



Embarrassment of Product Choices 1

How to Consume Differently

Michel Millot



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Preface

Making a Choice Means Solving a Problem

Unable to escape from a seemingly never-ending barrage of commercial marketing, advertising, disinformation and even scams, consumers and purchasers fall victim to the economic necessity of companies. How is it possible to consciously take into account factors including usage, convenience and the environment, together with the benefits of marketing and technology, to ultimately provide a better quality of life?

In reality, the consumer/purchaser is nothing more than a consumer of illusions: the many different powers of hype, publicity and disinformation mean that they are sold little more than fantasies. When choosing a product, the consumer finds themselves obligated to navigate through a barrage of unnecessary but deliberate over information or misinformation; not just too much information, but information that is useless, even misleading. Over information is a source of disruption because of its impact on the ability of consumers to process information in a relevant way. It is also a means of manipulation, because the mental confusion it generates leaves scarce room for reasoning.

In any case, the available information on products and services is still far too commercial (e.g. prospectuses, advertising materials, websites, sellers, etc.) or technical (i.e. descriptions, specialized press materials, laboratory measurements).

There is a global mismatch between the reality of the quality of products and the perception that customers have of them. The information that reaches consumers is almost always nebulous, widely varying in nature, and incomplete. Even the “best” choice or the “best” quality/price relationship given by consumer organizations is often too simplistic or illusory, and the ostensibly unbiased information clearly comes with the risk of making inappropriate choices for varying use cases. For their part, the consumer or purchaser, without an appropriate level of basic education on marketing tactics and the psychological effects of advertising, is inclined to make the least amount of effort: exactly what marketing departments hope for, and what their campaigns are geared toward. The consumer/purchaser does not have the intellectual and material resources to determine the true quality, uses and characteristics of products, let alone the specifics of what an optimal purchasing decision requires.

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Michel MILLOT
July 2018

Introduction

The Hegemony of Market Value

I.1. Market value versus usage value: customers, consumers and users

The many different complex relationships between products, users and backgrounds have yet to be considered as valid and serious issues. Market values have dominated usage values, for a multitude of reasons. It may be some time before marketing professionals figure out that it is a bad idea to confuse their own consumers (i.e. the customers) and their users, a mistake that can have serious consequences. The market economy, which claims to serve consumers, has instead enslaved them, reducing them to mere economic accessories. This is a system that works as long as it remains profitable. Ultimately however, this is of little importance, as often, the people making the purchases are not necessarily the ones who will use the product, nor the ones who will have to deal with its irritations!

Sales figures have no direct connection with the “quality” of a product. It is therefore “logical” that all efforts have been made on the market value, with its usage value reduced to the idea of the “essential function of the product”, to the motive of the purchase (it has *this* function, it assists with *this* task, it is used to do *that*, etc.). As we will see, this system only works because consumers are not clear about their choices.

Information about products or services is organized according to profits, and not according to the cases and/or requirements for use. The system encourages us to consume, to equip ourselves with lots of stuff, and in fact to not use these products very often – otherwise, in the absence of an education about the market, users would have more power as customers and buyers.

Thus, the number of intermediaries who intervene throughout the purchasing chain has steadily increased with the increasing complexity of economic and social structures. These intermediaries function as the interpreters of future users, predicting their needs and desires. The result is an inevitable dilution of responsibility with regard to the interpretation of users' requirements. The criteria of use determined at the purchasing stage are thus only taken into account after the product is purchased and used, and prove to be warped and distorted. Whatever we proclaim, the awareness of the factors relating to usage and the environment is a concern that has been almost completely set aside. Our choices in the consumption of objects and soliciting of services are thoroughly placed under the control of and remain firmly in the grip of technology and marketing.

1.2. A sucker's market

Nobody ever sets out to be scammed. Yet this is exactly what happens to us every day: we fall for unnecessary or dangerous medicines, falsely innovative products, services with hidden charges, etc. Far from being accidental, lies and manipulation are an integral part of commerce. Why is this? Because the balance of the market is not necessarily perfect. The competition is such that any opportunity for profit is systematically exploited, resulting all too often in a "sucker's market", filled with naïve customers who have been deceived. But also, accepting the mechanism of how we receive information leads us to make bad economic decisions.

