Influence of Sources of Information on Information Search Behaviour

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the sources of information influencing the consumer's information search behaviour while buying his/her everyday items like toothpaste and packaged tea. It uses weighted average score method to determine the most influencing source of information. The various sources are examined for the consumers while buying toothpaste and packaged tea. Finally marketing implications are made.

Key words: sources of information, weighted average score, toothpaste, packaged tea

Introduction

For every product category, consumer selects his/her preferred brand from the numerous competing brands. Most of the stores stock a large number of brands to provide the consumer a large variety to make the choice. In order to make a wise choice, information search is necessary (Guo, 2001). Information search is a conscious goal-oriented behaviour whereby consumers acquire information to evaluate a particular brand or product class (Hawkins *et al*. 2003). Information search as defined by Haines (1978) means data that induces the consumer to construct or alter an existing decision process for the relevant product, including raw data, encoded symbols, and any other data capable of representing reality to the decision-maker. Hence consumer makes information search to obtain all relevant facts that could provide satisfactory solution to the problem. For example, if a consumer wishes to buy a digital camera. In order to get the best brand of digital camera, the consumer must have knowledge about various brands prevailing in the market, their distinct features, promotional offers, etc. Hence, the question arises from where the consumer gets all such information. The answer lies in the sources of information.

In order to decide which brand of digital camera to buy, the consumer can discuss with his/her friends or relatives or neighbours. He/she can read the newspaper advertisement. He/she can make an inquiry at the stores where digital cameras are sold. He/she can use mass media advertisement. He/she can read some magazines that publish product related articles. These sources of information provide the consumer an ample opportunity to gather market intelligence on the product that he/she needs. Hence, these sources of information influence the purchase decision of the consumer, thus affecting his/her information search process.

This study aims to determine the sources of information influencing the consumer's information search behaviour while buying his/her everyday items like toothpaste and packaged tea.

Data Collection and Research Methodology

The behaviour of the consumers is analysed for toothpaste and packaged tea. The reason behind choosing these products is that a) these products have a large number of brands, b) these products are used by end consumer c) these are purchased frequently. Thus it is deemed that information provided by the consumers will be correct.

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In order to extract the influencing source of information, data is collected through survey method. People from Punjab are approached through a field survey. Survey is conducted in various areas like Amritsar (26%), Jalandhar (24%), Ludhiana (26%) and Chandigarh (24%). The information needed is collected from the consumers of products selected for the study.

A sample of 550 respondents is selected on the basis of judgement cum convenience sampling. As far as possible, the respondents were approached in the market place outside the major shopping centres of the four cities. They were requested to participate in the 'not for profit' survey. If they agreed, they were asked to fill the questionnaire. Due care was taken to give appropriate representation to gender and age. Finally, 543 questionnaires have been used in the analysis. Biased and incomplete questionnaires have been removed from the study.

The sample shows that out of the total respondents, 44% are male and 56% are females. The actual age of the consumers has been recorded. Thus no age wise description is made. However age of the respondents varies between 18-59 years of age. Out of the total sample, the percentage of married respondents is 46% and that of unmarried is 54%. The respondents were asked their educational qualification. Education level of the respondents shows that 8% of the respondents have passed secondary school, 44% are graduates, 31% are post graduates and 17% are professionally qualified. The respondents are segregated on the basis of income also. Income level shows that 10% of the respondents are earning up to Rs.15,000/-, 34% are earning between INR 15,001/- to INR 25,000/-, 35% are having income from INR 25,001/- to INR 35,000/- and 21% are earning INR 35,001/- and above. The sample collects information from almost all types of the consumers who are engaged in different occupations. Self-employed means businessmen as well as professionals having their own practice like doctors and chartered accountant doing their own practice. The percentage of respondents who are self employed is 28%. Salaried people cover serviceman as well as respondents working as executives or on other higher posts. The percentage of salaried people is 35%. Housewives account for 17%, students 15% and retired personnel are only 5%.

