Impact of advertising on brand preference of high involvement products

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Abstract

It is important for marketers to understand the nature and power of attitudes as it is a predisposition. It is made of three components – beliefs, affect and behavioral intentions. Depending on the consumers level of involvement and circumstances, his attitudes can result from hierarchy of effects. Persuasion is an attempt to change consumer attitudes. Although the traditional views of communication views consumers as passive elements, new developments of interactive communication highlights the active roles a consumer plays. The attractiveness and credibility are two important factors that influence effectiveness. The way a marketer structures his message determines the level of persuasiveness. This could be effectively done with advertisements employing emotional or rational appeals. The consumer’s characteristics determine if the message itself will be effective and depends on the level of involvement with communication. The Elaboration Likelihood model specifies that less involved consumers could be swayed whereas more involved consumer is likely to attend and process the components of actual message. (Solomon R Michael, 2011)

Advertising is the best known and most widely discussed form of promotion because of persuasiveness – it can create brand images and instill preferences among consumers. Advertising can result in creating strong positioning of brands thereby creating loyal consumers. A number of models depict the stages a consumer passes through from being aware of a brand to actual purchase – The AIDA, hierarchy of effects model, Innovation adoption model, Information processing model. (Kotler, Keller, Koshy and Jha 2009)

Consumer involvement is the level of engagement and active processing the consumer undertakes in responding to a marketing stimulus. High involvement products are those products for which the buyer is willing to spend considerable time and effort in searching for his brand. Low involvement products are bought frequently and with a minimum
of thought and effort because they are not of vital concern nor have any great impact on the consumer's lifestyle.

**Keywords**-Advertising, impact, involvement, purchase

**INTRODUCTION**

Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy the perceived needs, wants and objectives of individuals and organizations (American Marketing Associations definition of Marketing). This definition highlights that marketing is a process – a series of actions or methods in a sequential manner. The ultimate goal of marketing is earn a profit.

Advertising today is no longer a mere tool of marketing. It is a business, a creative process, a social phenomenon, and a fundamental ingredient of a free enterprise system. (Arens, William F and Bovee, 1995) “Advertising is the non personal communication of information, usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products (goods and services) or ideas by identified sponsors through various media.”1 This definition clearly emphasizes the fact that all kinds of advertising – be it for products, services or ideas is usually aimed at a particular segment of the population that is called the target audience – which could be either the consumers (people who buy the products for their own or someone else’s personal use) or business houses (organizations that buy the product to either resell or use to conduct their business - industries, professionals, trade).

Advertising presents the company and its products to the market - helps in the organization to achieve the marketing goal and hence there is a need to understand the relationship between marketing and the way consumers behave. It is the best known and most widely discussed form of promotion because of persuasiveness – it can create brand images and instill preferences among consumers. Advertising can result in creating strong positioning of brands thereby creating loyal consumers. It can strike a chord with consumers when differentiation across other elements of marketing mix is difficult to achieve. (Belch et al, 2001). Although the ultimate goal of all marketing programs is to influence purchase behaviour, the actual purchase is only part of an overall process and hence study if consumer behaviour is essential for successful communication programs.

Consumer behaviour is the “process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy their needs and desires” 2. Sometimes the purchases are a long detailed process; that includes extensive information search, comparisons and evaluation. Sometimes they are incidental and impulsive – a prominently displayed discount price or offers in a store may result in impulsive purchase. Any successful marketer has to understand the patterns and craft his marketing messages accordingly. (Belch, George E and Belch, Michael E). Marketers need to know the specific needs consumers are attempting to satisfy and how that translates into purchase. They need to understand how they access information regarding various brands and how they differentiate between various brands.

Market segmentation is an important aspect of consumer behaviour and markets can be divided on the basis of product usage, demographics,
psychographics, geography, family structure, social class. There are two basic approaches to the perspectives on consumer behaviour – positivist perspective that emphasis on the objectivity of science and the consumer as a rational decision maker. The interpretive perspective stresses on the subjective meaning of consumers individual experience and the idea that any behaviour is subject to multiple interpretations. Any consumer purchase is hence a response to a problem.

**Stages in the decision making process**

Problem Recognition is the first stage of decision making process when the consumer perceives a need and becomes motivated to solve the problem. This stage initiates the decision making process. It is triggered between the consumer’s ideal state and actual state. This is when the consumer realises the cause – that may be internal or external (Kotler, Keller, Koshy and Jha 2009). This stage could itself be triggered when

a) The consumer runs out of stock of the brand he is loyal to and he has to replenish the stock. Advertising helps consumers to realise the arrival of new products

b) The consumer feels dissatisfaction with the current product or service - advertisements help people realise a problem and when consumers need to make a purchase.

c) Changes in lifestyles status may create new needs and trigger purchases

d) Purchase of a product can also trigger upgrades or related products – advertisements certainly makes consumers realise such related products.

e) Advertisements trigger sales promotion techniques such as free samples introductory price offers and coupons – they rely on novelty seeking behaviour. Innovative products are introduced and brought to consumer’s attention.

