How customers choose your brand

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Neuroscientists believe that increasing the comparisons available may actually reduce happiness

But if vendors are offering all this extra choice to increase buyer satisfaction, they might well be making a mistake. Neuroscientists believe that increasing the comparisons available may actually reduce happiness, for the simple reason that people tend to regret the decision they made because of the additional options they couldn't pick.

Imagine yourself walking down an aisle in a supermarket. It would be fair, I think, to assume that most of you are in 'autopilot mode', just there to pick up items necessary for you and your family in the shortest possible time. Yet everywhere you look you are bombarded by countless similar offers, all of them trying to catch your attention, all of them trying to persuade you to buy them by telling you how much better they are than the competition.

The problem is that almost all market categories are saturated with similar propositions presenting themselves to customers with almost identical 'touchpoints' (the term designers use to refer to the points of contact between a customer and a product or service).

Ketchup bottles, Stockholm supermarket

However from time to time a company will emerge who introduces a product with an innovative, disruptive proposition, combined with unique and compelling touchpoints for customers. If it's successful, the way that product presents itself will become the new standard for others to follow.

Companies and brands are constantly battling to claim the leadership in their category. But even though every brand wants to lead, most end up creating touchpoints that are very similar to their competitors. This results in the marketplace perception of many products with similar propositions - and the feeling of supermarket aisle overload.

So are brands just playing it safe by choosing a similar approach to their competitors, or is there something else behind this strategy?

To understand what's going on, it helps to look at what's happening from the point of view of cognitive psychology and neuroscience.

Rules of thumb

In their book *Welcome to Your Brain*, Sandra Aamodt and Sam Wang wrote that, 'Most of the time, your brain favors speed, interpreting events based on rules of thumb that are easy to apply, but not always logical.'

This idea is based on concept in psychology called dual process theory. Its basic idea is that when weighing-up options individuals use both an unconscious (emotional or gut-feeling) process and a conscious (rational and structural) process. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman labels the two processes System 1 (intuition) and System 2 (reasoning).

Our intuition is based on well-established habits and so is very difficult to change or manipulate

System 1 (intuition) thinking is fast and automatic and often relies on emotional cues. Kahneman notes that intuition is based on well-established habits and so is very difficult to change or manipulate. System 2 thinking (reasoning) however, is slower and much more volatile, based on conscious judgments and attitudes.

I would suggest that when choosing a product people tend to make decisions based on intuition and then rationalise those decisions afterwards. They do so because the human brain favors speed: people want to decide as quickly as possible.

This is why I believe it's so important for all businesses to understand the intuitive rules of thumb people use to choose one product over another.

Follow the code

Let's go back to the example of walking down a supermarket aisle. There you are, being bombarded with an enormous amount of information by product after product. Each and every one of them is trying to grab your attention and persuade you to buy them by telling you how much better their propositions is than the others. However, because most of us find a visit to the supermarket more of a chore than a pleasure, you don't want to spend your time evaluating every single piece of information each product offers. The decisions you make are going to be fast and unconscious.

Supermarket shopping relies on a large number of fast unconscious decisions

This is why, in nearly every retail environment, products and their packaging need to attract and persuade potential buyers as fast as possible. They have

to, if they are to seize the lead in their category. With that in mind, the following three points are vital for a product's success.

1. Stand out: does it grab your audiences' attention?
2. Encourage purchase: does it describe a unique proposition with a relevant and meaningful claim in the minimum amount of time?
3. Fit with brand positioning: have you remained authentic to your brand values and beliefs?

So how can rules of thumb help you achieve these three goals?

When picking a product the human brain tries to speed up its decision making process by applying its existing knowledge of a product's category (designers often call this the 'category code'). Let's take cooking oil as an example. Because you can't take in the details of every bottle of oil on the shelves, your brain brings your knowledge of the cooking oil category code into play. You look for the familiar bottle shape, type of photograph and application of a specific colour. And since you are only looking for cooking oil, you won't pay much attention to other items – your knowledge of the cooking oil category code will determine what you take note of.

If you want your propositions to be identified, recognized and seriously considered by people looking to purchase a product in your category, then following the category code is vital.

Breaking the code

However from time to time a company introduces a product with a disruptive proposition, one that if successful may go to set a new standard for its category. So does this mean there are benefits to breaking the code?

By breaking the category code, you obviously run the risk of losing customers: they may not recognize your product any more, much less consider buying it. That said, if you have something different to say, a story to tell that will grab people's attention, then you may well want to change the appearance of your touchpoints in just such a way.

To do this successfully, your propositions should come with revolutionary new benefits, they can't just be evolutionary upgrades

To do this successfully, your propositions should come with revolutionary new benefits – prompted by new technology, new regulations, new infrastructure – they can't just be evolutionary upgrades. And if they are to grab people's attention, then those benefits must be perceived as radically different from all other current market offers. This is where an idea called 'cognitive dissonance' comes in.

