

Aspects Related to Researching Consumer Preferences

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***Abstract.** Catching the essence of consumer' preferences, a dimension of consumers' behavior through marketing research represents an important aspect in the activity of any organization and, in the same time, an objective very difficult to reach. This paper is meant to bring some light on the importance of knowing the consumer' preferences and on the ways that consumer' preferences are determined.*

Key words: consumers' behavior; consumer preferences; marketing research; sample; organizing the research.

“Know your consumer”. This is no simple task, and more so, isolating a single feature, as we do here, the consumers' preference for a certain good or service is particularly difficult. It may happen for them to express their needs and desires and yet act in an entirely different way; at times, it's possible that they aren't even aware of the true motivations behind their buying behavior, or they could react to factors determining last minute changes to their buying decision. Although the consumer decisions are relatively easy to notice and quantify, the psycho-physiological processes behind them are very difficult to take into account (Kotler et al., 1998).

Research related to the consumer behavior looks upon its different dimensions and their relationship. The final aim of these investigations is to foresee and channel the future reactions of the demand agents, for a precise correlation between demand and supply. All dimensions leading to a certain behavior must be determined. Each facet of consumer behavior we wish to analyze in-depth within the marketing research imprints certain specificity, special means of approaching the issue.

1. The importance of researching consumer preferences

We can define consumer preferences as a positive motivation, expressed by the emotional compatibility with a certain merchandise, service or form of sale. We're not

dealing with an internal bodily function, but a quality of objects that aims to fulfill our needs, quality acquired within the connection between man and the merchandise able to fulfill these needs.

Knowledge of consumer preferences is especially important with respect to the various activities carried out at the organizational level, necessary for its survival.

For example, in case an entrepreneur needs to establish the characteristics the product he intends to produce needs to hold, he must interview several potential buyers, asking them to mention the preferred level of each individual characteristic.

The consumer preferences and behavior represent the basis of the pretesting models for the new products (ASSESSOR, COMP, DEMON, NEWS, SPRINTER), which implies determining the functional relationships between the buyer's opinion concerning a product, testing it and the purchase behavior.

The level of preferences is one of the variables that need to be taken into account when identifying the strong and weak points of the competitors.

By measuring the consumer preferences before and after carrying out an advertising campaign, the transmitter may evaluate its success or failure (Kotler, 1999).

The preferences towards certain products or brands may constitute the theme of a survey supplying information concerning the relative non-consumers, since attracting these represents an important means of increasing the sales volume up to the maximum limits of market potential.

The companies constantly increasing the level of reminding and of preference shall attain an inevitable increase in market share and profitability. The size of profits is less important than managing to consolidate consumer preferences towards its products.

Examples concerning the implications of preferences in the organization's activity could continue.

Preferences are the result of a long-term relationship between the brand and the consumer, as the latter learns to associate the brand with a symbol and perceive it as having high quality. Following these deep connections created over the course of time, a strong emotion is developed which lies and the basis of preferences, remaining present even in the absence of the friendly symbol or of any other component feature.

In order to fully understand the coordinates of loyalty towards a brand, it may prove useful to present certain aspects related to measuring preferences.

Preference is a "favorable attitude" towards a brand, often expressed by creating the intent to purchase.

Forming and intensifying preferences towards a brand could be the result of a classic Pavlov-type conditioning, arising from buying repeatedly, from the fact that the individual becomes more and more accustomed to the brand and wishes to avoid unfamiliar situations by choosing other brands or, possibly, the family he/she was born in preferred the respective brand (Catoiu, Teodorescu, 2001).

Preferences towards a certain brand, out of the set of alternative brands available for a product or service, constitute one of the variables of learning, according to the Howard – Sheth pattern of influencing the consumer behavior. As per this pattern, the consumer develops a certain attitude (preference), in accordance with the level of knowledge and the choice criteria he/she has defined which, in turn, constitute an essential determinant of the purchase intent.

The attitude developed exerts its influence as a reactive action over obtaining and processing information.

After determining consumer preferences towards a brand, the producer may take the following measures, with a view to increase preferences for that brand:

- change the product;
- change beliefs concerning the brand;
- change beliefs concerning the competing brands;
- change the importance of features;
- attract attention towards neglected features;
- change the consumers' ideals.