While problem recognition is a basic process, his motivation (the compelling force that makes a consumer take an action) levels to solve that problem will influence the rest of the process. A classic theory of human motivation popularized by Abraham Maslow explains the hierarchy of needs – physiological (basic, primary), safety (security, protection), Social (love, sense of belonging), Esteem (recognition, status) and self actualization (realization and self development). According to his theory the lower needs must be satisfied for the higher needs to become meaningful. Advertising campaigns are designed to show hoe brands fulfill these needs. Marketers also recognize that different segments have different need levels.

Psychoanalytic theory propounded by Sigmund Freud has influenced marketers to probe into deeply rooted motives that underlie purchase decision (Belch and Belch, 2001). Motivational researchers employ a variety of methodologies to gain insight into underlying causes of consumer behaviour. The qualitative nature of research helps marketers to motivate buyers with effective messages and strong symbolic representations.

1. Information Search is the second stage of the decision making process that follows the problem recognition. The consumers search for information needed to make the decision – the sources of information can be internal
The process of how an individual receives, selects, organizes and interprets information to create a meaningful picture of the world is known as perception. The perception process involves Selective exposure, selective attention, selective comprehension and selective retention. The nuances of advertising can certainly affect the perception process (Belch and Belch 2001).

2. Alternative Evaluation is the stage when consumers compare various brands and products that have been shortlisted. The various brands that are being considered during this process are called the evoked set (Kotler, Kelly, Koshy and Jha, 2009). Marketers rely on advertising to create top of the mind awareness so that those brands are always part of the evoked set. Popular brands use reminder advertising to stay on in the minds of consumers while new brands rely on comparative advertising to create their market share. All brands aim to increase the likelihood of being considered. Once the set is formed, consumers evaluate the various brands on functional and psychosocial consequences (Belch and Belch, 2001).

Attitudes are an individual’s feelings towards a product. For marketers attitudes are important as they are related to purchase behaviour. Positive and negative feelings and behavioural tendencies decide a consumer’s evaluation of a product. Advertising and promotions create a favourable attitude towards new products, reinforce favourable attitudes or change negative attitudes.

3. Purchase decision is that stage when the consumer stops looking for alternatives and makes a purchase intention or predisposition. Although there is an intention it could be affected by factors like when to buy and where to buy. There is a time delay in high involvement and complex purchases such as automobiles, personal computers and durables. Low involvement items such as consumer package goods the time delay would be short. Marketers rely on reminder advertising to ensure brand names are remembered and resort to prominent pop displays.

4. Post purchase evaluation is the stage that follows the purchase decision when a consumer compares the level of performance with the expectations and he is either satisfied or not. This process is relevant and important as it affects further purchases and the degree of loyalty. Cognitive dissonance is a post purchase doubt or psychological tension and advertisements are an important source of support as consumers tend to be more attentive to advertisements at this stage (Belch and Belch, 2001).

Consumers do not always engage in all the five steps – a few steps may be skipped or minimized thus resulting in high involvement and low involvement decision making process.
According to Wilbur Schramm, Communication is defined as the passing of information the exchange of ideas or the process of establishing a commonness of thought between a sender and receiver. The major participants in the communication process are the sender and the receiver along with the message and channel. The major communication functions and processes include encoding, decoding response and feedback.

The source or the sender of a communication process is the person or organization that has information to share with. The communication process begins with the selection of words, symbols – encoding is the process of putting thoughts ideas into a symbolic form that will be understood by the receiver. The encoding leads to development of message – semiotics s the study of meaning and how words, gestures, myths, sign symbol acquire meaning. Advertisers and Marketers understand the importance of semiotics to craft effective messages (Belch and Belch, 2001). Decoding is the process of transforming the sender’s message back into thought. The receiver’s reaction after seeing the message is a response.

The most important aspect of developing effective communication programs understands the response process of the receiver in moving toward specific behaviour. A number of models depicts the stages of a consumer passes through before the actual purchase of a product.

1. The AIDA model represents the stages a marketer must take his consumer through in the selling process – a buyer successively passes through attention, interest, desire and action. The marketer must first gain the attention then arouse interest and create desire to use his product. The action stage is getting the customer to buy the product. Advertising certainly has an impact on every stage of this transformation process.

2. The Hierarchy of effects model developed by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner shows the process in which advertising works - a basic premise is that advertising effects occur over a period of time. The various stages are Awareness, Knowledge, Liking, Preference Conviction and purchase.

