# CONSUMER RESISTANCE TO INNOVATIONS: THE MARKETING PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTIONS

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In this article, our objective is to explain why customers resist innovations even though they are considered necessary and desirable. We will seek to identify the major barriers which create customer resistance to innovations and will suggest marketing strategies to overcome these barriers.

Why is there the need to study and understand consumer resistance to innovations? Primarily because most business corporations are faced with a very high rate of new product failure. Only a small fraction of the new product ideas chosen for market development are commercially suc-

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cessful. One of the major causes for market failure of innovations is the resistance they encounter from consumers. Yet, little research has been done on this subject. Most studies have focused on successful innovations and their rate of diffusion through the market. Some marketing scholars have emphasized the value of studying innovation resistance; 7. 10 however, except for a few studies, 3.4 the concept remains neglected.

#### **Innovation Resistance**

Consumers in industrialized nations are proinnovation. They believe that technology, if properly harnessed, can benefit them. Why then do they resist some innovative products or services?

#### Why Innovation Resistance?

First, an innovation may create a high degree of change in the consumers' day-to-day existence and disrupt their established routines. For example, the videotex, which offers in-home shopping services, when initially in France, met with high consumer resistance because of the changes it created in shopping behavior. Consumers could not interact with store personnel to get helpful information; they had to forego their enjoyment of the attractive atmospherics of the store; and those who loved to go shopping with their friends were deprived of this social interaction. Consumers had to learn how to use this innovative service. Further, many were happy with their current mode of shopping and resented the changes posed by the innovation. Thus potential changes from a satisfactory status quo (or current habit) can cause resistance to the innovation.8 In European countries such as France, where the innovation has gained success, consumers were given free terminals to overcome the resistance. Innovations, such as the videotex, which create considerable change for the consumer are said to be discontinuous.5 The higher the discontinuity of an innovation, the higher the resistance is likely to

Second, an innovation may conflict with the consumers' prior belief structure. For example, several consumers in the United States believe that goods produced by Third World countries are of inferior quality. This is one reason why machine tools produced by India, though high in quality, have not gained widespread acceptance in international markets. Some consumers believe that buying foreign goods is unpatriotic and does a dis-

service to the native economy.<sup>2, 9</sup> The <sup>1</sup> America" movement of the 1980s is a manifestion of the strong beliefs held by such American consumers, who are likely to resist innovation that originate on foreign soil.

First, an innovation may create a high degree of change in the consumers' day-to-day existence and disrupt their established routines.

From the above discussion, we may now venture a definition of innovation resistance. Innovation resistance is the resistance offered by consumers to an innovation, either because it poses potential changes from a satisfactory status quo or because it conflicts with their belief structure.

#### Characteristics of Innovation Resistance

There is evidence in the marketing literature in illustrate the existence of innovation resistance. First, innovation resistance affects the timing of adoption. Adopters of innovations have been classified into five categories: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards. Each of these groups has a different level of resistance to the innovation, and the variation in level affects the timing of adoption for example, Innovators exhibit no resistance the innovation and are the first to adopt. The Laggards, on the other hand, have such a highlevel of resistance that they do not adopt the product. For the other adopter categories, the resistance to the innovation breaks down over time.

Second, innovation resistance varies in degree. Resistance exists on a continuum, increasing from passive resistance or inertia to active resistance. Consumers who are aware of an innovation may behave in one of the following ways: (1) They may feel disinclined to adopt the innovation (inertia)—for example, few men adopted cosmetics when they were first introduced exclusively for the male segment. For a variety of cultural reasons men were not sufficiently motivated to change their current behavior. (2) Consumers may feel that the innovation is too risky and postpone the adoption decision (active resistance)—for example, microwave ovens met with high market resistance initially since consumers feared that

the radiation might cause physical risk. (3) Consumers may be convinced that the innovation is unsuitable and decide to launch an attack against its adoption (very active resistance)—for example, when diesel cars were first introduced, the early adopters had to cope with high diesel costs and radically new maintenance problems; these dissatisfied consumers raised such a hue and cry about their problems that they diffused resistance to the innovation through the rest of the market.

