



# Book The Truth About What Customers Want

## "...and why they buy..."

Michael Solomon  
FT Press, 2008  
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## Recommendation

If you kept this by your desk and read a short essay every week, it would last you a year (given a quick vacation) and you’d be able to absorb each of consumer behavior lecturer Michael Solomon’s 50 “truths” at a steady, thoughtful pace. Each well-researched insight is designed to stand alone, as opposed to fitting into an overall, conceptual presentation or some governing framework. Still, the temptation is to read them all at once, given the intriguing stories Solomon tells along the way. Despite offering his material in short, disconnected chapters, he shares a lot of solid content and expands on some of his juicier subjects by packing in telling, detailed stories, case histories and information. *BooksInShort* finds that this collection of ideas, notes, facts and findings includes some arresting insights, and recommends it for quick hits of marketing inspiration, either spread over time or happily taken in over a weekend.

## Take-Aways

- Fifty updates from marketing research offer insights that affect your business.
- For example, shifts in buyers’ priorities are making social consciousness an increasingly important marketing touchstone.
- People now seek goods that reflect their concerns about health, ethical values and the environment.
- Individual consumers make choices based on their beliefs and experiences.
- Consider what your customers want at the point of purchase, and before and after they make purchasing decisions.
- Develop bonds with your consumers; they seek relationships.
- People frame problems and make decisions in terms of comparing profits and losses.
- Certain tastes become rooted during young adulthood and linger in memory.
- The internet gives buyers too many options, so you must organize your products. Reach web shoppers via the social media, which they use to stay current.
- Address your customers by ethnic group, gender, family role, sexual preference, age cohort and product preference – identify with them any way you can.

## Summary

### Fifty “Truths” About Your Customers

Consumers use different methods to decide what experiences, goods and services they need to buy. This ongoing process extends far beyond simple purchase decisions. Good marketers consider their customers’ viewpoints well before buyers arrive at the point of sale, and they work to build bonds with consumers before and after a product changes hands. The best marketers are sensitive to their audience at every stage, knowing that the real test of a marketing strategy is how consumers react to it. For marketing to work well, you must know what your customers want. Here are 50 verities that will help you discover and use that information:

