

Maliarchuk E.
K.P. Pilova, research supervisor
S.I. Kostritskaya, language adviser
National Mining University

HOW CONSUMERS BUY

Possibly the most challenging concept in marketing deals with understanding why buyers do what they do (or don't do). Using this information, marketers can create marketing programs that they believe will be of interest to customers.

The factors affecting how customers make decisions are extremely complex. Buyer behavior is deeply rooted in psychology with dashes of sociology. The number of potential influence on consumer behavior is limitless. However, marketers are well served to understand the key influences such as perceptual filter, purchase situation, knowledge, attitude, personality, lifestyle, roles, motivation, culture and other group membership. By doing so they may be in a position to tailor their marketing efforts to take advantage of these influences in a way that will satisfy the consumer and the marketer.

The process of the buying itself is presented in a sequence of five steps. Marketers should realize that depending on the circumstances surrounding the purchase the importance of each step may vary.

In the first step the consumer has determined that for some reason he is not satisfied and wants to improve his situation. Marketers are particularly good at this through advertising, in-store displays and even the intentional use of scent. At this stage the decision-making process may stall if the consumer is not motivated to continue. Needs, want and desire are recognized.

Consumers are motivated to satisfy their need, they will undertake a search for information on possible solutions. The sources used to acquire this information may be as simple as remembering information from past experience, or the consumer may locate information from outside sources. How much effort the consumer directs toward searching depends on such factors as: the importance of satisfying the need, familiarity with available solutions, and the amount of time available to search. To appeal to consumers who are at the search stage, marketers should make efforts to ensure consumers can locate information related to their product.

Consumers' search efforts may result in a set of options from which a choice can be made. There may be two levels to this stage. At level one the consumer may create a set of possible solutions to his needs while at level two the consumer may be evaluating particular products within each solution. Marketers need to understand how consumers evaluate product options and why some products are included while others are not.

In many cases the solution chosen by the consumer is the same as the product whose evaluation is the highest. However, this may change when it is actually time to make the purchase. The "intended" purchase may be altered at the time of purchase for many reasons such as: the product is out-of-stock, a competitor offers an incentive at the point-of-purchase, the customer lacks the necessary funds, or members of the consumer's reference group take a negative view of the purchase.

Once the consumer has made the purchase they are faced with an evaluation of the decision. If the product performs below the consumer's expectation then he will re-evaluate satisfaction with the decision, which at its extreme may result in the consumer returning the product while in less extreme situations the consumer will retain the purchased item but may take a negative view of the product. Such evaluations are more likely to occur in cases of expensive or highly important purchases. To help ease the concerns consumers have with their purchase evaluation, marketers need to be receptive and even encourage consumer contact. Customer service centers and follow-up market research are useful tools in helping to address purchasers' concerns.

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