For marketing strategists, the "needs" of the consumer remain "sacred", at least in terms of principles. The motivations and desires that arise make it possible to sell and produce more. Does this really generate the greatest benefit for everyone? As the saying goes, "A product that sells well is a good product". Marketing-specific methods are used to determine and interpret the needs of the consumer – but their main focus is always their own, not the consumer's: the struggle to compete.

The ambiguous notion of the "quality" of a product bears witness to this fact. What kind of quality does this involve? Longevity, fabrication methods, user-friendliness? And is price the only cost-related factor for the consumer? These concepts all factor into the "manipulation" of the value of a product. In this way, the appearance and images seem rewarding for the consumer – and in equal measure, offering a pay-off for their marketing teams. How

many household “gizmos” quickly end up pushed to the bottom of drawers, largely because they are difficult to use? How many electronic gadgets, HD channels or smartphone apps are completely forgotten the day after they are purchased? The gleam from their sophistication wears off, and under normal usage conditions they are more or less useless, and in some cases, can even be used incorrectly! How many recreational boats and RVs are quickly put back up for sale, because their owners cannot comfortably pay their actual costs, or don’t have enough time to fully enjoy them? Many users later think that they would have been better off buying something else. Moreover, the motivations or “needs” indicated by the purchaser are not necessarily the same as those of the end-user.

Information on the requirements of users is not only lacking, but it is confused with the requirements of consumers/customers, as determined by marketing departments. The choice of products is not left to the user, but it is decided by people who do not themselves do “work” or activities with the product. As an example, as the number of people who outsource their house cleaning declines, would there perhaps arise demand for more user-friendly vacuum cleaners?

The Power of Words

1.1. The power of word-of-mouth

Many consumers make their buying decisions by relying on people they trust, for example, the people within their social circles. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that word-of-mouth is the oldest form of commercial communication: consumers primarily rely on information from people they know.

Having a conversation with another person is not very difficult, because you know who you are talking to. Language and gestures are related to reactions to questions and advice. Communication is interactive!

Word-of-mouth generally acts as a recommendation for a product. It is often positive when done verbally between close friends and family, but it can be much more critical when done through the relative anonymity of the Internet and social media – which in today's world also function as “electronic word-of-mouth”. This is one of the main drivers of purchasing decisions outside of stores.

The consumer or client highly values advice from family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and so forth. However, these tips can be somewhat partial, biased or unfounded. They can also be mere rumors. And neighbors and other users of the product do not necessarily have the same use requirements or the same kinds of expectations for a product's function. Unbiased word-of-mouth recommendations and the informed advice of friends, as comforting as they may be, are few and far between.

1.1.1. The Internet and electronic word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth communication about products and services has only been amplified with the pervasiveness of the Internet and social media. When choosing a new product, our natural reflex is now to go grab our computers, cell phones or tablets. We no longer receive advice from just a few family members or friends. Comments are spread quickly to a large number of information seekers, who similarly have a wealth of commentary to choose from. Communication known as *consumer-to-consumer* (or C2C) is facilitated easily through online conversations on consumer forums and social networks.

The main asset of the electronic word-of-mouth is that it is relatively fast and usually completely free. This has led to an industry infatuation with marketing strategies that harness this power and its potential for publicity by establishing discussions and exchanges of information that purport to be from impartial consumers. But this attempt by marketing techniques to control a product's messaging has its limits. This mainly applies to product vouchers (advertising vouchers). However, management of this form of marketing about products and services is difficult, due to the fact that delegating word-of-mouth communications to consumers leads to a loss of control over the information to be transmitted, and can leave the product open to intense and visible criticism, particularly if consumers have doubts about the authenticity of the initial message.

