4 Consumer Decisions in Marketing Communications

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Introduction

Quite simply, consumers are the primary reason for the existence of marketing communications. Without consumers, there is no commercial imperative for marketers to create even the simplest of messages. The remarkable developments experienced over the last century are testament not only to our creativity and mastery of technology but, more importantly, to the identification of myriad consumer types. Nowhere is this better illustrated than within marketing communications. These consumers are represented through complex and often overlapping needs and wants, and exist within a world of seemingly endless choice. Marketers are driven to define these audiences and to construct tailored communications that typically seek to move beyond simple informational value. Increasingly, the goal is the creation of emotionally and socially engaging marketing communications that serve to persuade consumers not only to purchase or visit but, further, to connect and to become part of a much bigger offering – a relationship.

Increasingly, this abstract sense of connectedness between consumers, marketers and brands is being translated into more tangible, financially relevant terms, namely through its inclusion as a component of brand and advertising equity (Rosengren and Dahlen, 2015). It is not surprising, therefore, that marketers are keen to develop brand relationships, with marketing communications offering an expedient, if not always perfect place within which to manage them.

The cost to marketers of this approach is the need to understand consumers in ways not previously required. It is no longer enough to identify target groups and fire-off marketing communications in their general direction. Now, consumers exist as an integral part of the communications production process. They are not simply the audience, they are co-creators – designers, developers and users. Quite simply, they are 'one of us' and so it has never been so necessary for marketers to understand 'why' and 'how' consumers behave as they do.

By focussing upon consumer decisions, this chapter seeks to support and further our understanding, explaining why consumers are driven to make decisions and how they manage their experiences. First, we consider who consumers are, exploring definitions relevant to marketing communications that seek to explain their nature, location and value to marketing communications. Second, we present a modelled conceptualisation of this understanding, focusing upon the consumer's decision-making process. Here, we will explore representations of the consumer's journey through their decisions; identify the benefits and costs to consumers and marketers within this process and consider how the contexts of consumption moderate these experiences. Third, we consider some of the over-arching theories that seek to explain consumer behaviour. By exploring consumer values, motivations and involvement, we frame this understanding around what consumers do (behaviour), what consumers feel (emotion) and what consumers think (cognition).

Understanding consumers in marketing communications

In Chapter 1, we noted a prevailing conceptualisation of marketing communications, through Kotler et al.'s (2016: 630) definition:

> "Marketing communications are the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade and remind customers directly or indirectly about the brands they market. In a sense, marketing communications represent the 'voice' of the company and its brands, and are the ways in which it can establish a dialogue and build relationship with customers."

The first part of this definition offers a fairly traditional interpretation of the role and function of marketing communications. This unidirectional (marketer to audience) approach is symptomatic of earlier attempts to conceptualise consumers and their behaviour, which emphasised the well-established, classical economic formula of production versus consumption. Within such approaches,

the marketing environment is seen as a place where products and services are produced and subsequently offered to consumers as part of a wider system of (typically commercial) exchange. Marketing communications naturally fill the void between these ideas, providing information (via numerous forms) that enables these parties to move closer together and achieve satisfying exchange.

This view has served marketing well for many years, allowing the creation of a readily understandable system of (transactional) exchange for both the marketer and the consumer (see Bagozzi, 1978). The marketing environment has changed, however, with an associated re-conceptualisation of the consumer, the marketer and marketing communications. Whilst some may argue that the traditional view always represented a misconception of this marketing exchange relationship (e.g. Galbraith, 1958; Baudrillard, 1988), the tangible changes in the fabric of the marketing environment (not least through advances in technology) push forward the notion of a radically altered set of parameters/priorities. The second part of Kotler et al.'s definition gives a nod to this changing dynamic, acknowledging that marketers may see value in nurturing collaborative relationships with customers, around the desired values of their brands (see Dwyer, et al., 1987; Gronroos, 2004). Of course, by labelling consumers as 'customers', this definition significantly limits the scope of understanding available to marketers to commercial and transactional value.

Perhaps most challenging in the re-conceptualisation of consumers is the notion that consumers exist not only to consume but also to produce. Similarly, to consider marketers as merely producers of communications is to underplay their own consumption of that process and experience. For example, consider how consumers are involved more than ever before in the design process of products and marketing communications, with some markets' existence dependent upon the activity of participant consumers – so called *'prosumers'* (see Cova & Cova, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2014).

It is likely that you will have contributed to and/or read online reviews, such as those on Tripadvisor. Your review sits alongside other existing reviews and/or elicits more responses regarding the experience. The provider of that experience may also contribute to that discussion, managing interpretations and expectations for the reviewers and readers. The validity of these reviews is bound up with an array of visible evidence to establish the credibility of authors (e.g. contribution ratings and rankings). Ultimately, the marketer may modify their offering and consumers may modify their understanding of the experience. Clearly, in that case, both consumers and marketers have qualitatively changed their position. The consumers (reviewers) have contributed to this