
cognitive dissonance and consumer behaviour

jagdish n. sheth

Difficulties and adjustments, inevitable when market conditions change from sellers' market to buyers' market, are being experienced by more industries in India. The current recession has also given a taste to other industries still operating under sellers' market conditions. Along with the transition, there comes greater importance and appreciation of marketing and marketing principles related to consumer behaviour.

Consumer behaviour is a fascinating area of research. It includes understanding of the psychology of the buyer—his motives, perceptions past experiences—as well as influences on him from such external factors as his family and reference groups, social class, and culture. Fortunately, a good deal of fundamental knowledge about consumer behaviour exists today which our industries can usefully utilize for a smoother transition. Much of this accumulated knowledge is based on extensions of behavioural sciences to marketing and buying behaviour.

One such extension is Leon Festinger's theory of Cognitive dissonance. Have you ever observed a child trying to decide which of the two equally attractive toys he should choose? He is in a state of conflict. Observe him more closely and you will see that once he makes the choice he manifests no regrets for his choice. Ask him, and most probably he will tell you that he likes the toy he selected more than the toy he rejected. This seems contradictory to the old saying that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Why do we have the tendency to like the brand we bought more after the purchase? Answers to these are provided by the cognitive dissonance theory.

The theory states that at a point in time, there exist several bits of relevant cognitions (knowledge, information) which may not be consistent with one another. These bits of cognitions may be related to one's opinions, behaviours, or to reality. For example, when someone offers to sell a genuine diamond at ruby's prices, inconsistency or dissonance is created: the price at which it is offered does not match—it is not congruent with our expectations, the latter being based on past experiences or information.

Similarly, inconsistency or dissonance exists between the facts that the two brands are equally attractive (he can't decide), and that one brand is chosen—he puts one above the other. Dissonance produces 'psychological discomfort' which is motiva-

tionally similar to physical discomfort due to hunger or pain: both impel the individual to reduce such discomfort. Psychological discomfort can be reduced by making the bits of cognitions consonant. In choosing between two attractive brands, consonance can be achieved if the consumer rearranges cognitions so that two brands are not equally attractive. This inequality is possible by (a) enhancing the attractiveness of the chosen brand and/or (b) reducing the attractiveness of the rejected brand. The consumer may persuade himself to believe that the attractive features of the rejected brand are not really as attractive as what he had originally thought, and that the unattractive features of the chosen brand are not really unattractive. He can also provide additional justification for the choice by exaggerating the attractive features of the chosen brand and the unattractive features of the rejected brand.

Cognitive dissonance theory fascinates most researchers and some practitioners because it provides implications for marketing which seem contrary to tradition and intuition. For example, the function of advertising is assumed to be to convert a potential customer into a buyer, and once sales is created the job is over. Dissonance theory, on the other hand, would imply that function of advertising begins once the consumer has bought the product: advertising will facilitate his attempts to rationalize his choice by enhancing the attractiveness of the chosen brand. Ford Motor Company, some years ago followed up this implication, and created billboards primarily directed to the new Ford owner. Similarly, in measurement of advertising effectiveness, the readership data collected by Starch and Politz contain the assumption that readers of an advertisement buy the brand more often than nonreaders. In other words reading of advertisements is the cause of buying behavior. The dissonance theory would predict the opposite; *the buyers of a brand have a tendency to read advertisements more often than nonbuyers.*

How can we demonstrate that the dissonance theory works? Numerous experimental studies in a variety of choice situations, both in marketing and nonmarketing contexts, have repeatedly demonstrated that consequences implied in the theory do occur. Below one such study is described in some detail.¹

One hundred students were chosen for the study. Three products were included in the study each having 11 to 12 national brands. They were toothpaste, hair shampoo and cigars. All the students were asked, as a part of marketing research, to rank order the brands of toothpaste in terms of their preferences or likings. Half the students were then also asked to rank order the brands of hair shampoo, again according to their preferences. The other half were asked to rank order the brands of cigars. Thus each student rank ordered a set of brands in two separate product classes.

The students were then randomly asked to choose between two brands which were ranked either 2 and 3, 5 and 6, or 10 and 11. The choice, therefore, was between

1. A complete description of the study including rationale for choice of products and respondents can be found in J. N. Sheth "Cognitive Dissonance, Brand Preference and Product Familiarity" in Johan Arndt (ed.) *Insights Into Consumer Behavior* (Allyn and Bacon 1968). The study was conducted in the U. S. with U. S. nationals. A similar study in India was conducted very recently. Preliminary results show a very similar pattern.

two brands which were equally attractive. Three days after the first interview and choice, each student was given the brand of his choice in each of the two product classes. Immediately after that, he was shown all the brands in each product class separately, and was asked to rank order them in terms of his preference or liking now. A total of four students were removed from the final analysis due to improper filling of the questionnaire.

According to cognitive dissonance theory we should expect an upward movement in rank position of the chosen brand and a downward movement in the rank position of the rejected brand. This would create greater inequality between the two brands, and, therefore, consonant with the choice. If we take the difference in rank position from before the choice to after the choice, we should expect more positive signs for the chosen brand and more negative signs for the rejected brand in the sample.

The following table gives the frequency of students who moved up (+) the rank of the chosen brand, of students who moved down (-) the rank, and of students who did not change it. The majority of students moved up the rank position of the chosen brand as dictated by the theory. Using the simple sign-test, we see this upward movement was statistically significant.

Change in Rank Position of the Chosen Brand

Product	+	-	No change	p
Toothpaste	48	9	39	.005
Hair Shampoo	25	4	20	.005
Cigars	31	6	10	.005

What about the change in rank position of the rejected brand? Another table below shows that the rejected brand was moved down more often than by chance. This would support the theory. However, the downward movement was neither as systematic nor as large as in the case of the chosen brand.

Change in Rank Position of the Rejected Brand

Product	+	-	No change	p
Toothpaste	16	28	50	.05
Hair Shampoo	4	27	16	.005
Cigars	13	20	12	n.s.

What is described is only one of numerous demonstrations of how the dissonance theory is tested. Its importance in consumer behaviour can be judged by the fact that in less than ten years it has occupied the position of one of the vital theories of buying behaviour.