1.1.2. Advertising marketing and word-of-mouth marketing

Tips given freely on the Internet help you to make choices. As surprising as it may sound, these opinions – whether biased or unbiased – are nevertheless a form of marketing: marketing via word-of-mouth. It is based on the principle of blending in with the opinions and conversations between users, customers and potential customers. In marketing, it is helpful to convince consumers that generating revenue from free things is a part of the sharing economy! So its slogan could be: “You have to give to receive!” Therefore, it is the antithesis of advertising. “The difference between advertisers and word-of-mouth marketers is that word-of-mouth marketers

are interested first and foremost in other people”. Advertisements do not give assurances, let alone information for making choices.

With this knowledge in mind, brands now actively try to create discussions and word-of-mouth. For someone to talk about a brand’s product, they must obviously appreciate the product, but they must also trust the brand and its values. Therefore, brands should facilitate the conversation by giving a good reason to talk about their products. This means that the brand must be remarkable; it must deserve being talked about.

Word-of-mouth remains the best tool for marketing. When undertaking these campaigns, the brand does not use industry jargon (“targets”, “campaigns”, etc.) which may be unfit for social media, and may confuse legitimate customers. Instead of investing fortunes in advertising, creating good buzz for a service or favorable word-of-mouth for a supplier is much better! Marketing departments now try to create discussions and word-of-mouth. They facilitate conversations about products by giving people a reason to talk about them. They also must avoid drawing attention to any suspicions, falsehoods, or even the smallest manipulation, by not indulging them.

Before buying a product, consumers relying on online word-of-mouth must be able to see that previous customers appreciate and/or recommend it; they must believe in it. The product must be admirable or outstanding, worthy of saying something good about. The products are sent out to be seen more directly by the customers, by aiming for a relatively high level of visibility. The issue of this word-of-mouth is quite considerable: building trust leads to good reputations. Word-of-mouth can make or break the reputation of a product. A bad opinion has a stronger impact than a positive experience. Bad opinions are powerful since overall consumer belief in the product is perceived to be weak. On the Internet, this is the simplest way to argue about a particular product, and the one with the most presence. Consumers are increasingly expressing themselves outside their circles of friends – or over the office water cooler – and taking advantage of the formidable sounding board that is the Internet. Consumers feel empowered by having access to this communication medium, and gain a certain self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction. C2C product information, ever more accessible and easier to obtain, is usually the information that has the most impact on emotions, and ultimately, the purchasing behavior of consumers.

1.1.3. Social influence

The emotions, thoughts and behaviors of consumers are greatly influenced by the people around them. Word-of-mouth feeds on these interactions, which are often done thoughtlessly. The perceived quality, spoken of by real users and customers themselves, makes the products immediately more desirable. If a customer is won over by the product, they will make an extra effort to buy it, regardless of price.

Customers generally tend to treat the information they perceive with frivolity and superficiality, even while not recognizing the messages' subconscious impact. However, on the contrary, some sources of information prompt them to think about it more deeply.

Social influence is the pressure placed on a person or consumers by society, which generates motivations for buying. There are different ways of exercising this power. Social influence is able to change the purchasing behaviors, viewpoints and opinions of a consumer or a group of consumers, as a result of the contact between one or more other consumers. Consumers with doubts or a lack of confidence are the most predisposed to accommodate these influences. They are looking for a kind of protection in being included in the crowd. The consumer is thus conflicted between the desire to be the same as others, and therefore acceptable and not being rejected, and the desire to be different, original, to stand out from other consumers.

Social influence refers to socio-emotional desires at the level of self-esteem, social acceptance, empathy and relationships, and holding opinions recognized by other people. But, by contrast, changes, innovations and influences of a minority are a rejection of social influence by the group.

These deviations, which are characterized by non-conformity, deliberately strive to break out from the values of the group, focusing on their own values. The consumer/customer then chooses a brand or product that will represent their unique identity.

In fact, social influence applies across a very broad area. It corresponds to the pressure of our peers and colleagues, all the way up to all of society. In this sense, it requires the questioning of an "expert" to obtain information in order to be able to make the best choice. A potential consumer, frustration by