



CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

AN
INFORMATION
PROCESSING
PERSPECTIVE



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Consumer Behavior

An Information Processing Perspective

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Preface

Consumer behavior as a field of inquiry has expanded dramatically in the past decade. The different theories used to develop an understanding of consumers' behavior, the varied contexts in which consumers' behavior is examined, and the burgeoning empirical research have all conspired to make it difficult to provide an adequate discussion of all facets of the field in one book. To deal with this diversity, we have taken a particular perspective called *information processing*, which interprets consumption behavior in terms of how people acquire, organize, and utilize information to make judgments. This approach provides a parsimonious means of organizing and integrating knowledge of consumers' behavior.

The adoption of an information processing perspective might seem to indicate that some important topics in consumer behavior are not discussed. However, this is not necessarily the case. Throughout the book we have sought to develop a common language that enables an information processing interpretation of issues not previously examined from this perspective. For example attribution theory, which describes how people perceive the causes of behavior and act upon these perceptions, is addressed by examining how behavior affects the thoughts on which consumers' judgments are predicated. The effect of demography, personality, and social class on consumption is examined in terms of how these individual differences influence *what* and *how* information is used to make decisions.

The book is intended primarily as a graduate-level text for a course in consumer behavior. It may also be useful to advanced undergraduates in consumer behavior and in social psychology courses with an applied social cognition perspective. No knowledge of behavioral science is assumed, and only a rudimentary understanding of marketing concepts is required. We develop in a step-by-step manner those behavioral science constructs that are required to explain and predict consumers' behavior. Moreover, the strategies implied by information processing theory are described and illustrated using familiar examples.

In describing consumers' behavior, we have stressed the link between theory and strategy. This approach is predicated on our belief that theory provides an efficient means of distinguishing variables likely to impact consumers' judgment from the myriad of nondeterminant variables present in everyday decision contexts. Moreover, it is our belief that the effects of variables on consumers' behavior can be deduced more accurately on the basis of theory than they can by relying on intuitive or empirical induction. Finally, we believe that illustrating the strategic applications of theory facilitates understanding and appreciation of theory.

The book is divided into six major sections. Part I explains what consumer behavior is about, why it is of interest to managers, and how it may be studied. An overview of the particular approach to the study of consumer behavior is developed, as well as the critical role of research in developing an understanding of consumers' behavior. In Part II consumer behavior as a field of inquiry is placed in historical perspective. Its development from the earliest single construct models to the more recent multiple variable models is traced. The key aspect of Part II is development of an information processing model of consumer behavior. This model serves two purposes. It organizes what is known about consumers' behavior, and it provides the structure for the remainder of the book. Part III begins the elaboration of the model by describing how consumers make decisions. Consumers' acquisition of information is examined in terms of external sources and their own experience. The ways in which consumers organize and utilize their information in making decisions is discussed.

Part IV examines consumers as individuals and as they exist in groups. The ways consumers make choices differ depending on the individual. To examine this, individual difference in decision-making and changing demographic trends are considered. The ways consumers are influenced by the groups to which they belong is described.

Part V applies the knowledge of consumer behavior developed earlier in the book to the design of strategies aimed at influencing individuals' consumption choices. This involves the development of product strategies to stimulate demand for new and existing products. Message strategies are considered in terms of communication content, execution, and structure. The source of the message and the particular modality used to deliver the message are also considered. Finally, Part VI summarizes the main features of the information processing perspective and highlights the applicability of information processing principles in addressing marketing problems.

This book has had a long gestation and its final form is a far cry from its initial design. Its present form reflects the evolution of the field of consumer behavior and the evolution of our own thinking about the field. In addition it bears the imprint of all those

who influenced us in our graduate studies and colleagues who have continued to stimulate our intellectual development. At the risk of omitting some, we do want to acknowledge our deep sense of gratitude to those who made this book a reality.

Professor James F. Engel, Wheaton College, Professors Anthony Greenwald and Roger D. Blackwell, Ohio State University, and David T. Kollat, The Limited, all provided direction and inspiration in our study of consumer behavior. Professor Clark Leavitt, Ohio State University, provided considerable intellectual stimulation in the early development of this book. Professors Bobby J. Calder, Sidney J. Levy, and Alice M. Tybout, Northwestern University, helped refine our thinking about numerous issues in consumer behavior. The senior author would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support of his current and former colleagues at Northwestern University—Richard M. Clewett, John Hauser, Philip Kotler, Trudy Murray, Louis W. Stern, Gerald Zaltman, and Adris A. Zoltners.

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Part I

Part I indicates what consumer behavior is about, why it is of interest to managers, and how it may be studied. Chapter One identifies the domain of consumer behavior inquiry. Consumer behavior is viewed as a process by which people acquire, organize, and use information to make purchase decisions. This process is of interest to managers because it suggests strategies that can be used to influence consumers' choices. Chapter Two examines the role of research in learning about consumers and in designing influence strategies. Research helps the manager describe and explain consumption behavior. The strategies that emerge from this analysis are subjected to research approaches that can evaluate the effectiveness of various strategic alternatives.

Introduction