3. The innovation adoption model that evolved from diffusion of innovations by Everett M Rogers represents the stages a consumer passes through in adopting a new product or service – adoption s proceeded by awareness, interest, evaluation and trial. Advertising creates awareness and interest – trial is triggered by sales promos.

4. The information processing model of advertising effects developed by William McGuire assumes the receiver in a persuasive communication situation like advertising. The stages are presentation, attention, comprehension, yielding retention and behaviour. Retention is that portion of the receiver’s ability to retain comprehended information that is valid or relevant. Advertising is persuasive in nature.

All the four models view the response process as moving through three sequential stages:
207

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a) cognitive – when the receivers knows about the brand (includes awareness, comprehension)

b) affective when the receivers develops feeling or attitudes(desire, preference, conviction)

c) behavioural – consumers action (trial, purchase, adoption, rejection)

The hierarchical response models focuses on approaches for studying receiver’s response to marketing communications. There are other approaches that understand nature of cognitive reactions to persuasive messages.

The model of information processing developed by Michael Ray identifies three alternate orderings of three stages based on product differentiation and product involvement (Ray, Michael L Communication and Hierarchy of effects) – standard learning, dissonance/attribution and low involvement models. In the standard learning hierarchy, the consumer goes through learn – feel – do stages. The dissonance model is based on do- feel –learn process and is more common when consumers select between alternatives. The low-involvement hierarchy is based on learn-do-feel sequence. This tends to occur when involvement is low and there is minimal difference between alternatives.

The integrated response model integrates concepts from traditional response models and low involvement response hierarchy. This was developed by Robert Smith and William Swinyard and accounts for effects of direct experience and recognizes that different levels of beliefs come from advertising and personal involvement with the product. Advertising leads to beliefs that are seen as biased. (Arens et al)

The FCB planning model of Richard Vaughn built on hierarchy of effects model and integrated research on high and low involvement. They added dimensions of thinking versus feeling processing at each level by bringing in theories regarding brain specialization. The theory suggests left brain is capable of rational cognitive thinking while the right engages in emotional affective functions. Their FCB grid suggests advertising planning goes through following stages – informative, affective, habit formation and satisfaction. Differences in the ways consumer’s process and respond to persuasive messages are analyzed in the Elaboration Likelihood model. (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The ELM model was propounded by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo to explain how persuasive communications such as advertisements lead to persuasion by influencing attitudes. According to this model “the attitude formation the attitude formation depends on the amount and nature of elaboration or processing of relevant information that occurs in response to a persuasive message.” High elaborations imply the consumers engage in careful consideration, thinking and evaluation low elaboration occurs when receiver does not engage in active information processing. ELM depends on two functions – motivation and ability to process message. Motivation depends on involvement, personal needs, relevance, and arousal levels while ability to process the message depends on knowledge, capacity and opportunity to process the message (Belch and Belch, 2001).

According to ELM there are two basic routes to persuasion or attitude change – central route to persuasion and peripheral route to persuasion. Under
the central route the receiver is viewed as a very active involved participant in the communication process whose ability and motivation are high. When central processing of advertising messages happen, the consumer closely analyses and scrutinizes the messages. Under the peripheral route to persuasion the receiver is viewed as lacking in motivation and is not engaged in detailed processing. The receiver relies on cues that may be incidental like celebrities etc. (Kotler, Kelly, Koshy and Jha, 2009).

The Elaboration likelihood Model has important relevance to marketing with respect to involvement. If involvement is high then an advertisement should contain strong arguments that the recipients may not counter argue. If the involvement is low then peripheral cues may take prominence over the message arguments. The ELM suggests the most effective type of message depends on route to persuasion the consumer follows. The involvement level for certain product categories may be low and hence consumers may not process the messages in detail. Hence low involvement products rely on creative tactics that emphasize peripheral cues and rely on repetitive advertising to create favorable attitudes. There is an absence of significant brand attributes (Kotler, Kelly, Koshy and Jha, 2009). Low involvement happens with low cost, frequently purchased products.

High involvement products could thus include cars, mobiles, durables etc while low involvement can include products like salt, cookies, toothpaste, consumables etc.

Some Findings from Research

The impact of advertising on consumer behavior with a focus on their involvement levels, has long been a subject for research. Zhaung, Cumiskey, Xiao and Alford (2010) define involvement as “the perceived personal relevance of a product based upon the individual’s needs, wants, and desires.” They argue that products by themselves cannot be involving since different people may show different levels of involvement for the same product. They support the suggestions of Bei and Simpson (1995) and Zaichkowsky (1985) that to study products or behavioural intentions, the levels of involvement of the individual is important.

