

## **Learning Construct: Its Implication for Marketing and Buyer's Perception of Product Stimulus**

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The objective of this paper is to examine the influence of learning as a construct on buyer's perception of product stimuli and by extension its implication for the entire marketing process through the use of desk research. The article takes off with an introductory piece which is intended to prepare the minds of readers. It attempts to correct the notion that the consumer is a passive user of product stimuli or information. However, consumers are considered to actively process information about product, colour, advertising claims, packaging and nutritional messages. The main body of the article handles the contextual issues of the implication for marketing of learning construct and as well as the effect of same in buyers' perception of product stimulus/stimuli. Thus, the implication of learning construct for marketing and buyer's perception of product stimuli are explored modestly through the use of the enumerated learning variables: (i) motives (ii) brand comprehension (iii) choice criteria (iv) confidence (v) attitude (vi) intention (vii) satisfaction. And finally, a concluding paragraph follows in which learning construct is considered to serve as a medium or route through which learning takes place whilst brand loyalty and generalization provide the basis for selective exposure and perpetual bias in the entire process of perception. The article ends with the provision of references employed in generating this paper.

Keywords: learning, perception, product stimulus, consumer, brand

### **Introduction**

This article discusses the marketing implication of learning and by extension its effect on the perception of product or packaging stimulus for example, colour, copy claims and nutritional information etc. learning or perception seems to be discussed separately. This article however, attempts to discuss the linkage between learning and perception in the entire marketing process. It is also very much believed by marketing practitioners that consumers are passive users of product stimulus/information. This article, therefore seeks to correct this motion by taking the position that consumers do actively process product stimulus/message in their day-to-day buying activities.

First, a definition of key concepts of this article namely learning, perception and packaging stimulus. Perception is defined, in this context, as the process whereby stimuli are received and interpreted by the individual and translated into a response (Bordeux, Boulic & Thalmann, 1999; Baker, 1980). Sekuler and Blake (2002) in explaining the importance of perception, asserts that perception study enables one to design devices that ensure optimal perceptual performance Formally defined, learning refers to any change in response tendency due to the effects of experience (Howard, 1963). In behavioural sciences, learning refers to any change in behaviour that comes about as a result of experience; whilst product

stimuli are variables employed by producers/intermediaries to elicit favourable sales response. Basically, all behaviours are learned including consumer behaviour which is an aspect of general behaviour.

Learning theorists believe that learning occur through the interplay of drive, stimulus, cue, response and reinforcement. The drives are explained as strong internal stimuli that call for action. This subsequently translates into a motive when it is directed towards a particular stimulus object namely a product or brand.

The cue is said to be a minor stimulus that determines when, where and how the consumer responds. Where the consumer responds by actually buying the product and his/her product experience is rewarding, he/she is adjudged to be reinforced. And based on the positive reinforcement, the buyer is likely to engage in a repeat purchase.

### **Marketing Implications**

In recent years, a variety of approaches have been employed in order to understand buyers' brand preferences and brand loyalty. Several researchers have attempted to explain the dynamics of brand loyalty by learning theory in one form or another. Keuhn (1962) for instance advocates a linear model of learning based upon the subject controlled sequence type of learning described by Bush and Mosteller (1965).

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Similarly, Haines (1964) gives an aggregate theory of diffusion of innovation based upon the same type of learning. Tucker (1964) and Krugman (1962) experimentally observe the development of brand loyalty utilizing learning principles. Howard (1963), Howard and Sheth (1968) rely heavily on learning principles to develop the theory of buyer behaviour. Having drawn examples to attest to marketing implications or utilization of the concept of learning, there is the need to provide an appreciation of how this variable may influence the perception of packaging stimuli.

To properly situate the article, it is instructive to consider those learning variables that are instrumental to the incidence of learning. In the process, the outcomes of learning is examined alongside their effects on the perception of product stimuli.

Howard and Sheth (1968) advance a number of learning constructs in their theory of buyer behaviour as the routes by which learning takes place. The learning constructs include: (i) motives, (ii) Brand Comprehension, (iii) Choice Criteria, (iv) Confidence, (v) attitude, (vi) Intention and (vii) Satisfaction.

According to Howard and Sheth (1968), learning begins with motives; several motives may operate on a consumer in any buying situation. Motives are the biogenic or psychogenic needs or desires of a consumer in purchasing and consuming an item in a product class, and may be classified into two categories: (i) the relevant and (ii) the irrelevant motives. The relevant motives are anchored to the product stimuli or attributes and are innate. They are specific when they can be satisfied with a brand in a product class and non-specific when they can be satisfied by brands in other product class.

The irrelevant motives relate to personality variables such as authoritarianism, exhibitionism, and to such variables as power, status and prestige; which are learned. Of more relevance to an understanding of the process of learning is the relevant motive. It is made up of two parts: (i) energizing and (ii) directive components. These two components help to explain the role of motive in setting up the process of learning.

