

Discerning your customer

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Knowing or understanding your consumer is a basic principle of brand management and of marketing more generally. This principle is actually as important today as it has ever been. However, it is crucial to know that consumers aren't a fixed target because they do change: existing consumers of a brand develop new needs, change their preferences, alter their habits and acquire new skills for engaging in purchasing and consumption; fresh consumers come into new and established markets with their own needs, preferences and skills too.

Critics talk of contemporary consumers as better informed and connected, more marketing literate and savvier than in the past, and as being more empowered. Some commentators even describe this as a new economic order - an era of consumer-centric commerce. Assuming that they are correct, it would be surprising if these momentous changes didn't have implications for the way consumers think about brands and the way brands will be managed in future.

Would it be off the mark to put it this way? 'Person-centric commerce' is set to transform how individuals and organisations interact and transact, and change the way our economy works. Individuals in all their roles - 'consumer', 'employee', and 'citizen' - will benefit greatly from person-centric services. So will the organisations that serve them".

What makes the savvy consumer... savvy?

The contemporary savvy consumer is seen as someone who combines areas of competency (particularly technological sophistication, network competency and marketing/advertising literacy) with empowerment (especially self-confidence and self-efficacy). Before looking at the implications of this for brand management it is worth taking a closer look at these components of consumer savvy.

Competency refers to practical skills and acquired knowledge to respond to a constantly changing environment. It is seen in the technological sophistication of consumers: they are ready and willing to adopt new technologies (everything from SMS to interactive, participatory) and they are comfortable multi-tasking with their technological toolkit (seamlessly moving between PC accesses to websites, sending SMSs, and retrieving emails from their mobile phones).

Competency is also seen in the way consumers make use of their networks: the capacity to harness a network of useful personal contacts (to acquire up-to-date product information, to hear about word-of-mouth recommendations and to make more informed choices) and to tap into the online net (with its bulletin boards, chat-rooms, blogs, social sites and virtual communities).

Competency is further manifest through marketing/advertising literacy - the fact that consumers are familiar with the ideas,

objectives and methods of marketing, advertising and marketing communications. This is evident in the way consumers understand and use marketing terminology, the way they closely follow developments in the media business, their capacity to deconstruct and reconstruct marketing communications and their readiness to offer judgements about products, attributes, value and levels of service. Such sophisticated literacy gives consumers greater control over what they see, hear and read, especially when control is combined with enabling technologies (the panoply of enablers that extends from the internet to podcasts and webcasts, from personal shopping assistants and iPhones).

Multiple values

Empowered by access to information, consumers are driven by value - seeking not just the value that accrues from consuming brands, but also value in terms of quality interactions with the organisation behind the brands. As such, they seek value-for-time, value-for-attention and value-for-access to their personal information. The democratisation of access to information means that consumers have enhanced self-confidence in their ability to perform behaviours related to consumption - just think of the aptitude and astuteness of consumers when they engage in online grocery shopping and online travel booking.

Self-confidence is in many cases fully justified - compared to conventional technologies, user-directed ones give consumers remarkable levels of control (web users, for instance, decide which websites to visit, bookmark and revisit, they choose whether to navigate thoroughly or fleetingly and they determine if interaction should occur, how often, on what terms and also for what purpose). Consumers evidently have the ability and the confidence to 'call the shots'.

At the upcoming [Brand That Make Cents Conference 2014](#), this June we will have speakers from the marketing industry looking into responsive brand management - to the ever increasingly savvy consumer, differentially savvy consumers - with a focus on arguably the biggest challenge for brand managers which is how to contend with differences among consumers and also differentially responsive brand management as you learn how knowing your consumer can shape your brand marketing strategy. Consumers change, but not all at the same pace. Not all consumers are equally savvy. Not all are equally empowered.

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