The pioneers in Elaboration Likelihood Model perspective of message reception, Cacioppo and Petty, along with Feng Kao and Rodriguez conducted a set of experiments which assumed that the need for cognition or a better understanding of an issue was the motivator for message processing and persuasion. In their experiment on 192 male and female undergraduates, Cacioppo and others aimed at classifying subjects on their need for cognition, while the second experiment used this difference in need for cognition to study if there were any differences in attitude formation using the peripheral versus the central route. Findings showed that attitudes that were formed using the central route were more consistent with the behaviours than attitudes formed using the peripheral route.

In their empirical study on the Impact of perceived value on behaviour intention, Zhaung, Cumiskey, Xiao and Alford (2010), proposed that the perception of acquisition utility and transaction utility have positive influences on behavioural intention. They added another independent variable, involvement, as a moderator for behavioural intention. A lab experiment was conducted among 389 undergraduate students whose average age was 21.6 years. Findings showed that acquisition utility helps in a higher
intention to purchase, with the impact being stronger in a high involvement situation. Results also showed that transaction utility does not positively influence purchase intention across high and low involvement groups.

The impact of advertising messages on high involvement and low involvement purchase decisions has been of research interest since the 1980s. Radder & Huang’s (2008) study on high involvement (sportswear clothing brands) and low involvement products (coffee brands) found a high brand awareness of the high involvement product brands among respondents. Advertising was found to be effective in creating awareness about the high involvement product brands, and of little consequence for the low involvement product brands. Earlier studies found that for high elaboration likelihood products, advertisement messages that had rational appeals with logical argument and relevant facts were more effective than those with emotional appeals, which were more effective when peripheral routes of message reception were used (Petty and Cacioppo, 1980). In another paper, Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) argued that if the central route is followed for issue-relevant information, persuasive message can induce attitude change that is longer lasting and that translates into corresponding behaviours. Those who use the peripheral route do not respond to advertising/ persuasive message content, but rather on non-content cues that are available. Attitude change in this case is temporary and non-predictive of behaviour.

In their experiments on ‘Issue Involvement as a Moderator of the Effects on Attitude of Advertising Content and Context’, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) manipulated three variables: personal relevance of message, quality of arguments (content), and source of the message. Results showed that content played a more significant role than the source variable under high involvement conditions, whereas the source was more influential in low involvement conditions.

The experiment, ‘Revisit Elaboration Likelihood Model: How Advertising Appeals Work on attitudinal and behavioural Brand Loyalty Centring Around Low vs. High-Involvement Product’ (Um, 2008) tried to find out the effectiveness of advertising appeals (here, rational versus emotional) on brand loyalty (studied in terms of attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty). 195 university students with an average age of 22.6 years who took part in the experiment were grouped into four in a factorial design having four print ads: two rational appeals and two emotional appeal advertisements for two product categories each – one with high involvement (a notebook computer) and the other with low involvement (toothpaste).

Analysis using t-test and ANOVA showed that the effectiveness of advertising appeals in increasing brand affect, brand trust, brand identification, attitudinal brand loyalty and behavioural brand loyalty was a function of involvement with the product, rather than on its rationality or emotional content. A high- involvement product showed a significant increase in the effectiveness of advertising appeals on the dependent variables studies and conversely, a low-involvement product showed no significant increase in the effectiveness of advertising appeals on the dependent variables of the study.

Punyatoya Plavini (2011) proposed that the impact of brand personality on consumer brand preference and purchase intention was similar for both high and low involvement products. She concluded that this impact is positive across involvement levels. However, she
suggests that the positive impact is higher for high involvement products when compared to that of low involvement products.

Asadollahi Amin (2011) classified consumers based on their place in the hierarchy of effects model to study the differences in advertising strategy for these groups of consumers. In this research, significant differences between groups of consumers in relation to hierarchy of advertisement effects for high and low involvement products was investigated. Results showed a positive relationship between different levels of consumer involvement and advertising. The study found a positive relationship between degree of consumer involvement and hierarchy of effects of advertisements. Advertisements were found to have a high impact on highly involved consumers. The author concludes that consumer involvement is the primary stimulus for advertising strategy.

Conclusion

Advertising is a paid mass mediated attempt that persuasive in nature. It is a communication process that involves interpretation – the level of conscious interpretation may be minimal or extensive. The audiences interpret ads based on social, cultural factors along with personal levels of comprehension and motivation. Consumers go through deliberate decision making process that begins with explicit need recognition, deliberate extensive information search and in-depth alternative evaluation and purchase ending with lengthy post purchase evaluation.

When a consumer is highly involved, the advertisement is analyzed more and claims are believed. The success of any advertisement depends on the levels of involvement of the consumer. For low involvement products such reactions do not occur immediately. Advertisement messages rely on peripheral cues like attractive spokespersons, imagery, humour, jingles are relied on and the consumer learns in a very passive manner.
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