In addition, in order to attract consumers' preferences towards their own brands, producers and retailers may chose the option of "renting" those brands having won the preferences of consumers (names or symbols previously created by other producers, names of celebrities, names of movie characters etc.).

The renowned specialist George S. Day, professor at Wharton School, believes that for a consumer to be truly loyal, he/she must not only repeatedly purchase a certain brand, but he/she must prefer it as well.

2. Methods of researching consumer preferences

Researching preferences is not as wide, but more in-depth than studying motivations, being a component of the latter. In evaluating the intensity of preferences, the same instruments are used as in the case of motivations.

Analyzing purchasing preferences as well as motivations may be performed using the *observation method*; ensuring an authentic motivational image, observation imprints an objective feature to the investigation and may prove to be the least expensive and most exact method of gathering behavioral data.

Organizing a research on preferences using the observation method must be performed thoroughly and rigorously, must be systematic in character, and the presence of observers must not be noticed by the subject (Florescu (coordinator), 1992).

The selective enquiry based on a written questionnaire is also used in studying consumer preferences even though it determines solely the declared behavior of consumers and not the actual one, as in the case of observation.

Measuring consumer preferences for alternative product concepts may be performed by using technique that is more and more widely known, namely the *conjugate analysis*. This is a method of finding out the value in use consumers attach to various features of an object. The respondents are presented with several hypothetical offers obtained by combining certain features, and the must rank these offers according to their preferences.

The results obtained may be used by the company leadership to identify the most attractive offer as well as the market share and the profit estimated to be attained by the company.

This analysis was used, for instance, in creating car prototypes, in projecting services offered by air-line companies, in creating credit cards.

Testing consumer preferences is based on a variety of techniques such as: simple rank ordering, paired comparisons, appraisal scales, each having specific advantages and disadvantages.

The method of unitary appraisal supplies much more information than the method of simple ranking and that of paired comparisons. The subject is required to order on a scale his/her preferences for each product.

By using this method, we can find out not only the order of preferences, but also the qualitative levels of preferences for each product and the distance between the products. At the same time, this method is easy to use, especially when we must evaluate several products.

When the aim is to identify categories of consumers according to their preferences, we may obtain the following types of structures:

- homogenous preferences when all consumers on the market have the same preferences;

- heterogeneous (diffuse) preferences when the preferences of consumers are divided uniformly at market level;
- “grouped” preferences. The market can contain groups having distinct preferences, called natural market segments. A company entering the market has, in this instance, three possibilities:
 - to implement undifferentiated marketing (to attract all groups);
 - to position itself on the largest market segment (concentrated marketing);
 - to create several product brands, each aimed towards a different market segment (differentiated marketing) (Kotler, 1999).

Should the company launch a single product brand, it is obvious that the competition shall launch products aimed at the other market segments.

Investigating preferences may be approached in different combinations with investigations of other dimensions of consumer behavior. The dimensions of consumer behavior may constitute the object of marketing investigations, viewed in their entirety. For this purpose, one can make use of special investigation techniques, such as contextual methods of psychodrama type (Florescu (coordinator), 1992).

3. Organizing the consumer preference marketing research

Organizing a selective marketing research is an especially complex process. In order to maximize the contribution of the marketing research to the decision-making process, this complex activity must be organized with most care.

Carrying-out the marketing research involves going through certain successive phases, within a complex process, starting with determining the research aim and objectives and finishing with presenting conclusions and recommendations.

Identifying the issues and defining the research purpose

Identifying the issues and defining the research purpose is one of the most important phases of the research process, having decisive influences over the subsequent phases.

Even if perfect decisions are taken during the other phases, the research is compromised if the issue to be investigated and the research purpose were not clearly defined, and this can only be attained through a close collaboration between the person conducting the research and its beneficiary. (Balaure (coordinator), 2000)

In order to exemplify such a research, we will assume that the purpose is “studying readers’ preferences for the Formula AS weekly magazine”, with a view to improve it in accordance with the preferences.

Defining the research objectives

In the process of organizing the marketing research, formulating objectives involves determining on an operational level which information is necessary for grounding the optimal decision alternatives for each dimension of the issue investigated. Each objective must be relevant for the research purpose.

Establishing clearly the research objectives are useful in fundamenting the priorities concerning the necessary information and serves as a standard in evaluating the final results.