Third, innovation resistance exists across product classes. What matters is not the product class to which the innovation belongs, but the two basic causes of resistance: the degree of change or discontinuity brought about by the innovation,5 and/ or the extent to which it conflicts with the consumer's belief structure. A highly discontinuous innovation, such as the first computer, creates a great degree of change for the consumer and is likely to encounter high resistance. Innovations based on new technologies usually create high discontinuity. On the other hand, a continuous innovation, such as the push-button phone, which improved on the rotary dial phone, creates hardly any change for the consumer. Yet, even such an innovation can meet with resistance for the second reason: conflict with belief structure. While the market has readily accepted push-button phones made in the United States, not all consumers have switched to the cheaper imitations made in Hong Kong, because of the lower quality that they perceive in the latter.

## The higher the discontinuity of an innovation, the higher the resistance is likely to be.

Innovation resistance thus seems to be a normal, instinctive response of consumers. What we need, therefore, is to understand the process.

## **Encountering Customer Resistance to Innovations**

Customers face several barriers that paralyze their desire to adopt innovations, and these barriers may be grouped into two categories: functional barriers and psychological barriers. The functional barriers relate to three areas: product usage patterns, product value, and risks associated with product usage. These barriers are

more likely to arise if consumers perceive significant changes from adopting the innovation. The psychological barriers arise from two factors: traditions and norms of the customers, and perceived product image. These barriers are more often created through conflict with customers' prior beliefs.

#### **Functional Barriers**

#### Usage Barrier

Perhaps the most common reason for customer resistance to an innovation is that it is not compatible with existing workflows, practices, or habits. Innovations that require changes in customers' routine require a relatively long development process before gaining customer acceptance.

For example, one innovation that has met with resistance from some potential users is carpooling, since it requires a significant change in their daily routine. Carpoolers have to synchronize their arrival and departure times and can no longer enjoy the freedom of a flexible office schedule. They have to compromise on several things during the journey as well: the type of music they listen to is no longer an individual choice; the privilege of silence may have to be forgone for the sake of polite conversation; and smokers may have to grit their teeth and bravely endure the urge for nicotine. Carpooling requires compatibility with fellow carpoolers' punctuality, manners, and even personal grooming habits! Hence, the resistance to the innovation.

Tofu, an inexpensive protein substitute, is another product facing usage barriers from American consumers. Tofu is bland in taste, but other ingredients can be blended with it to add flavor and texture. However, the cooking skills required for using this product are becoming obsolete with the changing lifestyles. Few people have the time or patience to hunt for recipes of tofu dishes and then to learn the different ways of preparing them. Unless the usage of the product is made easier, it will continue to face resistance. Tofu manufacturers have partially succeeded in dealing with this barrier by processing and packaging the product in the form of ready-to-eat frozen dessert.

#### Value Barrier

The second functional barrier to an innovation is based on the value of the innovation. Unless an

innovation offers a strong performance-to-price value compared with product substitutes, there is no incentive for customers to change.

An innovation that has avoided the value barrier (by not charging for usage) is the Automatic Teller Machine (ATM).\* The ATM is restricted in the types of transactions that it can do for a customer. It cannot open a new account, issue drafts, provide loans, or perform any of a number of other services that are provided routinely at a bank counter. The ATM does provide cash at 24hour locations, but even here there are limitations. The cash can be withdrawn only in multiples of \$20, there is an upper limit on the dollar amount that can be withdrawn during a day (such as \$300), and sometimes the machine runs out of cash or is temporarily out of service, requiring the frustrated customer to go to an alternative location. Clearly, the ATM provides no value to the customer who seeks complex banking transactions. The innovation does, however, provide value to the customers in places and at times when access to human tellers are not available. Retail stores, supermarkets, gasoline stations, and post offices are examples of locations where the ATM will provide value to the customer, and it is through these outlets that the cash-dispensing utility of the ATM is increasing.