'Cognitive dissonance', Robert L Solso explains, is a state of psychological tension caused by experiencing a disparity between what one expected to see and what one actually sees. In the field of art, it is a recognised technique

designed to demand the active participation of a viewer (as opposed to offering an image or sound or experience designed purely to comfort).

For example, the painting *Not to be Reproduced* by René Magritte shows a man standing in front of a mirror. All you can see of him is his back and shoulders. However, what appears in the mirror is exactly the same view of the man – not the face and torso you would expect. What you see is completely wrong in terms of the laws of physics – but is expressly designed to generate a form of creative tension in the viewer that cries out for resolution. The painting is intended to disorient you. And why, once seen, it can't be ignored.

Not to be Reproduced – René Magritte, 1937

Applied to a new product, cognitive dissonance allows you to illustrate your product's revolutionary benefits by creating touchpoints that break with the current category code. This allows you to grab an audience's attention (forcing them to absorb the changes and allowing you to present a new kind of proposition). In doing so you are encouraging people to consider purchasing the product (by communicating its benefits).

Let me offer one example from a well-established category. James Dyson is responsible for the current category code of the bagless vacuum cleaner. I can still remember the impact the Dyson G-Force Cyclonic vacuum cleaner made on me when I saw it in 1990 in Tokyo.

Dyson's iconic product design was - and, with the addition of new benefits such as continuous suction, remains - provocative and aggressive. It emphasizes the company's unique cyclone technology - which when it launched was unlike anything that had been seen before - the 'cognitive dissonance' that the product created in the marketplace made it extremely hard to ignore.

Dyson G-Force Cyclonic vacuum cleaner, 1990

As a result, Dyson as a company managed to draw attention not only to its proposition, but also to the entire vacuum cleaner category. Before its appearance, hardly anyone would have considered the design of vacuum cleaners as something to get excited about.

If your product is successful in the market, then the new category code you have created will become the code other brands will copy and start to apply. If you manage your code, and brand, correctly, then people will see you - and more importantly remember you - as the leader of the category. I do not have to tell you how considerable a business advantage you will gain from this.

Dyson DC54 Animal cylinder vacuum cleaner, 2014
Use the code to break the code

It's also possible, of course, to take a middle way, one that both follows and breaks the two approaches I've just described. And many designers reading this may well say, "That's what I do every day."

Let's go back to the cooking oil example. To be more specific, let's look at olive oil.

As a designer you can analyse - and use - simple elements that appeal to our expectations of the category - in this case, that could be the use of the colour green and images of olives. You can then proceed to break the category code with other elements - such as the size and shape of the bottle - to create a cognitive dissonance that will grab the shopper's attention.

By following elements of the category code, and breaking others, you can create a unique proposition that stands apart from the competition.

Olive oil bottle by mouse graphics for My Olive Tree

As long you have a clear knowledge and understanding of the key codes in your targeted categories this can be a very successful strategy for businesses today. But is this strategy futureproof?

From end-product to end-solution

The category-code is the result of today's mainstream manufacturing business model, a model that has been developed over the last one hundred years or so.

One of the most notable aspects of that model is mass-production - the standard approach for many categories for at least the last century. Today, many companies' organisation, infrastructure, skill-sets, resources, process, know-how and governance model are focused exclusively on the most effective and efficient mass-production methods possible.

General Motors assembly line, 1933

However, as efficient and effective as this may be for certain categories, mass-production demands a commitment of months - or even years - ahead in a company's business plan. And one result of that is that employees tend to focus only on the product. What the customer really wants (their deep motivation) sometimes gets forgotten or ignored.

New technologies will, I believe, help companies shift their internal set up from mass-production to customizable-production

But this is beginning to change. New technologies - the internet, mobile applications and 3D printers, for example - are emerging and altering the current paradigm. These technologies will, I believe, help some companies

shift their internal set up from mass-production to 'customizable-production' on a small (or perhaps even mass) scale.

What this new landscape will require is for companies and brands to shift their mindset away from the production of end products to the delivery of solutions. And by doing that, it will add new layers and challenges to design. It will force designers away from the category code and into whole new areas.

Berg Cloudwash prototype connected washing machine

For example, a fashion brand might make an app to ensure that the clothes it produced were washed correctly. A detergent company might make one to ensure that its detergent delivered the best possible wash. If this were to happen, then a washing machine would become an 'open' device, one that enabled other experts to optimize its use and usability with their applications.

Berg Cloudwash app

Taking the idea further, what if a manufacturer didn't just allow companies the chance to control its washing machine, but also allowed customers the chance to personalise their appliance by, for example, changing it's appearance. What would happen if the washing machine owner could change or replace a part by contacting other companies? Not just the original manufacturer?

What will this mean for today's companies? For me it means that one company will often no longer complete a user experience by itself. It means that it must pool resources with others to deliver the best possible solutions. It means that the current product-focused categories will disappear and new categories will emerge. These new categories will be based on providing solutions that meet all manner of needs, whether they be operating a washing machine or, to cite a more complex solution, monitoring diet and lifestyle to encourage healthy living. The solution will be goal, not the product.

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