Further, the various information sources examined to extract the most influencing source of information are, past experience; friends and family's advice; TV advertisements; point of purchase advertisement; newspaper, magazine advertisements; window shopping through store visits; manufacturer's pamphlets inserted in newspapers; salesperson and shopkeeper's advice; advertisement in public transports i.e. buses, railways; road side bill boards/hoardings; radio advertisements; cinema advertisements; manufacturer's websites and Internet.

Respondents are to state the extent to which these sources of information influence their purchase decision while buying toothpaste/packaged tea on seven-point Likert scale, 1) Strongly influenced, 2) Influenced, 3) Influenced somewhat, 4) Neutral, 5) Not influenced somewhat, 6) Not influenced, 7) Strongly not influenced. These seven point Likert scale are converted into values of 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively for the purpose of analysis.

To determine which source of information is most widely used, weighted average method is used. First of all, weighted average score of all the values provided by respondents is calculated to determine the source of information more widely used in case of two product categories. To calculate weighted average, score values provided by respondents is summated and then average is calculated. Further on ranks are allotted for the two products based on the value of weighted average score (WAS).

Data Analysis

As discussed earlier, consumers acquire knowledge about the products from various sources of information. There are numerous sources of information and not necessarily all these sources influence the consumer. Weighted average helps to determine the source of information influencing the consumer information search behaviour while buying toothpaste and packaged tea. Results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of weighted average score for Toothpaste and Packaged Tea

Sources of Information	Toothpaste		Packaged tea	
	Weighted Average Score	Rank	Weighted Average Score	Rank
TV advertisements	5.901	1	5.825	1
Past experience	5.546	2	5.561	2
Friends and Family advice	5.211	3	5.363	3
Point of purchase advertisement	5.104	4	5.157	4
Window shopping through store visits	4.708	5	4.856	6
Newspaper, Magazine advertisements	4.671	6	4.898	5
Manufacturer's pamphlets inserted in newspapers	4.564	7	4.679	8
Salesperson and Shopkeeper's advice	4.533	8	4.689	7
Manufacturer's websites	4.159	9	4.344	9
Road side bill boards/hoardings	4.123	10	4.159	11
Advertisement in public transports i.e. buses, railways	3.866	11	4.287	10
Cinema advertisements	3.854	12	3.976	13
Radio advertisements	3.809	13	4.070	12
Internet	3.402	14	3.436	14

Table 1 show that there is no major difference between the ranks of sources of information of toothpaste and packaged tea. For both the products, TV advertisement is the most influencing source of information thus ranked as one (5.901 for toothpaste and 5.825 for packaged tea). Second ranked source of information is past experience (5.546 for toothpaste and 5.561 for packaged tea). Friends and family advice (5.211 and 5.363 for toothpaste and packaged tea respectively) gets the third rank. Point of purchase advertisement with fourth rank (5.104 and 5.157 for toothpaste and packaged tea respectively) also influences the consumers while taking a purchase decision. Toothpaste and packaged tea are daily routine items and sometimes after reaching the store consumer makes up his/her mind for a particular brand. Window shopping through store visits holds fifth position in case of toothpaste (4.708) whereas sixth rank is given to this source of information in case of packaged tea (4.856). Newspaper and magazines advertisements occupy sixth rank in case of toothpaste (4.671) and fifth rank in case of packaged tea (4.898). Manufacturer's pamphlets inserted in newspapers and salesperson and shopkeeper's advice occupy seventh (4.564) and eight rank (4.533) respectively for toothpaste whereas in case of packaged tea, salesperson and shopkeeper's advice is at seventh rank (4.689) and

manufacturer's pamphlets is ranked as eighth (4.679). Manufacturer's websites has been allotted ninth rank in case of both the products, with WAS of 4.159 in case of toothpaste and WAS of 4.344 in case of packaged tea. Again an interchange of ranks is observed for road side bill boards/hoardings and advertisement in public transports i.e. buses, railways. In case of toothpaste, tenth rank (4.123) is for road side bill boards/hoardings and eleventh rank (3.866) is for advertisement in public transports i.e. buses, railways. In case of packaged tea, tenth rank is allotted to advertisement in public transports i.e. buses, railways (4.287). Eleventh rank is given to road side bill boards/hoardings (4.159). Same results are observed for cinema and radio advertisements and then further for internet. In case of toothpaste, cinema advertisement has twelfth rank (3.854) and radio advertisement has thirteenth rank (3.809) whereas for packaged tea, radio advertisement has twelfth rank (4.070) and cinema advertisement has thirteenth rank (3.976). At last, internet has fourteenth rank for toothpaste (3.402) as well as for packaged tea (3.206).