## Resistance affects the timing of adoption.

Similarly, the videodisc player introduced by RCA met with high customer resistance. From the consumer's perspective, the innovation lacked the value that was promised by a feasible substitute: the videocassette recorder (VCR). The videodisc could play but not record: the VCR could do both. Videodiscs could not be reused, while videocassettes could be reused any number of times. Finally, videodisc players cost much more than VCRs, especially as Japanese producers of VCRs started to drop their prices. The value barriers faced by the videodisc player were so high that they eventually led to market failure.

#### Risk Barrier

All innovations, to some extent, represent un-

certainty and pose potential side effects that cannot be anticipated. Customers, aware of the risk try to postpone adopting an innovation until they can learn more about it. There are four main types of risk inherent in an innovation.

The first type of risk is physical risk: harm to person or property that may be inherent in the innovation. New drugs commonly carry some physical risk because they are designed to act on the body. Farmers are unwilling to experiment with new insecticides, fertilizers, and herbicides for fear of soil damage. Consumers are reluctant to try new hair colors for fear that they may cause permanent damage to their hair. Sugar substitutes such as saccharin have met with consumer resistance because of possible adverse effects on health. In fact, this fear of physical risk extends to all processed foods.

The second type of risk is economic risk. The higher the cost of an innovation, as with capital goods, the higher the perceived economic risk. For example, with products such as personal computers and video cameras, many interested consumers are postponing their purchases. They reason, quite correctly, that if they wait, a better product with a lower price tag will soon be on the market. Products based on new technologies are especially susceptible to this risk. For example, even in the corporate world, many companied decide to wait for a new generation of production with a better performance-to-price ratio before upgrading their computer systems.

The third type of risk is due to performance uncertainty and is known as functional risk. The customer worries that the innovation may not have been fully tested and that therefore it is possible that it may not function properly or reliably. New cars often generate this uncertainty, since they have no performance record whatsoever.

The fourth type of risk is social risk. Customers may resist an innovation because they feel that they will face social ostracism or peer ridicule when they adopt it. Buying generic brand foods is still not acceptable to most people, even in the case of standardized food items such as frozen vegetables and corn flakes.

#### **Psychological Barriers**

#### Tradition Barrier

The first source of psychological resistance is

Some banks are now considering charging for transactions.
 This may seriously retard future growth.

the cultural change created for the customer by an innovation. When an innovation requires a customer to deviate from established traditions, it is resisted. The greater the deviation, the greater the resistance.

### Innovation resistance varies in degree.

For example, not all people find it socially acceptable to use computerized dating or to advertise in the newspaper for a potential spouse. Even singles bars as a meeting place carry a stigma. Women executives still encounter difficulties traveling because of the social connotations associated with eating or drinking alone in a hotel. Thus, for the individual consumer, behavior that is contrary to social norms and societal and family values creates the barrier.

Tradition plays a more dominant role, perhaps, in eating habits than in any other form of consumption. This fact has thwarted the innovative uses of foods and beverages as well as the introduction of foods new to the culture. For example, consumers tend to think of cranberry sauce primarily as a Thanksgiving turkey relish, thus creating a marketing problem for Ocean Spray. In the past, instant coffee has had to overcome the image of a laxy homemaker's product; beer has been, for a long time, considered a blue-collar indulgence; gin and tonic has had the image of a sissy drink, unworthy of the he-man. The examples go on and on. Attitudes can change over time, but until they do, the barriers are up.

#### image Barrier

Innovations acquire a certain identity from their origins: the product class or industry to which they belong, or the country in which they are manufactured. If any of these associations are unfavorable, the customer develops an unfavorable image about the product, and there is a barrier to adoption. Clearly, the image barrier is a perceptual problem that arises out of stereotyped thinking and makes life difficult for the innovation.

