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In Marketing: Perceptions = Reality The Psychology of Consumer Buying

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Most marketers are continually bemused by the apparent confusion of their customers. Many view the “customer is always right” philosophy with a great deal of disdain, since they are well aware of large numbers of customers who are substantially misguided at any point in time and some who are always laboring under some fundamental misconception about the products, the suppliers of those product or another major aspect of the marketplace.

Further, many marketing discussions are organized around a basis that the customers are “ignorant” and need to be “educated” so that they will recognize the innate superiority of our product, business or service compared to those offered by our competition. This type of thinking is unfortunate, but difficult to overcome. It is unfortunate, because it hampers our ability to deal with the realities of the marketplace.

Simply put, the quality, characteristics and rightful competitive position of our product or service is what our customers perceive it to be. It is important to recognize that these perceptions may differ strongly from what we—experts in the field—believe to be the objective reality. However, the breakthrough is when we begin to realize that, as marketers, perceptions **are** the only reality worth considering. Think back to your last major purchase. In the final analysis, what you bought and where you bought it was based on your understanding of the marketplace.

Rightly or wrongly, you formed perceptions about the competitors and chose the one you perceived to provide the highest value. That there is considerable post purchase dissatisfaction indicates the degree to which pre-purchase perceptions, on further experience and consideration, may be woefully inaccurate.

There are numerous examples of where perceptions violate reality. Armstrong once invented an acoustic ceiling tile that was 60% better at deadening sound than the existing product. Because the product had no holes, they felt it to be aesthetically superior and a surefire winner in the market. Early sales were disappointing. Follow-up research indicated that the consumer couldn’t believe that a tile without holes could possibly be acoustic, since they thought that the holes were where the sound went. Finally, by putting holes in the product, which in fact lessened the sound deadening properties somewhat, the product sold briskly.

Never the less, it is those perceptions—right or wrong—on which we make our decisions. Accepting this is the first step towards good marketing. In order to successfully communicate with the market, you need to forget what you know and put yourself in the shoes of your customers. Typically, the customer’s view of your industry, product and service are much more simple than yours, and they tend to be much less involved in the details of the competition than you are. Often, in our consulting, we meet people for whom their business is one of the top two or three important and interesting things in their lives. They sometimes have difficulty seeing that not everyone is as involved. When they try to communicate with customers, they tend to talk as if to someone as involved as they are and come off being somewhat manic. Much like an unwelcome political or religious persuasion attempt, overly ambitious efforts may actually

turn the market against you.

The key to successful communication is being able to put yourself into the mind set of your consumer. Most consumers are strongly resistant to persuasive messages, since they have a strong “force field” around them to filter out the estimated 5000 persuasive messages they receive each day. So many voices are crying out for the consumers’ attention that the only way the consumer can preserve sanity is to effectively filter the bulk of them. Most persuasion attempts are ignored altogether and the remainder are met with cynicism, indifference and a goodly dose of skepticism.

In this raucous environment, communication with the target is difficult and considerable resources must be expended to generate enough impact to make any kind of change. The secret is to make sure that you are focusing on a simple message that will clearly communicate the key benefit that differentiates your product or service from your competitors. Many fledgling efforts are hampered by trying to communicate a complex message to an audience that is mostly not interested, and may in fact actively resist persuasion attempts. Rather than ineffectively trying to tell the customers every good thing about your offering, it is far better to forcefully tell them the one key thing.

Next month we’ll continue our examination of the pricing strategy with a discussion of the role price pays in consumer buying decisions and a comparison of value versus pricing.



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