Discussion

The most important source which influences the purchase decision of FMCG products (toothpaste and packaged tea) is TV advertisements. Shimp (2007) depicts that as an advertising medium, television is uniquely personal and demonstrative, yet it is also expensive and subject to considerable competitive clutters. TV advertisements possess the capability to demonstrate a product being used, and especially in case of products such as tea and toothpaste, individuals are able to see and hear a product being used, identify with the product's users, and imagine using the product. An advantage of television advertising is that it has the ability to achieve great impact. If a consumer sees an advertisement for a certain brand of tea or toothpaste on the television, not only does this create consumer awareness about the brand and enhances his/her receptiveness to sales messages, but it also enhances brand recognition (something that the consumer can relate to when buying the product). As a strong source of information, advertising, through positioning and top-of-mind awareness, can influence the consumers prior brand perceptions and thus the order of search. Being high in the order of search may well determine the ultimate choice because the consumer will obtain additional information on only those brands which are in contention to be the winner (Reiss, 1991 cited in Moorthy *et al.* 1997). Furthermore, advertising is now not only limited to TV channels rather brands now reach to the consumer directly through their own media space, such as their websites and across media application (Clark, 2008) which will result in mass communication and more probability of catching the attention of consumers. Advertising must be capable of maximizing the accessibility of specific brand information that is likely to be used by the consumers to discriminate brand alternatives.

Further past experience means a lot to the consumers; hence marketers may concentrate on consumer satisfaction so that their previous positive experience influences them to buy the same brand on the next purchase occasion. Recommendations from friends and family alter consumer's perceptions of the expected utility from a recommended product and may affect his/her eventual search and purchase behaviour (Nikolaeva & Sriram, 2006).

Newspaper and magazine advertisements also act as a source of information but to a lesser extent than TV advertisements and past experience.

Salesman and shopkeeper's advice is very important in influencing buying decision of the consumers. Interaction with salesperson is very important in the buying process. Thus companies should be careful while selecting its salesmen.

The least influencing sources are radio advertisements and the Internet. Chamikutty (2008) argues that radio as a medium of communication can capture the attention of the Indian consumers if radio ads come as per international standards.

Further, results signify that internet is the least influencing source of information for the consumers. Possible reason for the failure of web could be the requirements of the web. The e-consumer has to learn complex and evolving Web technologies, adapt to different commercial practices of online vendors, and feel comfortable with novel characteristics of the medium (Das *et al*. 2003). Further Peterson and Merino (2003) add that internet is not likely to be an information panacea for consumers because of the complexities involved in it. For the inexperienced user, information search can require sophisticated knowledge of search engines and search bots which may be off putting for the individual (Shimp, 2007). In India, internet penetration rate is just 0.71 percent. However, Harwood (2008) provide that internet now matches with the life style of the consumers. He explains that more than half of 16-24 years old and more men than women said that the growth of online market has changed their buying pattern.

Hence, marketing managers are ever eager to determine which source most influences the information search behaviour of the consumer. A new strategy suggested by Dhall and Dutta (2008) is to create interest in brand by sponsoring the titles of the movies as is being adopted by Cadilla Healthcare Company. Spare (2008) provide that brands from sectors as diverse as FMCG, apparel, insurance, banking, IT, telecom are making regular appearance in online games to attract the attention of the consumers. Also blogs are now being attempted by marketers, to reach a wider audience at minimal cost. This source is still in its infancy in the UK but is more popular in the US. Microsoft Corporation Chairman Bill Gates said that communicating with customers via blogs is more advantageous than traditional communication method such as emails (Bakaie, 2008).

Conclusion

To conclude, this study helps in determining the sources of information most influencing the consumer behaviour while buying FMCG products. Thus, by assessing the dimensions of information sources for a wide range of individuals, marketing managers can move closer to the voices and actions of consumers.

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