For example, many people believe that the U.S. postal system is really bad. Yet, it is one of the most efficient in the world. Many other common stereotypes are also false. Small businesses are not always more entrepreneurial than large ones.

Decentralized corporations are not always more efficient than centralized corporations. Private universities are not necessarily more innovative than state universities.

The negative image of some foreign countries is a barrier for innovations that originate from such nations. For example, India is one of the largest producers of industrial machine tools, but until recently it suffered from a negative image unrelated to the quality of its products. How could a country of roaming cows and snake charmers produce machine tools, let alone high-quality tools? It took a considerable amount of marketing effort for India to offset this adverse image. Similarly, electronic goods made in Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have had to contend with consumer skepticism.

## Strategies for Breaking the Barriers

Each strategy suggested in this section can be classified into one of five categories: product strategy, communication strategy, pricing strategy, market strategy, or coping strategy. A summary classification of this scheme is shown in Table 1. As can be seen, most of the strategies relate directly to the product or the use of communication.

#### Undoing Usage Barriers

The first probable strategy is to develop a systems perspective to market the innovation. After all, any new product or service interacts with other products used and other activities performed by the customer. By looking at the whole operation, the innovating firm can estimate how its new offering will fit into the existing system. For example, when dishwashers were first introduced, they met with resistance from housewives, who were the primary target market. When husbands and teenage children were around to take care of the dishwashing need adequately, a mechanical appliance to take their place seemed unnecessary. Besides, the dishwasher needed compatible dishes and detergent. The dishes had to be rinsed anyway, and had to be loaded and unloaded. The intended customers thus faced a significant usage barrier. The manufacturers realized that the best approach to marketing the product was to integrate it with other home appliances that were considered essential and provided convenience. Therefore, they sold the dishwashers directly to

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#### Table 1 A Classification of Marketing Strategies To Overcome Consumer Resistance to Innovations

Res	rce of stance	Marketing Strategy Product	Communication	Pricing	Market	Coping	W. 1. W. C.
I Fu	rier) inctional irriers	Strategy	Strategy	Strategy	Strategy	Strategy	
1.	Usage Barrier	Develop a systems perspective (packaging) Integrate innovation with preceding activity (packaging)			Mandate usage (market development)	ŝ	The same of the same of
2.	Value Barrier	Improve product performance (modification and development) Improve produce positioning		Reduce price by lowering costs			Side in the se
3.	Risk Barrier	Use a well-known brand name	Elicit endorsements and testimonials		Facilitate trial (increase market exposure)		Same of the second
	sychological arriers						
1.	Tradition Barrier		Educate customers Use change agents			Understand and respect traditions	
2.	Image Barrier	Borrow a good image (brand name)	Make fun of negative image Create a unique image				

home builders, who included them in the design of new kitchens. Once the product was available, its utility became apparent, and the usage barrier was broken.

The success of minivans can also be attributed to this systems approach. Initially designed for commercial use, they could not be parked in the standard home garage. Chrysler Corporation redesigned the van so that it would fit into existing garages and broke down the usage barrier.

## Innovation resistance seems to be a normal, instinctive response of consumers.

A related strategy to usage resistance is to integrate the innovation into the preceding activity or product. In other words, the innovation must be sold to an original equipment supplier, who in turn sells it to end-users as part of a package. For example, many peripheral manufacturers sell their printers to IBM, DEC, and Honeywell, who integrate these into their computer systems. Similarly, some manufacturers of cellular mobile phones have started to sell the phones directly to auto manufacturers so that they can be factory-installed just like radios or air conditioners.

Finally, it is possible to overcome usage barriers by making the innovation mandatory through government legislation. This strategy works effectively if the lawmakers can be convinced that customers will benefit from the innovation. The success of lead-free gasoline can be directly attributed to this strategy. Lead-free gasoline was an innovation developed by Standard Oil Company of Indiana to replace the polluting leaded gasolines which prevented the knocking of automobile engines. Even though it was competitively priced with regular leaded gasoline, customers were not enthusiastic about it. The primary reason was that the car engines were not designed to take this new type of fuel. However, when the oil company directly contacted the government and highlighted the environmental benefits that could be obtained with this product, the government mandated the design and production of automobile engines suitable for lead-free gasoline. A similar strategy worked very well for both seat belts and smoke detectors.

