Consumer Behaviour Models
Part II - The Howard Sheth Model

The Howard Sheth theory of buyer behaviour is a sophisticated integration of the various social, psychological and marketing influences on consumer choice into a coherent sequence of information processing. It aims not only to explain consumer behaviour in terms of cognitive functioning but to provide an empirically testable depiction of such behaviour and its outcomes (Howard 1977).

Utilizing the learning theory thoroughly and systematically, John Howard came out with the first truly integrative model of buyer behaviour. He was the first to introduce the difference between problem solving behaviour, limited problem solving and automatic response behaviour. The model is essentially an attempt to explain brand choice behaviour over time and therefore specially pertinent to our field. Focussing on repeat buying, the model relies on four major components - stimulus inputs, hypothetical constructs, response outputs and exogenous variables.

This are the three levels of decision making:

1. **Extensive problem solving** - early stages of decision making in which the buyer has little information about brands and has not yet developed well defined and structured criteria by which to choose among products.

2. **Limited problem solving** - this is a more advance stage, choice criteria are well defined but the buyer is still undecided about which set of brands will best serve him. Thus the consumer still experiences uncertainty about which brand is best.

3. **Routinized response behaviour** - buyers have well defined choice criteria and also have strong predispositions toward the brand. Little confusion exists in the consumer’s mind and he is ready to purchase a particular brand with little evaluation of alternatives.

The model then borrows from learning concepts to explain brand choice behaviour over time as learning takes place and the buyer moves from exclusive to routinized problem solving behaviour. Here the four major components get involved.

**The Input Variables**

The input variables consist of informational cues about the attributes of a product or brand (i.e. quality, price, distinctiveness, service and availability). This informational cues may be *significative* if they influence the consumer directly through the brand’s attributes or *symbolic* if they derive from the same factors as they are portrayed in the mass media and by salespeople, influencing the consumer in a indirect way. These two sources are commercial, in that they represent the efforts of the firm to build and project these values in the product. A third set of informational cues may come from the buyer’s social environment, including the family, reference groups and social class - which are influences that are internalized by the consumer.
Hypothetical Constructs

Hypothetical constructs have been classified in two groups - perceptual constructs and learning constructs. The first deals with the way the individual perceives and responds to the information from the input variables, accounting for stimulus ambiguity and perceptual bias. The second deals with the stages from the buyer motives to his satisfaction in a buying situation. The purchase intention is an outcome of the interplay of buyer motives, choice criteria, brand comprehension, resultant brand attitude and the confidence associated with the purchase decision. The motives are general or specific goals impelling to action, impinging upon the buyer intention are also the attitudes about the existing brand alternatives in the buyer’s evoked set, which result in an arrangement of an order of preference regarding brands. Brand comprehension and the degree of confidence that the buyer has about it, choice criteria and buying intentions, converge upon the intention to buy.

As a feedback component of learning, the model includes another learning construct - satisfaction which refers to the post purchase evaluation and resultant reinforcing of brand comprehension, attitudes etc. (shown by broken lines in the figure).

Output Variables

The five output variables in the right hand portion of the model are buyer’s observable responses to stimulus inputs. They are arranged in order from Attention to Actual Purchase. The purchase is the actual, overt act of buying and is the sequencial result of the attention (buyer's total response to information intake), the brand comprehension, brand attitude (referring to the evaluation of satisfying potential of the brand) and the buyer intention (a verbal statement made in the light of the above externalising factors that the preferred brand will be bought the next time the buying is necessitated).

Exogenous Variables

The model also includes some exogenous variables which are not defined but are taken as constant. These influence all or some of the constructs explained above and through them, the output. Some exogenous variables are importance of the purchase, time at the disposal of the buyer, personality traits, financial status etc.
Most scholars agree that the study of consumer behaviour was advanced and given an impetus by Howard Sheth Model. The major advantage and strength of the theory lied in the precision with which a large number of variables have been linked in the working relationships to cover most aspects of the purchase decision and the effective utilization of contribution from the behavioural sciences. The weakness stems from the fact that, there being substantial measurement error, the theory cannot be realistically tested. The distinction between the exogenous and endogenous variables is not clear cut. And some of these variables do not lend themselves easily to measurement and other defy precise definition.

In spite all limitations, the model because of its comprehensive coverage of almost all aspects of the purchase decision and operational explanation of the underlying stimuli and responses have given a useful frame of reference for the study of buying decision over time.

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References:

(ISBN 1-58798-240-4)


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Publicado 23rd July 2011 por Diogo Seborro