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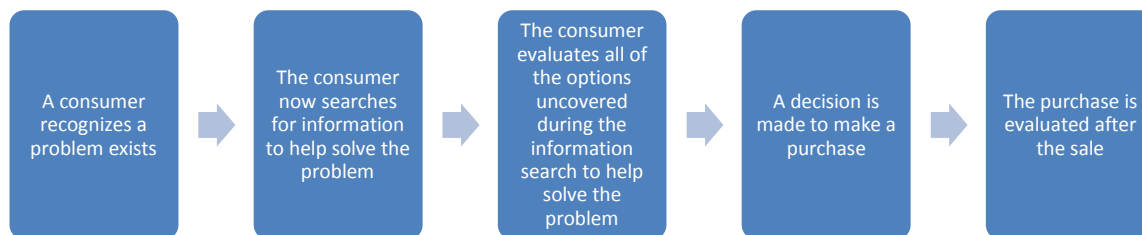
**To Buy or Not to Buy:
Influencing Customers throughout the Consumer Decision Making Process**

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Have you ever walked down the street and smelled a burger being charcoal grilled? Or how about when you are in a supermarket and you smell bread baking? All of a sudden the cravings start, and before you know it, a fresh loaf of bread is in your shopping cart! How do these aromas create such a strong urge when just a few minutes earlier you had no intention of purchasing fresh bread?

Consumer behavior is a discipline that helps to explain why people buy what they buy. It is important for marketers to understand consumer behavior, so they can influence their target market throughout the consumer decision making process. Specific examples of strategies a marketer might consider to influence a customer's purchase decision are outlined below.

The following diagram illustrates the consumer buying process.



Problem recognition

A problem is recognized when a consumer experiences an imbalance between their present and preferred state. Typically some type of stimulus triggers this imbalance...maybe that chargrilled smell or an advertisement for a new restaurant. Certainly a frozen computer or a knee injury can create a problem that begs for immediate attention. Many "imbalances" are created by marketers through their promotional efforts and can occur at every step in the consumer decision making process.

Strategies for marketers to consider: Creating an Imbalance

- Create irresistible aromas

- Position a product to make it cool...create an image so that consumers think they can't live without it...Apple does a great job with this!
- Focus your discussion around safety...think about ADT ads and Life Alert Ads
- "Health" is an excellent focus area of promotional efforts...products that promote better health are popular with consumers today
- Appeal to consumers' sense of self, lifestyle and their aspirations. Kashi does a great job of appealing to consumers who see themselves as healthy people who love adventure and the outdoors

Information search

Depending on the magnitude of the imbalance a consumer may need to initiate an *information search*. Following the aroma of the burger down the street is a simple search while fixing a computer, seeking medical advice or learning more about the Apple Watch suggests a more complex time intensive information search is warranted.

Information searches are more complex and lengthy when the consequences of the purchase hold great importance to the consumer. If the burger you are chasing down doesn't turn out to be delicious, it's no big deal; however, if the doctor you select for your knee injury is less than competent, the consequences can be serious.

Very simple information searches are done "internally." You think about which restaurants are in the area, make a decision, and you're done. Other, more complex searches require an "external" information search utilizing websites, brochures, advertisements, magazines, etc. to provide the information necessary to make an informed decision. These external information sources are where marketers can influence their target market.

Strategies for marketers to consider: Influencing the information search

- Make sure information about your business is "everywhere" that consumers are and on every "screen." If a consumer needs information about a new computer or an orthopedic surgeon, the information should be easily available and available in many forms. Too many clicks, a webpage that will not load, or no website at all will deter potential customers. If you are promoting a restaurant, make sure the menu is easy to access on mobile devices, computers and tablets.
- If you have a small local business, post flyers in public places like the post office or grocery store. Put the flyers where your customers will be!
- Don't be afraid to advertise the "old fashion way" with print ads, flyers, brochures and tear-off sheets. Depending on your target audience and the type of product or service offered, a flyer may be more effective than a complex social media campaign or an expensive ad in a local newspaper.

Evaluate Alternatives

As the information search evolves, a list of alternatives is generated. Sometimes the list is short and simple...I'll follow the smell to the burger, while other times it is longer and more complex. As consumers sift through alternatives they tend to rank order them; those with the attributes that are most important rise to the top of the list.

Strategies for marketers to consider: Influencing customer rankings

- It is critical that consumers understand what makes your product or service unique. Whatever that unique feature is should be the focal point of all promotional efforts. Think about Volvo (safety), Wal-Mart (price), Wegmans (fresh). The stronger the positioning,

the better chance that your target market will recognize your product and place it at the top of the list!

Purchase

After an imbalance has been created, an information search conducted, and the alternatives have been evaluated, a purchase decision follows.

Strategies for marketers to consider: Closing the sale

- One of the most effective ways to “close the sale” is by offering some type of promotion or discount that entices consumers to take the plunge. For many, everyday consumer products or low risk/low price purchases, a discount or incentive will convert a consumer’s interest into a purchase.
- For more complex, high risk/high price purchases, personal interaction with the consumer is important to help close the deal. A pleasant conversation with the administrator setting up your appointment with an orthopedic surgeon may help a consumer feel comfortable with their choice.

Post Purchase Evaluation

Did you ever get a product home and wonder what were you thinking when you purchased it? Buyer’s remorse is not uncommon particularly when dealing with more costly purchases.

Strategies for marketers to consider: Minimizing buyer’s remorse

- The best way to keep your customers happy even after the sale is with follow-up post-purchase actions, especially for more costly/risky purchases. A phone call, email, or letter works great.
- Keep customers involved with the company after the purchase with social media...entice them to “like” or “follow” you on Facebook or twitter.
- Offer incentives on future purchases.

There are many places throughout the consumer decision making process that marketers can intervene and “nudge” people toward their products or services. This should be an all-out effort with a strategic plan in place that influences customers during each step of the consumer decision making process. Hopefully with a great plan in place, more sales will be closed!

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