

The Consumer's Informational Environment: Ignorance or Bliss?

In the Information Age, knowledge abounds as it can be found everywhere we look. Buyers never need make blind purchases, for there is always a review written by another consumer or an abundance of information provided regarding the product from multiple viewpoints. As consumers, it is our obligation to learn what we need to about the products we purchase. Advertising has proven in countless times past that it will still glaze over specific details that may dissuade consumers from buying a product. Presently, the subject of nationwide obesity is frequently discussed, which draws supposedly stronger scrutiny upon the processes in which food is prepared. Yet, how much do we truly know about the food we eat?

The curious thing to note is that consumers are oftentimes more satisfied with remaining in the dark on how our food is prepared. I would like to expound on what Michael Schudson called the "consumer's information environment." Based on the concepts that he outlines in his book, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, I will explore some of the psychological elements that influence the information environment, both from an advertisement standpoint as well as from the consumer standpoint.

Consumer Information Environment

Advertising in its entirety is dependent largely on the perception of the public regarding its product. Simply put, people would not go to McDonald's if they did not believe the food was prepared in a sanitary fashion. How we obtain the information to make educated decisions on where we would and wouldn't like to go depends on our own consumer information environment. In *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, author Michael Schudson defines eight influencing factors that create the consumer information environment, which are:

1. The consumer's own information
2. Word-of-mouth information
3. Information in the media
4. Information available through formal channels
5. Advertisements for rival products
6. Skepticism about credibility
7. Information from non-advertising channels
8. Price

How we perceive a brand in comparison to another brand, how we perceive a brand based on our own experience and the experience of others, and how we are given information ultimately defines this environment. As much as we would like to believe it however, in many cases consumers are not in control of how that environment is shaped. Advertising attempts to bridge the information divide and answer questions regarding food preparation to lull any potential concerns. When we begin to demand healthy food, advertising gives information regarding preparation processes that would appear to be healthy, though they never change how that food is prepared.

In his study of consumer information environments, James R. Bettman notes the concern of the public regarding public policy in how information environments are designed (169). Typically consumers are only able to obtain information regarding a brand when that brand chooses to share information. This then allows advertisers to share only the best information with the right twist to make it appear better than it really is. What consumers need is the right information in the “‘right’ manner so that consumers can make ‘better’ decisions” (Bettman 169). How do we get that right information though, when anything an advertiser may say is tainted with the bias of their employer?

Examples

The Internet has become an important source of information for consumers. Websites provide numerous locations for consumers to rate services and products and share their experiences with others. This is an invaluable service to help inform fellow consumers. In addition, it provides advertisers with numerous outlets for providing information.

Consumers consider themselves to be rather well-educated individuals where food is concerned. When we aren't, we seek out the information we need through mainstream sources. The internet, health magazines, news articles, each of these provides key information from a different viewpoint. They all help educate us, yet still shift our perceptions of what food or brands are or are not healthy to consume. In some cases, it is quite difficult to locate accurate information. We are then left to the mercy of advertising.

With the focus placed on eating healthy due to increasing obesity rates and health issues among Americans, advertisers have had to come up with some rather creative twists to sell products without actually changing how that product may be manufactured. By making claims that a product is "healthy," it appeals to the vulnerable and uneducated consumer. While these claims may be partially true, there is a great deal of information being left out so that advertising can educate consumers on a need-to-know basis.

Made From 100% Natural Oranges

When we're asked to name a healthy drink found in local grocery stores, many consumers will say orange juice. It's a healthy drink for breakfast and everyone recommends you drink it to recover from illnesses. Even better, the cartons all scream "100 percent natural" and "Not made from concentrate" and "No added sugar." Why shouldn't we believe them? When it comes down to manufacturing orange juice, it's not that complex. You grow oranges, you pick them, you squeeze them,

and you put the resulting liquid in a container with or without pulp. At this point it should be the end of the story.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. What advertisers fail to tell consumers is that the orange juice we purchase could very well be more than a year old and has been subjected to some pretty weird stuff. There is a reason why orange juice tastes the same between brands, even though they may contain no additives or preservatives. The process for making orange juice does indeed start with oranges being squeezed, but that's the first and last step in the normal process. The extracted juice is then sealed in a giant holding tank wherein all oxygen is removed, which allows the liquid to keep from spoiling for up to a year. That's why they can sell this beverage year-round even when oranges are not in season.

While this method of storage may seem a logical alternative to preservatives or additives, it does have one inherent flaw: it removes all taste from the liquid. The end result of this is that manufacturers now have vats of extremely vintage orange juice that tastes just like paper. Because of this, manufacturers must then re flavor the orange juice with a careful combination of chemicals called "flavor packs," which happens to be manufactured by perfume companies. Then they ship the orange-scented flavorless water and sell it to consumers.

It's small things like this that we the consumers can learn to forgive. However, consider the informational environment consumers are given. These little details are not even mentioned on the packaging of orange juice containers. Why? Because of a small loophole in regulations that allows them to glaze over mentioning the flavor pack chemicals in the list of ingredients.

Ammonia-Infused Hamburgers

Let's go a little deeper into the consumer information environment. Fast food companies are quite notorious these days for the health issues that consumers accuse them of. For the sake of social bias, we shall continue with the assumption that fast food is unhealthy. While the consumer information

environment may stress the unhealthiness of fast food through news articles and polls, it fails to place enough focus on the actual practices that go into making fast food. We understand that the processing that goes into preparing meat patties isn't exactly natural, though consumers seem to be content at simply knowing it's not healthy.

