

# THE CHANGING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF CONSUMER CHOICE

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The social environment affects the linkage between consumers' attitudes and their behaviors. Significant changes have occurred in recent years in this social environment. The social norms constraining consumer complaining and information search have eased. At the same time, increasing time pressures are affecting consumer information search, the use of recommended practices and complaining. These changes in the social environment, especially time pressures, suggest that, in the future consumers will be more selective in taking action on their concerns. Action is likely to be taken only on the most involving issues and concerns.

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One of the principal focuses of social science research is understanding the linkage between attitudes and behavior. Social scientists have made continuing efforts to understand how beliefs, judgments and intentions shape behavioral outcomes. Some of these efforts have looked at the context within which the individual is operating and within which behavior occurs, and how this affects the attitude-behavior link.

There are many ways in which contextual factors that can affect the attitude-behavior link. The urging of a friend, for example, may get us to buy a brand we view unfavorably. The influence of the friend has a brief effect in time and space creating a short-lived situational effect (Belk, 1975). Contextual influences may, however, be longer-run and continue largely unchanged for years, as would be the case for the legal environment--the set of laws, procedures and institutions governing legal relations.

This paper will focus on changes in the environment of consumer decisions created by changing social norms and increasingly widespread feelings of time pressure. It looks specifically at how these changes affect some of the consumer behaviors in which we are most interested: information search, the use of recommended practices and complaining.

## CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS

When sociologists speak of norms they are talking about the social rules which specify appropriate behavior for a particular society. Deviation from these rules will be punished by social disapproval. While these rules are slow to change, they are not immutable. We have, in fact, seen some important changes in attitudes toward the idea of consumer-supported product testing and the resultant product ratings over the last 50 years.

## Information Search

Only a few of today's consumers are aware of the stigma under which Consumers Union labored in the 1930s and 1940s. Over 60 newspapers and magazines including the Hearst publications and the New York Times refused CU's advertising on the grounds that Consumer Reports' ratings constituted an unfair and subversive attack upon advertising (Silber, 1983). Not only was CU frozen out of the advertising pages, it also was attacked editorially by both Good Housekeeping and Women's Home Companion. CU's unconventional approach and the radical views of some of its leadership also got it into political difficulties. In 1938 it was investigated for subversive activities by the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee chaired by Martin Dies of Texas. CU remained under a cloud until it was removed from the Committee's list of subversive organizations in 1954 (Silber, 1983).

Few consumers remember these allegations today. Instead, CU and its test reports are regarded as a model of dispassionate neutrality. In fact, Consumer Reports is regularly cited in business school consumer behavior texts as an example of independent or neutral information sources (e.g., Hawkins, Best and Coney, 1989). The social stigma on Consumer Reports subscribership and the use of its information is gone. At the same time, attitudes toward participation in the consumer movement also seem to have changed.

## Complaint Behavior

Nobody seems to like a complainer. As a result, consumer complainers are under some social constraint to demonstrate that their complaints are justified and reasonable. The traditional view seems to be that if problems arise, they somehow are the fault of the consumer: directions have been ignored, the wrong product chosen or expectations set too high.

The social constraints on complaining are reinforced by the traditions of American law. Tradition dictates that legal complaints be treated on a case-by-case basis and works against grouping complainants into classes. This case-by-case tradition grows out of a recognition that this is the most profitable arrangement for attorneys and is reinforced by American traditions of individualism (Nader, 1980). Somehow, the public welfare is expected to result from the assertion of individual rights in the same way that individual pursuit of economic gain makes markets function better.

The case-by-case approach of American law causes individual complaints to be seen as unique, unusual and atypical. This perception is reinforced by business'

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efforts to keep complaints confidential (allegedly to protect the privacy of the complainers). The result is that individual complaints typically are not seen as part of broader, more widespread problems and the development of public awareness and concern is inhibited (Nader, 1980).

The isolation of the individual consumer with problems makes it easier for a business to suggest that the complainer is an eccentric or deviant. Nader (1980) notes that this is a prime technique of control. Statements such as "You are the only one who has complained about this," suggest that the complainer is out-of-line or that their experience is atypical. This technique coupled with the social pressures against complaining have been important factors in deterring complaining.

Best (1981) notes that most people wish to avoid being seen as complainers. In a 1975 survey, 90 percent of the adults questioned said they made about the same number of complaints or fewer than other households. Only a small group said they complained more than average. Statistically this seems unlikely. The pattern of the responses suggests that the respondents understated their complaint activity because of the perceived social stigma on complaining.

While there may be efforts to make complainers feel like deviants, the evidence suggests that they are not. They seem, instead, to be the pillars of their communities. The most active complainers have been found also to be politically active members of the middle and upper middle class with above average educations and incomes, who are middle-aged and long-time residents of their communities (Warland, Herrmann and Moore, 1986).

The social stigma on complaining may be easing. Several factors seem to be working to make complaining more socially acceptable. One is the obvious willingness of some major corporations to receive complaints as evidenced by their creation of 800 numbers and the publicity given to them. If major corporations welcome complaints, can complaining really be bad? A second factor is the widespread coverage given to consumer problems, product recalls and safety issues by the media. If some problems are widespread, are we really atypical or eccentric if we complain? The coverage of consumer complaining in consumer education texts and educational materials also helps to legitimize complaining. If the federal government's U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs' Consumer's Resource Handbook tells us how to complain and encourages us to do so, can complaining be wrong? Further, if the pillars of the community are active complainers, can complaining really be socially unacceptable?