The objectives corresponding to the research purpose put forth above may be formulated as follows:

- Determining the importance readers invest in the main characteristics of weekly magazines;
- Identifying the main competitors of “Formula AS”, from the number of readers point of view;
- Identifying readers’ preference for the “Formula AS” weekly magazine;
- Determining how the readers preferring “Formula AS” appraise its main characteristics;
- Identifying how the readers preferring “Formula AS” appraise its topics;
- Identifying the main sections preferred by the readers of “Formula AS”, by age groups;
- Determining how the readers preferring “Formula AS” appraise its main sections;
- Identifying the main reader segments by age groups, sex, employment and income.

Defining the research hypotheses

Once the research objectives are set, it is necessary to decide on the hypotheses to be tested within the research.

Based on a logical analysis of all possible hypotheses related to the issue under research, those hypotheses that can be tested by the research conducted are selected.

Stating a valid hypothesis may have as a starting point the theory of a discipline, the experience acquired by certain specialists, the results of previous researches or the results of an exploratory research conducted in advance.

For our example, the corresponding hypotheses may include:

- The main weekly magazines competing with “Formula AS” are “Magazin” and “Acasă Magazin”;
- The weekly magazine “Formula AS” is on top of weekly magazines readers’ preferences;
- The preferences for the sections of “Formula AS” are varied:
 - the main sections preferred by persons under 35 are: “Romanian world”, “Stars gallery”, “Bizarre chronicles” and “Enigmas” ;
 - the main sections preferred by persons over 35 are: “Health”, “Spirituality”, “Top Shape”;
- The topics covered by “Formula AS” are appraised by readers as extremely varied and detailed;

- The frequency of reading the “Formula AS” weekly magazine differs significantly according to age and sex.

The research sample

It is essential in carrying out a marketing research to determine the elements concerning the research sample.

Sampling relates to establishing the sample size and structure, so that one basic condition is fulfilled, for the sample to be representative with respect to the population researched.

The sampling base is to be determined (general population, population of selection and unit of observation) and the sample size, size which is to produce optimal results with minimum costs (it does not necessarily ensure representativeness of information).

The sample size, apart from its theoretic foundations, must answer to the concrete objectives associated to the study under scrutiny. In practice, while it is possible to determine a sample size ensuring representativeness of all information to be gathered, is very seldom used, due to the costs involved. A compromise is usually accepted between objectives and costs, by choosing that sample size producing the best results (Anghelache et al., 1995).

The research questionnaire

The questionnaire is the instrument most frequently used in obtaining primary data and consists in a set of questions the respondents must reply to. The flexibility of such instrument lies in the fact that a question may be asked in countless different ways (Kotler, 1999).

The questionnaire is one of the most important elements the success of a selective research depends upon. Concerning the methodology of elaborating the questionnaire, it is believed it is more of answer art than a science.

Specialists agree that, in order for the questionnaire to be an efficient tool, it must fulfill the following functions:

- to ensure the cooperation and involvement of the respondents;
- to communicate correctly to the respondents what is expected from them;

- to aid the respondents in formulating answers to questions;
- to avoid possible distortions of replies;
- to facilitate the interview operator to carry out his/her task;
- to generate the base necessary for processing the data gathered.

Upon elaborating the questionnaire, aspects such as the following needs to be addressed:

- identifying the characteristics comprised in the survey objectives and program, and their logical ordering;
- formulating the questions the respondent is to be asked. With this respect, one must take into account:
 - the type of questions that are to be used (closed, open or mixed questions; factual or opinion questions etc.);
 - the quality of questions (to be specific, simple, to avoid ambiguity, vague and tendentious wording, to avoid presumptions or hypotheses etc.);
 - the order of questions (the questionnaire must be elaborated using the “funnel” principle, starting with general questions and continuing with more and more specific questions, or using the “inverted funnel” approach);
- choosing the proper sizing, page layout and general aspect of the questionnaire;
- using the proper coding and elaborating the code list.

After applying the questionnaire and processing the data collected, we proceed to analyzing and interpreting the data in order to reach the research conclusions. The research conclusions aim at answering to the objectives and hypotheses set out in the preliminary phase of the research, and shall constitute an important source of data for the decision-maker.

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