Before delving into "why" consumers are content with any level of knowledge concerning a product's manufacturing, I'd like to explore once more into "how" something is made. Any restaurant worth its salt will try to go out of its way to reassure consumers how pure and natural their beef is, though some of us may not take them at their word. These claims are that the beef is grown in the U.S., they're 100% premium beef, they are USDA inspected, and passed a checklist of quality measures for that establishment. The emphasis they put on how natural the meat is would rival how a five star restaurant would stress the quality of its filet mignon.

They stress the natural preparation of the meat to reassure us that it's clean. Why do we want to know how clean it is? So that we can rest easy that we won't get E. coli when we digest that bad boy. How do manufacturers protect against outbreaks like that? Ammonia. This chemical also happens to be used in fertilizers and oven cleaners because of how harsh they are on bacteria. And point of the matter, it kills E. coli quite effectively.

In many cases, consumers have not heard about ammonia being used on meat unless they've heard stories from folks who've had to return their meat because it stunk of ammonia so badly. This is caused through the ammonia "application" process. They pass hamburgers through a pipe where it is literally doused in ammonia gas. The process was originally designed by Beef Products Inc., which developed it as a way to use the cheapest parts of a cow rather than the prime cuts of beef. From this, they have managed to corner the burger patty market to the point that they process over 70% of all patties in the United States.

Consumer Psychology

Schudson identifies simply the things which will influence our information environment with such aspects as “facts and figures about a product [...] the emotional responses or social approval of friends or neighbors” (91). The only factors in which advertisers would have influence is facts and figures. Word-of-mouth is known to be one of the most powerful advertising tools available to brands simply because advertisers don’t have to pay for this kind of marketing. Consumers will share their opinions of products based on their own experience, which will influence another consumer’s decision to act.

From this, we can then understand that it is a consumer’s past experience that provides the grounds for decision making and the feedback of family or friends gives the knowledge or internal feeling that “informs and leads to a decision” (Schudson 92). If the consumer deems that a product is suitable to their needs and does an adequate job of addressing that need. In other words, if I feel that going to Jamba Juice is the best way to get a healthy drink, I’m more liable to overlook unscrupulous practices, if any exist.

In one shape or another, information is readily available on a wide variety of food types. However, the presence of information is not always what shapes the consumer information environment. Schudson acknowledges this when he admits that he does not “assume the consumer always actively seeks out information to make a purchasing decision” (91). After finding out how orange juice and hamburger patties are produced, who would want to know what they’re really ingesting on a daily basis? It is ultimately advertising that gives us the assurance we need to continue our current buying habits. When we view advertising for products we currently use, we are more inclined to overlook negative details.

Schudson puts this into perspective with a study about car owners. When car owners were asked about advertising for vehicles they did not own, they scored advertising lower on its level of

belief. That statistic nearly doubled in size, however, for consumers who were asked about ads for vehicles they currently owned. The psychology of the consumer is therefore strongly rooted to products they currently use.

To put this into perspective, I will use myself as an example. As a consumer, I have never liked orange juice, so I do not purchase it. Now that I know what I know about orange juice and its preparation, I feel an even stronger vindication in never purchasing it. Hamburger patties, however, is another story. While I may feel some reservation or a pickier attitude in where I purchase hamburgers, I am still comfortable in eating meat that has been prepared in such a grotesque fashion.

Personal Influence

Given the pulling and oftentimes contradictory nature of advertising and word-of-mouth, the question then raises of which is more influential to the consumer information environment. Advertising provides very convincing facts and statistics, accreditations and certifications, and other details to make it seem like their product is on the up-and-up. However, when compared against personal influencing factors like the opinions of a consumer's family and friends, advertising can have little hold on perceptions and belief.

Schudson supports this with his description of a study performed on women in Decatur, Illinois. To the surprise of the researchers, they found that "personal influence made more of a difference than the mass media" (95). An effective example of this was a rumor that affected Procter & Gamble in 1982 which linked the company to Satanism. While this is a rather extreme example, it illustrates the power of personal influence over that of mass media. Shoppers threatened to boycott, others accosted salesmen, and many more bogged down the company's phone lines with protests. In the end, this proved a significant "distraction to conducting business" (Schudson 94).

In most cases, personal influence does not go to such extremes. When a consumer meets with friends or shops at a store online, they seek out the opinions of their peers to influence their decision to

buy. When I shop through Amazon.com or NewEgg.com, I read through reviews to determine what value I would be getting out of a product or if I should avoid it. When a product has no reviews, I am less inclined to buy. When I want to go to a new restaurant, I seek out the feedback of family and friends who may have eaten there before. Restaurant advertising is inherently biased, which means the only honest reviews we can find are from fellow consumers. They have nothing to gain from a recommendation and little to lose from it other than credibility (for those who want it). "Intimates," as they are called, are the ones who will influence the consumer information environment. In a study of who these influentials are, it came to be that 64% were family (Schudson 96). For married women, their spouses were the strongest influencers.

Conclusion

The consumer information environment is always available in one form or another. Some products have a larger environment, whereas others are quite minimal. The depth to the information environment we create is largely dependent on how interested we are in seeking out information. Our buying patterns are a key influencer for how interested we are in learning more about a product. If we currently use it, we're more inclined to seek out more information on it. If we want to use it, we research it. And how do consumers generally do their research? They either go online to view other consumer reviews or they ask their peers. While advertising would make itself out to be an influencing factor, in many cases it takes a back seat to the more influential word-of-mouth marketing. The consumer information environment is what we the consumer make it out to be. By actively seeking information we can influence our decisions to purchase. By controlling our consumer information environment, rather than letting it control us, we can decide what purchases to make.

Works Cited

Bettman, James R. "Issues in Designing Consumer Information Environments." *Journal of Consumer Research* 2.3 (1975), 169-174. Print.

Schudson, Michael. *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984. Print.