Of the three strategies we discussed above, the

first two relate to product packaging while the third is a market development strategy.

#### Vaporizing Value Barriers

The first strategy for overcoming value barriers is to provide significant performance value over existing alternatives. For example, electronic calculators could perform engineering and financial calculators could not. Similarly, new telephones have features such as redial and memory that were simply not possible with basic telephones. Customers were willing to pay a little more to enjoy the enhanced functional capabilities of these innovations. This strategy is thus based on product development and modification.

A second strategy is to reduce the manufacturing costs of the innovation and pass on the savings to the customers. Several years ago, Timex was able to reduce the production costs on its watches by switching to the pin lever movement, thus literally creating the mass market for watches. Recently, price reductions through cost savings have constituted the major thrust in the minicomputer industry. Within a decade, the minicomputers have decreased in size to desktop models with better features and at half the cost of the older-generation machines. This strategy is thus based on effective pricing.

## Customers face several barriers that paralyze their desire to adopt innovations.

A third strategy is to add value to the innovation by successful positioning. A good example is the success of Campbell's new canned soups. Campbell's positioning move is motivated by some key demographic shifts. For years, Campbell's Soup was the companion to the sandwich for children's lunch at home. Today, however, the increase in single-person households and dualincome families has reduced the frequency with which kids get lunch from mom. Home-cooked meals have become more irregular. As a result, Campbell has positioned its soup as an easy-tofix, inexpensive item for the adult's main meal and has emphasized the nutritional quality with messages such as "Soup is good food" and "Chunky soups eat like a meal." The product is thus perceived as better value (taste, nutrition, convenience) when compared with frozen foods, fast foods, or even meals cooked at home. This strategy is thus based on effective product positioning.

#### Ripping Risk Barriers

A common solution to overcoming the risk barrier has been to offer the innovation on a trial basis to potential customers. For example, when American farmers were worried about the chemical effects of the 2, 4-D preweed killer on their crops, they were offered a free trial of the product on a five- to ten-acre field. The trial reassured them of the utility of the innovation and removed the perceived risk. This strategy is thus market-related and increases consumer exposure to the product.

A second method of overcoming risk is to elicit endorsements and testimonials from experts who objectively evaluate the innovation. This approach works for a variety of innovations such as new movies, new restaurants, new pharmaceuticals, and even services offered by brokerage, insurance and legal firms. This is essentially a communication strategy.

## Innovations that require changes in customers' routine require a relatively long development process.

Another method of attacking the risk barriers is to package the innovation under a well-known name. For example, many offshore manufacturers of clothing and electronic goods sell their products through reputed firms such as Arrow and General Electric. Professional services such as plumbing, heating, cooling, and roofing are offered by independent contractors under the Sears name, thus guaranteeing quality service. Similarly, imitation cheese is sold mostly to well-known fast food chains, which use the product as an ingredient in their cheeseburgers. This is thus a product strategy, based on using a reputed brand name.

#### Thwenting Tradition Barriers

Understanding and respecting cultural traditions is the first approach to offsetting the barriers they create. At least some of the new product failures of U.S. firms in foreign countries can be attributed to the ignorance and arrogance about their cultures. The failure to establish a beindustry in India, for example, is due to the doinance of the Hindu religion in that country. Hindu revere the cow as a sacred animal and will no permit the establishment of slaughter houses. Understanding and respecting this religious belief of the indian consumer would have saved many firms from making the futile effort. Similarly, Betty Crocker encountered difficulties with its American style moist, rich dessert cakes in England because the British tradition is to eat drier cakes, cookies, and biscuits by hand at tea time. In such cases, the marketing firm cannot pursue an aggressive strategy to offset the barriers. All it can do is accept the situation; hence this is a coping strategy.

