Consumers pursue goals throughout the course of each day. Consider the act of choosing what to eat for lunch, whether to buy an expensive or cheaper outfit, or what to do on a Thursday evening. We pick something healthy (vs. tasty) because we have the goal of maintaining or losing weight, buy an expensive (vs. cheaper) outfit because we have the goal of impressing others, go out with friends (vs. stay late at work) because we have the goal to have fun.

While we may have some of these goals in life, many times we do things that are inconsistent with our life goals. Buying an expensive outfit may serve a sudden urge to impress others, but may also represent going beyond our budget and incurring debt. How is this possible when we have a life goal of always having enough money to pay for our bills? The research I have conducted with my colleagues shows that many times our immediate environment makes certain goals momentarily salient, and we pursue these goals even though they are not goals that we generally hold in life.

We found that when people are exposed to information that makes them feel like we live in a harsh world, with scarcity of resources, they tend to immediately prefer high calorie foods. People ate more food that was described as being “high calorie” when they saw information about struggle and adversity, something that did not happen with low calorie food. This means that even though people understand that they should control their calorie intake, they eat more calories, and actually do not want low calorie food, when they are exposed to information suggesting we live in a harsh world. Importantly, when asked people did not show any awareness that they had been exposed to such information, meaning that they ate more high calorie food without knowing what made them want to do it. Similar effects were found in the context of spending, as people spent more money when exposed to information in their environment about spending without their awareness.

Fortunately, people can also benefit from the influence of information in their surrounding environment. We found that when people are exposed to information about making careful choices they tend to pick healthy food items most of the times, such as choosing a granola bar vs. potato chips, even though they are not aware of the information. This occurs because the information makes them focus on what can be good for them and ignore food items that can be harmful. We also found that when people are exposed to slogans in the marketplace suggesting they should spend money (e.g., “Luxury, you deserve it.”, “Because you can afford it.”) they actually prefer to save, spending less of their money. This occurs because with practice people can develop a mechanism that helps them understand that certain marketplace agents are there to persuade them, and they defend themselves against this persuasion by doing the opposite of what has been suggested.

This perspective of the influence of the environment on people’s behavior without their awareness suggests that people should engineer their environment in a way that conduces to better choices. This means avoiding information about harshness and spending, and surrounding oneself with information about abundance and being careful. Fortunately, we learn overtime, and if people understand and consistently bring to mind thoughts about how the environment can make them perform harmful behaviors they will eventually learn how to defend themselves.

Applications:

1. Consumers are sensitive to the information in their environment, which means they can be influenced without their awareness.
2. Consider which tools will be used to steer consumers in a certain direction as they have developed mechanisms to defend themselves against wanted influence.
3. It is important to understand the goals consumers have as trying to steer them toward pursuing goals that they already have could benefit both companies and consumers.
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Related reading:


Index terms: goals, self-control, eating, spending, well-being.
Many marketing professionals believe that, when consumers buy their products, they are satisfied, especially if they continue to purchase the same goods or services over time. Even most theoretical conceptions of customer satisfaction suggest that people are contented if they buy repeatedly. The underlying idea is simple economic logic: consumers only exchange money for products if the products are worth more than the money.

However, is it possible that these persons believe that your offering is the least objectionable alternative (if there are any others)? Consider the time I was stuck in traffic for several hours because of an accident on a then-closed highway. Someone with cold water (it was summer) walked by and offered bottles that sold in bulk for 25 cents for an asking price of $10. When queried by me how he arrived at that price, he simple stated: “I’ve got it and you don’t.”

You may think this is a one-time, unique set of circumstances, but consider people without transportation in impoverished communities; are they happy buying produce at twice the price for half the quality of their more affluent counterparts just because they lack adequate transportation to discount retailers? How does awareness of these options impact their feelings of satisfaction?

Maybe it is time to rethink what we mean by customer satisfaction. With “big data” the playing field has shifted in profound ways. Marketers have more information about their customers on a timely basis, allowing firms to make real-time adjustments to their product offerings.

Yet while we know more, these data reflect who buys what rather than the totality of benefits to purchasers in both the short and long-term. Consider information that tells us women between 25 and 45 who are of African American descent, and single mothers of two or more children living in urban areas are highly likely to purchase our goods and services. Are their underlying rationales for why clear? We can intuit their reasons and even ask for clarification, but marketers may still miss the mark.

Our goals for comprehending how our products serve customers should shift from who buys what to how products fit into the constellation of items purchased that impact the quality of consumers’ lives. For example, if these women tend to buy more fast-food than other cohorts, can we assume that they do so out of choice rather than necessity? Might these mothers use calorie-dense, cheap foods to ensure their children eat regularly but still realize that long-term consumption has a negative impact on diet choices and health? Such an understanding can help marketers make more informed decisions that serve them and their customers in positive ways.

This perspective of our customers and organizations will make us more responsive as well as more responsible. Marketers can be more responsive since they now look at the impacts of products more systemically, capturing the fuller picture of the role of goods and services in the lives of the people they serve. They are also more responsible because they recognize the positive and negative consequences of using their products that supersede simple decisions to buy or not buy.

Applications:

1. Simple purchase behavior may not necessarily signal customer satisfaction. Marketers need to consider customer needs relative to alternatives available in the market.
2. Big data have considerable value but resulting information may not fully capture the range of customer reactions to your products.
3. Knowing your customers may require a systemic understanding of their constellation of goods and service and how your products support need satisfaction in the longer term.
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Related reading:


Index terms: Customer satisfaction, big data, consumption restrictions.