1. **“Your customers want a relationship”** – Apple beat Sony in the portable-music business because it recognized that hardware enhancements alone do not build relationships. Apple added specialized content and features to its innovative iPod to create a “brand personality” that gives meaning to a buyer’s link with the company.
2. **“Design it and they will come”** – Good design has mass-market appeal that can even trump quality. Design has moved to the top of the list in the product-creation process – as well as in displays and packaging – because it reaches buyers’ emotions.
3. **“Sensory marketing – smells like profits”** – Since Glade debuted the air freshener in 1956, marketers have become more aware of aroma’s power to link mood and memory. By 2016, scent marketing will be a \$500 million industry.
4. **The power of suggestion** – Marketers often debate the power of subconscious suggestions or hidden shapes and images. While some studies say that subliminal messages might work in some contexts, marketing is not one of them. “Remember, if you can see it or hear it, it’s not subliminal; the stimulus is above the level of conscious awareness.”
5. **Individual interpretations** – People decode common events differently based on their personal “schema” or evaluation criteria, which stem from their individual beliefs and perceptions. The way folks fill in patterns, relate similar items to each other, or project desire onto an item or an ad will affect the way they perceive your product.
6. **Behavioral learning** – The lessons people derive from both positive and negative experiences can create a “halo effect,” transferring their emotions to other products or people. Your advertising can activate these emotions.
7. **“Stay in their minds”** – Recall is a challenge. More than 50% of 13,000 adults polled could not remember any specific ad they had seen within the past 30 days. Recall increases when people pay attention to an ad or when the product is the first of its kind.
8. **“These are the good old days”** – Nostalgic marketing builds on people’s good feelings about the past. Most folks’ favorite songs are ones they liked when they were 23.5 years old and their favorite movie stars were popular when they were 26 or 27. A product that can evoke positive memories ignites strong emotions.
9. **Motivation** – Consumers’ reasons for buying certain products can stem from their beliefs or from their need for “affiliation, power or uniqueness.” Marketers often pander to these needs. For instance, Cachet brand perfumes maintain they are “as individual as you are.”
10. **“He who dies with the most toys wins”** – Values vary by country and personality. People of many different nationalities are de-emphasizing materialism in favor of spirituality and environmental awareness. The core American values are “freedom, youthfulness, achievement and materialism,” but a more spiritual, ecologically aware counterforce is emerging in U.S. society.
11. **“Conscientious consumerism”** – About 16% of U.S. adults say they want products that are healthful, ethically produced and eco-friendly. The market for “socially conscious products” is worth more than \$200 billion.
12. **“Because I’m worth it”** – How people view themselves affects the products they buy. Cater to consumers’ self-esteem by demonstrating the ways that your product can boost their positive feelings about themselves.
13. **“Love me, love my avatar”** – Virtual reality is an increasingly popular marketing tool as more people participate in cyberspace – “the next huge marketing platform.”
14. **“You really are what you wear”** – People who suffer from “incomplete self-definitions” often buy brands that fulfill their identities so they can complete their “extended” selves.
15. **Evolving gender identity** – Culture influences consumers’ gender identities, which affect what they buy. The shifting definition of masculinity may help explain why men “spend \$7.7 billion on grooming products globally each year.”
16. **“Girls just want to have fun”** – Women buy 25% of special auto accessories, influence 75% of consumer electronics purchases and comprise 40% of the total gaming audience.
17. **Lifestyle marketing** – About 6% of the people in the U.S. say that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered – a segment as large as the U.S.’s Asian population. Major brands such as IKEA and Subaru reach out to this significant market segment.
18. **“Yesterday’s chubby is today’s voluptuous”** – A 1941 study of female U.S. Army soldiers became the basis for U.S. clothing sizes. But women are now larger. The most common dress size is 14; in 1985 it was eight. Despite the emphasis on fitness, ads now show more average-sized models and more people who look ordinary.
19. **“Men want to sleep with their cars”** – Archetypes have power. Motivational research applies Freudian ideas and symbolism to draw consumers. Esso (now Exxon) used the slogan “Put a tiger in your tank” to inject animalism and sexuality into gas purchases.
20. **Brand personalities** – Distinctive brands draw loyal customers by putting their familiar imprimatur on their goods. Such permanent brand personalities earn consumer loyalty, but marketers will find it difficult to change public perceptions about well-known brands.
21. **“Birds of a feather buy together”** – People’s tendencies to group themselves by interests empower lifestyle marketing. Marketers can use demographic data to refine targeted market segments based on their interests, activities and opinions.
22. **Situational advertising** – Advertisers love to position their products at aligned social events; for example, beer at barbecues. This requires understanding how your brand intersects with the consumption patterns of specific market segments.
23. **Powerful consumers** – The web gives your customers the power to voice opinions, pro and con, about your products and enables two-way communication between buyers and brands. Marketers can benefit from this, but should be braced for some stinging criticism.
24. **“When to sell the steak, when to sell the sizzle”** – Offer a high-quality message that reinforces buyers’ knowledge about your goods. Use an arresting package or an attractive spokesperson to increase their excitement about lesser-known products.
25. **Mental accounting** – People frame problems and make decisions in terms of profits or losses. They also spend money differently based on where they got it. For instance, they are openhanded with bonuses and conservative with their savings.
26. **Discovering neuro-marketing** – Research finds that brands, products and even celebrity spokespeople can trigger certain positive brain responses and stimulate people to buy. The future applications of this research are still under debate. Your goal is to create a situation where “your customers have your brand on the brain.”
27. **“Let their mouse clicks do the walking”** – The web has given folks too many options. Marketers can mitigate this information overload by helping online buyers “organize” their choices. Internet shoppers really heed the source of a recommendation.
28. **Mental shortcuts** – Buyers associate products with certain external entities, like the country where they were made. Such links, including those based on mistaken assumptions, tend to stem from strong associations or mental shortcuts.
29. **Time pressure** – People hate waiting in lines, so marketers should reduce the time customers wait and take steps to make the wait seem less tedious.
30. **Encourage complaining** – When customers complain, they are asking for help and for a response. Customers are delighted when you solve their dilemmas. Marketers should observe their products in use to detect potential problem areas.

