

Delivering Useful Information for Consumers: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

By understanding where consumers get their information, we can develop a much more efficient and effective information program. To facilitate the delivery of information, a taxonomy of information sources is developed based on who provides information and where consumers obtain information, and a model of search which incorporates sources of information is presented with methodological issues.

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Introduction

Although understanding from which information sources consumers get their information is an important issue for marketers and public policy makers to effectively disseminate information (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), previous research has tended to focus on consumers' "extent" of search rather than "source" of information. Thus, while consumers can search a variety of information sources, a systematic investigation of which information sources are sought by which types of consumers, and to what extent, has been limited (Feick, Herrman & Warland 1986).

In this study, a model of consumers' external information search across a variety of information sources is proposed. Before incorporating sources of information into the traditional search model, a taxonomy of external information is presented. Finally, the issues which need to be considered in operationalizing empirical research of search are addressed.

Taxonomy of Information

Sources of consumer information can be first distinguished into internal and external information sources (Beales et al. 1981). Internal source refers to consumer's memory from which the information can be retrieved, including accumulated knowledge from previous active search, experience with products, or passively acquired information during normal daily activities (Beales et al. 1981; Punj & Staelin 1983). External sources include friends and family, expert consumers, books, magazine articles, consumer-rating organizations, publicity, advertising, in-store display, and salespersons.

Although taxonomy of external sources has not been rigorously investigated, Claxton, Fry and Portis (1974) divides sources into in-store and out-of-store sources, while Newman and Staelin (1973) classified into four sources—personal (friends, relatives, or neighbors), neutral (books, magazine or newspaper articles, and pamphlets), advertising, and retail outlet. Beales et al. (1981) grouped into three: third party, seller-controlled sources, and direct inspection.

These schemata seem to have been developed based on two criteria: (1) where the information is found (in-store versus out-of-store) and (2) who provide the information (personal, seller, or third party). Then, the taxonomy of information should be based on these two criteria. This classification can be useful to draw implications for policy makers. By differentiating information providers, policy makers can identify the effective agents to disseminate information, while by differentiating where information is collected, want-to-be-communicated information can be provided at the right places.

The Model

The starting point for this model is the cost-benefit framework of search: a consumer will search a particular information source if the benefits of searching that particular information source exceeds the costs involved. However, unlike previous models which ignore sources of information, the model of consumers' external search across information sources is based on Weitzman's (1979) conceptualization, considering differences among information sources. "There are a number of different opportunities or sources, each yielding an unknown reward. The uncertainty about the reward from a source can be eliminated, at a fee, by searching or sampling. Each

source has its own independent probability distribution for the rewards, search cost, and search time, ..." (Weitzman, 1979, p. 641).

In this study, the benefit of search a particular information source is defined as an immediate reward from searching a particular information source, which includes the utilitarian value of acquired information (Wilton and Myers 1986) and the hedonic value of the search activity (Babin, Darden & Griffin 1994; Beatty & Smith 1987). The utilitarian value of information refers to the usefulness of information (i.e., how helpful the information is for a consumer to solve a problem), while the hedonic value of search activity reflects the search's potential entertainment and emotional worth. Each source of information provides utilitarian and hedonic values at a different level. In addition, the cost of search varies across different information sources.

The model proposed in this paper also incorporates the potential determinants of consumers' external information search based on a review of psychology and consumer behavior literature. The potential determinants of consumers' external information search include characteristics of information sources; a consumer's internal information; consumer, product, and situational characteristics; and choice certainty.

Empirical Issues

Many previous researchers reported that information search is difficult to quantify. During the last three decades, numerous measures of search have been used including both single measures which measure only a single aspect of search behavior and some aggregate measures of search. The most popular search measure has been the number of stores visited, while a variety of other measures were introduced, including duration of search time, time spent at store, deliberation time, the number of brands, models, and/or product characteristics considered, and whether or not certain information source was consulted.

In developing composite measures of search, researchers often assigned weight to search efforts. With the exception of Duncan and Olshavsky's (1982) study, in which a panel of experts determined the efforts weights, the weights were arbitrarily determined by the researchers. That is, many previous researchers have measured a variety of different aspects of search without explicitly recognizing differences. Using different operational definitions of search, they investigated consumers' search and the effects of

various determinants on search. These operational differences, of course, have led to conflicting findings, limiting the generalizability of previous research.

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Endnote

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