### TIME PRESSURE

The general perception of the American public seems to be that the time pressures of everyday life have

increased. Reports of "always feeling rushed" have been found to be more common than one or two decades ago (Robinson, 1990). The feelings of time pressure seem to be particularly widespread among the sizable middle-aged category which includes the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers' perceptions of their situation are of interest since, because of their numbers, they seem to set the tone of our society. When the Baby Boomers were teen-agers we had the "Youth Explosion," and when they were beginning their careers we had the "Me Decade." Now, when they are starting their families and trying to keep their careers going at the same time, we have "The Time-pressed Society." Ten or twenty years from now when the time pressures on this group ease we are likely to have "The Leisure Society."

Time pressures can be regarded as a proxy for the opportunity cost of time. When time pressures are high, the time cost of an activity becomes higher, and the activity is likely to be eliminated or scaled back. Statistically this effect can be thought of as a direct effect, which typically is negative. If these negative direct effects are sporadic or occasional, they may be regarded as situational. Continuing time pressures may create a longer run environmental effect which influences the relationship between attitude and behavior. Statistically this may take the form of an interaction between attitude and time pressure. When time pressures persist over a longer period, individuals may evolve strategies to deal with them. For example, if high involvement or commitment to a particular concern occurs in combination with high time pressure, an individual may give priority to the associated behavior and scale back other activities. This will have the effect of offsetting the negative direct effects of time pressure.

### Information Search

Preliminary work indicates that time pressures affect the use of a variety of different information sources dealing with food and nutrition (Herrmann and Warland, 1990). Four different dimensions of involvement which affect information use were identified. These dimensions included health concerns, economy concerns, enjoyment and self-image factors. The relationship of these involvement dimensions to the use of nine different information sources was examined.

The involvement dimensions were found to have differing effects on the use of the information sources under high and low time pressure. The results suggest that those who were highly time-pressed and were also highly involved with food and nutrition made time to use selected information sources.

### Use of Recommended Practices

The effects of time pressure at meal time on the use of recommended nutritional practices also has been examined (Warland, Herrmann and Kassab, 1990). Time pressure was found to have a depressing effect on the use of recommended dietary practices, as might be

expected. This suggests that increasing levels of time pressure in this country could have negative effects on the quality of diets.

Time pressure was, however, found to increase commitment to good dietary practices among those who were nutritionally concerned. Under high time pressure, those who were most nutritionally involved were almost as likely to use good practices as those who were under low time pressure. In other words, those who felt nutrition was important despite high time pressure at meals were almost as likely to follow through on their concerns as those under low time pressure.

In contrast, those who had little involvement with nutrition behaved as would be expected. Those who were under less time pressure followed through in using recommended practices more than those who were time pressed. The results indicate that time pressure interacts with involvement, and has the effect of strengthening the commitment of the involved and depressing the behavior of the less committed.

#### Complaint Behavior

There are no studies of the effect of time pressure on complaining behavior. Time pressures can be expected to have a negative effect on complaining, just as they do for most other activities. This suggests that the present level of complaining is lower than it might be if American consumers were less pressed. Despite time pressures, time-pressed consumers seem likely to complain if involvement is high. This can occur if the problem involves product safety, if the product is costly, or if the product is linked to particular personal interests (e.g., cars cooking, clothing and fashion, etc.).

#### CONCLUSIONS

While the social norms which limited some consumer activities in the past are easing, increasing time pressures are putting a different type of constraint on these activities. Time pressures are likely to have especially important effects since the group most affected, the middle-aged, typically has been found to be active information seekers and complainers.

One result is that we are likely to see increasing selectivity among consumers in the actions they take. For many, only the most involving concerns will be acted upon. These involving concerns seem likely to include the following:

- o health/safety problems
- o problems involving costly items
- o high involvement products (e.g., cars and also auto insurance, cable TV)
- o highly involving issues, such as problems affecting children and the helpless.

Consumers concerns are likely to result in action only if some clear remedial measures are available. This will constrain action in several areas:

- o the discussions of radon problems have not spelled out remedial measures clearly
- o no-fault auto insurance proposals seem complex to many consumers, and their record of success seems ambiguous.

Recycling, on the other hand, seems relatively simple. There will be strong support for recycling from consumer activists. The characteristics of consumer activists and environmental activists are much the same. In fact, they probably often are the same people. There are, however, problems for consumer recyclers which need attention. Some pick-up systems such as curbside pick-up are a burden for the elderly. Consumer groups may need to help in developing "user friendly" systems.

The biggest limitation upon consumer action may be the complexity of today's problems. Many of the simpler problems have been dealt with and it seems that those which remain all are difficult. Given the complexity of today's consumer problems we are fortunate have consumer organizations such as Consumers Union and the public interest organizations. They have the time and the technical expertise to examine the problems confronting consumers and to develop solutions in the consumers' interest.

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