When the consumer experiences a need either psychological or physiological, a tension or a state of disequilibrium is immediately set up. The resulting tension or disequilibrium tends to initiate an equilibrating course of action aimed at satisfying this need. The equilibrating course of action thus influences the consumer to familiarize herself with the various brands in a product class capable of satisfying her needs. This behaviour is exemplified in the second learning construct here referred to as "brand comprehension".

Brand comprehension is the cognitive state of the buyer that reflects the extent to which the consumer has sufficient knowledge to establish well defined criteria for identifying the brands she encounters and to have available words for discussing a particular brand. The brand comprehension is said to

be important in the acquisition of two types of knowledge: (i) the denotative and (ii) the connotative meanings of brands.

The denotative meaning of brands is a measure of the extent to which the consumer has sufficient knowledge regarding the difference(s) between the different brands in a product class and the extent to which she can in terms of this difference discuss the brands with others.

The connotative meaning of brands refers to the depth of knowledge on the part of the consumer regarding the attributes of these brands such that the consumer can easily evaluate the different brands prior to determining and buying the most preferred brand (Ladipo, Olufayo & Bakare, 2012). Knowledge of this type is mostly acquired through product information which may be symbolic, significative or social (Ham, 2010).

Because of the limitation to the mental capability of an individual to retain learned materials due to the incidence of retroactive inhibition and also because of the energy and time required to understudy all the brands in a product class, the consumer seems to simplify the process of learning by merely comparing a small number of available brands constituting a product class. This form of behaviour is captured in the concept of evoke set (Wencel, Tang & Bosselman, 2011).

Evoke-set refers to those few brands out of the total number of available brands in a product group that the consumer will always consider for a purchase when the need specific to the product class arises (Wencel et al., 2011). According to Campbell (1972) for toothpaste and detergents, no buyer has an evoke-set larger than seven, with the mean number being 3.1 and 5 respectively. Thus, it is important for the brands carrying a number of product stimuli to be one of the brands constituting the evoke-set of the consumers.

Perhaps another immediate and important effect of brand comprehension is the formulation of choice-criteria by the consumer which come up next as another learning construct. Choice-criteria refer to the cognitive state of a consumer reflecting those attributes of the brands in the product class that are salient in the consumer's evaluation of a brand and are related to the consumer's need. Such criteria when fully developed by consumer over time are mainly used for preference rating of brands such that the brand in the face of other competing brands, that score highest on the criteria in terms of its capacity to satisfy the consumer's need ultimately becomes the most preferred brand. Choice-criteria when appropriately developed have a direct effect on confidence which is the next learning construct for consideration.

Confidence refers to the degree of certainty with which the consumer perceives a brand. Confidence, in other words, relates to the degree of certainty about her knowledge regarding each of the

alternatives in her evoke-set. Thus, the consumers on the strength of confidence acquired from choice-criteria, formulates an attitude toward each brand in her evoke-set (Lissack, 2003). This, therefore, brings to mind the next learning construct which is attitude.

Attitude according to Samson and Daft (2005) refers to the consumer's relative preference of brands in her evoke-set which are based on her evaluative beliefs about these brands as goal-objects. Thus, attitude may be visualized as the place where the connotative meanings of the brands in the evoke-set are compared with choice-criteria to yield a judgment on the relative contribution of the brands towards the satisfaction of the consumer's need(s). Hence, with attitude the consumer learns further about how to organize preference. With attitude formation the consumer may emerge with a preferred brand but may not remain loyal to the preferred brand until the last learning construct of satisfaction may have fully generated repeat-purchase of the said preferred brand(s).

Granting the fact that through intention, buying takes place, learning can be expected to be further consolidated or strengthened through the next learning variable of satisfaction. According to Cofer (1964), motives or needs whether they directly relate to a product class or only indirectly impinge upon it, are based upon expectation or anticipation of certain outcomes from the purchase of a brand in that product class.

The anticipated outcomes are no doubt synonymous with the buyer's or consumer's satisfaction. By implication, the concept of satisfaction thus represents the only medium by which the consumer tends to learn whether or not her preferred brand has in any way fulfilled her needs (Harrison & Shaw, 2004). The effectiveness of other learning constructs is likewise further determined by satisfaction. In other words, satisfaction determines the congruence between the actual consequences from purchase and consumption and what was expected from it by the consumer at the time of purchase. The consumer is said to be satisfied only when actual consequences are equal to or greater than expected consequence whilst dissatisfaction is said to occur when the actual consequences fall short of the expected consequences. Thus, the attractiveness of the preferred brand relative to others in the evoke-set is a function of the concept of satisfaction.