A second strategy for overcoming tradition barriers is market education. Educating the customers can be a slow, laborious process, especially in developing nations, and it often requires government support. For example, birth control was initially resisted by the people of countries such as Singapore, India, and China because of strong religious and social beliefs against it. However, mass education has helped overcome the resistance. Similar efforts are being used today to promote computer literacy in the United States.

## All innovations, to some extent, represent uncertainty and pose potential side effects that cannot be anticipated.

A third strategy for combatting tradition barriers is the use of change agents. This approach is referred to as opinion leadership or leading edge strategy. For example, in farming, the most successful innovations are first targeted at the university agriculture extension people, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the big farmers who are receptive to modernization. Once these industry leaders endorse the innovation, it is easily adopted. In medicine, the change agents are respected hospitals, clinics, and physicians who have reputations for leadership. IBM has consistently used the leading edge customers, such as large government agencies and corporations, to promote its innovations. Similarly, most innovations in consumer products are introduced in metropolitan areas where education and income levels tend to be high. Urban users then act as change agents for the rural markets. As can be seen, this strategy, as well as the previous one, is based on communication.

#### immobilizing Image Barriers

The first strategy for overcoming a poor image is to make fun of the image and suggest to people that it is silly for people to carry such stereotypes. For example, the prune growers association had to reckon with the image barrier for prunes. They hired Stan Freeburg, who came out with such classic slogans as "Today the pits, tomorrow the wrinkles" to promote pitiess prunes. Honda had to counter the beatnik image of motorcycles in the United States. It did so with a campaign which showed respectable people such as a priest and an old lady in tennis shoes riding on the motorcycle. The caption: "The nicest people ride on a Honda."

### Innovations acquire a certain identity from their origins.

A second strategy is to create a unique image for the product or service. For example, Philip Morris positioned the Marlboro cigarettes for the mache he-man segment and promoted this position using the cowboy theme.

A third strategy is to associate consciously the innovation with someone or something having a positive public image. Borrowing a good image can be very effective. For example, little-known software manufacturers capitalize on compatibility with IBM. Manufacturers of machine tools in India associate themselves with reputed U.S. distributors, thereby overcoming any negative image they suffer with customers.

In this case, the first two strategies are based on mass communication, while the third strategy is related to the product (brand name strategy).

#### Conclusion

Innovations have been, and will continue to be, the major source of corporate progress, yet successfully innovating is a troublesome task. Customers may resist an innovation because it conflicts with their prior beliefs or because it threatens to create changes in their well-established routines. The major barriers that create consumer resistance to innovations are the three functional barriers (usage barrier, value barrier, and risk barrier) and the two psychological barriers (tradition barrier and image barrier). Corporations also face their own set of barriers when attempting to bring innovations to the market; that subject is beyond the scope of this paper and is discussed in detail elsewhere.

Customer resistance in the form of usage barriers can be lowered by use of one of three strategies: developing a systems perspective, integrating the innovation with preceding activity, and mandating usage through governmental legislation. Value barriers can be lowered through one of three strategies: improving product performance, positioning the product successfully, and reducing price to the consumer through cost efficiency. Risk barriers can be reduced with the following strategies: using a well-known brand name, eliciting endorsements and testimonials from users, and facilitating product trial. Traditional barriers can be overcome by educating the consumers and/or using agents; in some instances, the marketing firm may just have to respect the traditions and norms of the users and realize that coping with the situation is the best possible solution. Three strategies are available for countering the image barrier: borrow a good image (such as a known brand name), make fun of the negative image that currently exists, or create a unique image for the innovation. Each of these strategies may be classified into one of five types: product strategy, communication strategy, pricing strategy, market strategy, and coping strategy.

A marketing firm's answer to successful innovation lies not in bowing down to consumer resistance, but rather in understanding the causes of the resistance and making a frontal attack on them.

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