process that often oscillates between the unconscious and the conscious, and is influenced by a variety of factors. Many purchase decisions begin in the unconscious, where individuals are exposed to advertisements,

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promotions, or other marketing stimuli without being fully aware of them (Belch & Belch, 2018). This preliminary exposure can lead to familiarity with a brand or product, even if it is not immediately recognised. Emotions and associations, whether positive or negative, associated with a brand also play a crucial role in this process, which is often largely unconscious.

As consumers become aware of their needs or wants, they enter a more conscious phase of the decision-making process (Aaker & Williams, 1998). They begin to actively seek information, compare different options and evaluate different criteria such as quality, price and availability. This awareness marks the transition of the decision-making process from an unconscious to a more reflective phase.

However, even at this conscious stage, the unconscious continues to influence consumer choices. Pre-existing emotions, prejudices, habits and mental associations can still play an important role, even when individuals believe they are making rational decisions (Salomon, 2016). For example, a consumer may prefer a brand because of a previous positive experience without being fully aware of it. In marketing, this interaction between the unconscious and the conscious is essential: marketing strategies aim to influence both aspects by creating positive associations and providing objective information to guide purchase decisions (Heath, 2012).

3. Marketing strategies to navigate between subconscious awareness and conscious decision: Optimising the impact on buying behaviour

In the modern marketing landscape, understanding how to navigate between unconscious arousal and conscious decision is key to optimising the impact on buying behaviour. Marketing strategies must be designed to influence both unconscious and conscious consumer processes to drive favourable purchase decisions. This involves a combination of tactics to elicit emotional responses and provide relevant information to support considered decisions (Belch & Belch, 2018).

Subconscious arousal techniques such as product placement, emotional advertising campaigns and sensory marketing are crucial in creating brand familiarity and preference before the consumer is fully aware of it. For example, brands can use memorable visual and auditory elements to reinforce positive associations in consumers' minds. The aim is to build a brand image and embed positive emotions that subtly influence future preferences and purchase behaviour, even before consumers make a conscious decision.

At the same time, marketing strategies need to address the deliberative stage of the decision-making process by providing clear, relevant information. This includes providing detailed product descriptions, competitive comparisons, customer reviews and buying guides. By making it easier to find information and answer consumers' questions, companies can help customers objectively assess their options and make informed choices. Promotions, special offers and targeted marketing messages are effective ways of encouraging consumers to take action.

Finally, an effective strategy must incorporate elements of post-purchase feedback and evaluation to continually refine marketing approaches. By gathering data on purchase behaviour, preferences and customer satisfaction, companies can adjust their strategies to better meet consumer needs. This approach creates an enhanced shopping experience and strengthens brand loyalty by continuing to positively influence consumer perceptions and behaviours, both at an unconscious and conscious level.

CONCLUSION

The buying process, from need identification to post-purchase satisfaction, is a complex sequence of decisions and behaviours that influence consumers on a daily basis. This research shows that the process often lies between the unconscious and the conscious, with a constant interplay between these two dimensions.

The unconscious plays a crucial role, as marketing stimuli create associations, emotions and prejudices that influence consumers' choices, even when they believe they are making rational decisions. At the same time, the buying process is also conscious, with consumers actively seeking information, comparing options and evaluating different criteria.

Marketing intervenes at several levels to shape these processes. It initiates consumer awareness by creating needs or desires, facilitates the recognition of needs by presenting products and brands, and guides consumers to informed choices with objective information. It also personalises offers, targets specific groups and creates incentives to buy.

Understanding the complexities of consumer psychology and harnessing these mechanisms enables companies to develop more effective marketing strategies. They can reach their target audience, positively influence purchase decisions and build lasting relationships with their customers.

Ultimately, the purchase decision process combines the science of psychology with the art of marketing and is constantly evolving as new products, services and communication channels emerge. Consumers are all influenced by this process, and marketers have a responsibility to understand and respect the needs and preferences of their target audience in order to create exceptional buying experiences.

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