

# 4

## Understanding the Consumer

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Marketing efforts are designed with targeted consumers in mind, therefore understanding the mechanisms behind their behaviours as well as the different sub-processes involved in the decision making process is crucial for marketers. The way consumers take decisions affects all elements of the marketing mix, from the type of product, the pricing and how it is assessed, depending on the level of involvement or the decision making process involved. It is unlikely that the same effort is spent when choosing a fizzy drink as a choice of university. Similar considerations affect where to place a product. For example, impulse buying products (e.g. chewing gum, crisps, etc.) are located close to the cashier at the supermarket, and highly technical products are sold through outlets where appropriate advice is available. All marketing decisions are informed by our understanding of consumer behaviour and this chapter aims to cover some of the important models that help explain these behaviours.

### The ABC model of attitudes

Developing opinions and forming dislikes and likes about everything around us are part of daily life. Opinions known as attitudes affect the way we live and the choices that we make. Attitudes can be defined as “a summary evaluation of an object or thought” (Vogel and Wanke, 2016:2). Attitudes can be positive or negative, or even uncertain. For example, it is not uncommon to have mixed feelings about what to order at a favourite restaurant, and this involves a series of attitudes towards different choices. Every attitude has three components, represented in the ABC model of attitudes developed by Allport (1935) and Table 4.1 exemplifies these three components for organic products:

**Table 4.1:** The ABC model of attitudes

Affective	Emotional reaction towards a target object (e.g. Feeling good about doing good to your body and to the environment by buying organic food)
Behavioural	Behavioural reaction towards a target object (e.g. Choosing organic products over non-organic ones).
Cognitive	Thoughts towards a target object (e.g. Analysing the benefits of buying organic products by reading the label and other information available online).

Every attitude has all three components; however, any particular attitude can be based on one of the components more than another. This means that each component could potentially answer the question: where does an attitude come from?

Attitudes are a central construct of well-established models that aim to explain behaviour, such as the theory of reasoned action or the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). These models have been extensively used to understand and predict behaviours in marketing and broader fields such as health, psychology, and economy. Broadly speaking, the theory of planned behaviour posits that behaviour is determined by intentions which are determined by attitudes (what we think about the action), subjective norm (what others think about a given action) and perceived behavioural control (how much we feel we are capable of performing the given action). For example, if my attitude towards Bentley cars is positive and everyone around has a Bentley (subjective norm) but I do not have the money needed to actually buy one (perceived behavioural control), my intentions to buy are diminished and purchase is unlikely in the near future. Alternatively, if my positive attitudes towards organic food are shared and I have the extra money needed to buy it and it is accessible to me, then the intention to buy is high. So attitude may affect behaviour but not necessarily predict it.

Can you think of other factors that influence consumer behaviour? Are there any limitations with the theory of planned behaviour by reflecting on how your own personal experience (e.g. choosing university buying a car or buying shampoo)?

## Decision-making: Choosing, using and disposing

The decision-making process describes the consumer going through several stages when purchasing a product. The process starts when the consumer identifies a problem and perceives that purchase of a good or service is a solution. They identify the available alternatives and evaluate them. The choice is made and the

purchase will go ahead. Post-purchase, the consumer evaluates the decision. This process is often portrayed as a simple, linear process, with each stage following the previous. Figure 4.1 shows the process as circular, recognising that consumers gain experience during purchase and this influences future decision-making. Where the decision outcome is successful, the consumer is more likely to rebuy without going through the full process. Marketers can influence the consumer at each stage of decision making, initially by ensuring that the consumer is aware of the product and its benefits, and then providing stimuli for action. In addition they can encourage current customers to discuss positive experiences on blogs and review sites

Consumers continuously evaluate purchase choices and many experience uncertainty throughout each stage of the decision-making process. Uncertainty tends to be stronger when buying for the first time and the purchase is perceived to be risky. Uncertainty after purchase is known as *post-purchase dissonance*. In order to lessen dissonance the consumer may take a variety of actions.

**Table 4.2:** Overcoming dissonance

Action	Through
Return the purchase	Money back request (multiple reasons)
Elicit positive support from peers	Asking: What do you think about my new ....?
Justify the decision	Saying: I only bought it because it was so...cheap It was the only one available (In my size...) It had the best (feature)
Information search	Searching: Reviews Checking : guarantees and accompanying labels and literature Paying attention: Advertising, owners

Decision making does not end on purchase and consumers must also decide what to do with products for which they no longer want or have a use – keep, recycle or dispose? Options available for recycling have grown, with many opportunities to give away, swap or resell. So the consumer problem changes but the process of decision-making continues.

What role can marketers play to influence each stage of the consumer decision making process and help them move quickly to purchase? Does marketing have any role to play post purchase?