31. **The power of reference groups** – People like to belong to groups. Social scientists rank individual social connections by knowledge, institutional affiliation, expert endorsements, approval, coercion or affiliation. Know your buyers' reference groups.
32. **“Go tribal”** – Consumers develop relationships based on a shared interest.
33. **Following the herd** – People conform to the tastes and choices of the majority because of cultural pressure, fear of being ostracized, interpersonal pressures or group membership. Given the choice, most consumers will conform.
34. **“Catch a buzz”** – When people pass a recommendation along to their friends, the recipients consider it especially trustworthy. Create such positive word-of-mouth by nurturing “brand ambassadors” and maintaining an active presence on the web.
35. **“Go with the flow”** – People worldwide are using social networks to initiate interactions, invent new applications, and produce and sell new merchandise. The power of social networking lies in the vast number of internet users who want to be in the loop.
36. **“Find the market maven”** – Recognize the power of opinion leaders who influence buying decisions, and who endorse products. Court them for your brand.
37. **“Hundreds of housewives can predict your company's future”** – Some companies use groups of employees and outsiders to help solve complex problems or predict the success of future products. This is a powerful new forecasting trend.
38. **“Know who wears the pants in the family”** – Identify the person who makes buying decisions in your product area. Generally, women make 81% of financial decisions, so marketers must pay attention to their priorities and shopping criteria.
39. **Economically empowered youth** – More parents now involve their children (ages 6-15) in product selection. Kids annually influence \$453 billion in family purchases.
40. **“Make millions on the Millennials”** – Young professionals were raised with computers, the web and cellphones. To reach this up-and-coming market, craft entertaining, authentic messages.
41. **Gen X can buy** – Baby boomers have huge spending power. However, Gen X members shell out even more on cars, houses and entertainment.
42. **“Dollar stores make good cents”** – To profit from serving low-income customers, imaginative corporations have initiated microloans and have repackaged goods into smaller, more affordable units.
43. **“The rich are different”** – The increase in the number of wealthy people has created a “mass class market.” This has made luxury goods more readily available and, in the process, it also has diluted the exclusivity that some shoppers prize.
44. **“Out with the ketchup, in with the salsa”** – Ethnic, racial and national heritage groups in the U.S. spend \$600 billion annually on targeted goods and services. Minority group appeal builds brand credibility and consumer bonds.
45. **Reaching subsets of the market** – Mass markets have fragmented into subcultures and “microcultures.” These mini-groups have their own identities, symbols and values. Can you sell to “environmentalist, jazz-loving, Harry Potter freaks?”
46. **The power of myth** – Capitalize on cultural myths. Create new messages based on comics, movies, holidays and even old commercials.
47. **Promoting product displays** – Arrange strategic placement in movies and on TV shows. Product placement is a \$3.5 billion global business – a 200% increase since 1994.
48. **Cash in on habits** – People like ritual: 89% of folks follow an unvarying morning routine when they prepare for work. They like one kind of cereal and one kind of coffee. Marketers can benefit by supplying items that lead to new habits.
49. **“Turn a pet rock into gold”** – The marketer who recognizes an emerging fashion or fad gains the first-mover advantage. Evaluate and analyze trendy cycles based on whether they accompany a lifestyle change, pose new benefits or have the potential to be customized to appeal to your market.
50. **“Think globally, act locally”** – Marketers who go global should adopt an overall strategy that they can tailor for local markets. Global marketing fails when it does not account for individual national customs. Marketers must remain culturally aware.

## About the Author

**Michael Solomon**, Ph.D., teaches marketing and heads the Center for Consumer Research at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He also teaches consumer behavior at the University of Manchester in England. His books include *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having and Being*.

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