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Resources

Four Consumer Behavior Theories Every Marketer Should Know



Marketing in the 21st century is part art and part science, and both sides place a crucial role in successful marketing. Creative expression develops marketing campaigns that catch the eye and capture the imagination, but behind every marketing strategy are theories grounded solidly in psychology, economics, and studies in human behavior. The scientific insights help marketers design campaigns that speak to the fundamental concerns and desires of their audience, greatly deepening the impact of the marketing materials.

At the heart of the scientific study of marketing are key insights about consumer behavior, or why consumers buy and act the way they do. Theories of consumer behavior address important issues, such as how consumers purchase as individuals versus how they purchase in groups, the role of emotions in purchasing decisions, post-purchase attitudes, and the role of object utility. Understanding these issues enhances a marketing campaign's effectiveness and its impact on consumers.

To determine consumer behavior, marketers use numerous consumer behavior models.

Theory of Reasoned Action

Created by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in the late 1960s, the Theory of Reasoned Action centers its analysis on the importance of pre-existing attitudes in the decision-making process. The core of the theory posits that consumers act on a behavior based on their intention to create or receive a particular outcome. In this analysis, consumers are rational actors who choose to act in their best interests.

According to the theory, specificity is critical in the decision-making process. A consumer only takes a specific action when there is an equally specific result expected. From the time the consumer decides to act to the time the action is completed, the consumer retains **the ability to change** his or her mind and decide on a different course of action.

Marketers can learn several lessons from the Theory of Reasoned Action. First, when marketing a product to consumers, marketers must associate a purchase with a positive result, and that result must be specific. Axe Body Spray used this concept very effectively by linking its product to desirability with women. Second, the theory highlights the importance of moving consumers through the sales pipeline. Marketers must understand that long lags between initial intention and the completion of the action allows consumers plenty of time to talk themselves out of a purchase or question the outcome of the purchase.

Engel, Kollet, Blackwell (EKB) Model

The EKB Model expands on the Theory of Reasoned Action, and lays out a five-step process that consumers use when making a purchase. The first step, input, is where consumers absorb most of the marketing materials they see on television, newspapers or online. Once the consumer collects the data, he or she moves into information processing, where the consumer compares the input to past experiences and expectations.

Consumers move to the decision-making stage after a period of thought, choosing to make a purchase based on rational insight. Consumers are affected in the decision-making phase by process variables and external influences, including how the consumer envisions his or herself after making the purchase.

Under the EKB Model, marketers have two periods where their input is the most valuable. During the initial information stage, marketers must provide consumers with enough information about the product to drive the consumer to keep the company's products under consideration for purchase. Marketing becomes a factor again in the phase of external influences. Lifestyle brands are very good at instilling desire in the consumer to look or feel a certain way with the product, even if the brand's product is not fundamentally different from the competition.

Motivation-Need Theory

Abraham Maslow put forward his hierarchy of needs in 1943, sending ripple effects through the entire psychological community. Under his theory, people act to fulfill their needs based on a five-part priority system. The needs include, in order of importance: physiological (survival), safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization.

Business schools and marketing classes adapted Maslow's theories to explain the need to tailor marketing messages to consumers in a particular way. Successful marketing campaigns must not only bring awareness to a product, but also establish its place somewhere on the hierarchy of needs. Consumers are motivated to prioritize purchases toward the base of the hierarchy, so it is vital that companies draft a message that instills a sense of need or urgency in consumers.

Marketers have been able to use motivation-need theory very effectively by creating an artificial need for consumers. Modern luxury carmakers are especially good at highlighting the safety and security features of their vehicles over the aesthetic. In the consumer's mind, they need to spend the money on an expensive luxury car because it is the only way they can provide adequate safety features for their family.

Hawkins Stern Impulse Buying

While many of the theories of consumer behavior focus on rational action, Hawkins Stern believed heavily in the idea of impulse behavior. Stern argued that sudden buying impulses fit alongside rational purchasing decisions to paint a complete picture of the average consumer. Impulse purchases are driven largely by external stimuli, and have almost no relationship to traditional decision-making.

Stern established four categories of impulse buying. First are the purely impulse purchases, like a candy bar at the checkout line of a grocery store. Second, consumers make reminded impulse buys, like placing a display of hot dogbuns next to a meat cooler. Third are suggested impulse purchases, such as a warranty for an electronic device. Finally, consumers make planned impulse decisions, where they know they want to buy a product, but are unsure about the specifics.

Impulse buying theories present an ocean of opportunities for marketers. Every aspect of a product, from the way the packaging catches the eye to the way the product is displayed in the store, has an impact on a consumer's impulse control. Marketers who can capture the impulsive thought and close the sale will have the most success.

Consumer behavior theories predict how consumers make purchasing decisions and show marketers how best to **capitalize on predictable behaviors**. Though impulse purchases are a significant part of a consumer's buying patterns, rational decision-making processes dominate consumer behavior and affect marketing theory.