Consequently, the higher the ability of the preferred brand to generate enormous satisfaction and enhance greater attractiveness following its consumption, the greater are its chances at generating repeat-purchase for itself relative to other brands in the evoke-set when a similar need arises for the same product class. One of the immediate results of satisfactory product experience is the repeat-purchase of one or more brands from a given product class. Learning with respect to a given product may be said to be at its climax when such a

product results in repeated satisfactory product experience for the consumer. To the extent that the consumer organizes repeat-purchase she may be depicted as engaging in a routine decision process. Thus, routine decision processes may be viewed as a direct result of learning.

## Perception

Next is a consideration of routine-decision process and its implication for the perception of product stimulus/ stimuli. Most, if not all, consumer purchases are habitual responses deriving from prior satisfaction with a brand. That this may be so is supported by the view expressed by Kassarian (1973) "The consumer would indeed be in a state of quandary if on each shopping trip, she has to logically select among brands for every item on her shopping list." This phase of repetitive decision-making in which the consumer reduces the complexity of buying situation from prior learning is referred to as the psychology of simplification by Howard-Sheth (1968).

According to Tiwasing and Sahachaisaeree (2011), psychology of simplification may by itself help to explicate how learning may affect perception of packaging stimuli (e.g. colour, copy claim, nutrition information etc). The further the consumer is in simplifying his or her environmental stimuli (or stimulus) that relate to a purchase situation, the more meaningful and less ambiguous will the product stimulus become. Furthermore, consumer will tend to establish more cognitive consistency amongst brands of a product class. Consequently, the consumer may not seek information and may not engage in search behaviour.

The consumer may be very unlikely to pay attention to new product stimuli (i.e. "New"). If perceived at all, they may be subject to perceptual distortion during the interpretative process, such that the consumer may avoid the incidence of cognitive dissonance. Learning may be advanced as capable of affecting the perception of stimuli by either denying the stimuli attention or by subjecting the stimuli to perceptual distortion where they succeed in gaining attention.

The above view is however based on the premises or assumptions that the consumer knows or understands the concept of product class and that the same consumer has not reached the stage of boredom or satisfaction. This view further assumes that the brands are frequently purchased and are non-durable. Another result of learning in explaining its implication for the perception of product/packaging cues is brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is defined as a function of regularity and frequency with which a brand has been selected in the past (Oliver, 1999). To the extent that satisfactory product experience facilitates a regular and frequent buying of a brand, brand loyalty may be safely concluded as a function of learning (Harris & Goode, 2004).

According to Berlyne (1966) a product stimulus that appears ambiguous in meaning to the consumer tends to generate conceptual conflict and in consequence the consumer tends to seek information in an attempt to resolve the conflict. One possible advantage of brand loyalty is perhaps the fact that it may help the brand-loyal consumer to avoid the problem of conceptual conflict when an ambiguous concept is encountered. Rather than resolving conceptual conflict through an information seeking approach, the brand loyal consumer may attain consonance by adopting the process of perceptual distortion or bias. Perceptual bias in itself is synonymous with the concept of supportive exposure of Katz (1978) which maintains that people tend to seek support for their preconceptions.

By implication, when brand-loyal consumers (Homburg & Giering, 2001) are confronted with an ambiguous product stimulus or promotional copy claim, they will tend to interpret the stimulus such that their interpretations fit or support their previously held views or perceptions of their preferred brands. Thus, learning through brand loyalty may again deny a given product stimulus consumer's attention, and where attention is gained, the stimulus may be distorted in meaning and the meaning made congruent with the consumer's previously held views about the brand or product in question.

Another result of the implication of learning for the perception of product stimuli is the concept of generalization. The transfer of past learning or experience to a new situation is referred to as generalization. The intention to buy is a function of certain inhibitory factors. Amongst these is the lack of availability of the consumer's preferred brand. Lack of availability may help to explain how generalization may influence the consumer's perception (Shatka & Nablus, 2009) of product stimulus. In a situation where the consumer is unable to locate her regular brand to buy, she may, on the basis of her past satisfactory product experiences with her favourite brand, interpret "NEW" for instance appearing on another similar brand to fit or support her views or experiences regarding her regular brand. This mode of generalization which is referred to as stimulus generalization by Howard-Sheth (1968) assumes that the brands in question are physically and semantically similar.

In other words, learning may through lack of availability of a preferred brand cause the package copy claim or any other stimulus for that matter to gain attention but only to be perceptually distorted to support existing cognition regarding the preferred brand (Moeller et al., 2010). Whilst learning may facilitate brand-loyalty and generalization, care must be exercised on the part of the marketer to ensure that the loyalty already achieved for a brand through the process of learning is not gradually eroded or destroyed through the concept of generalization. In other words, the marketer must ensure that his

offerings or brands that are already enjoying loyalty of a target market are regularly kept available on the shelves, moreover the quality levels of these brands must be maintained, if not improved or increased for fear of passing the extra cost of doing so to the loyal consumers in terms of higher price(s).

## Conclusion

The article seems to have modestly provided an explicit exposition of the concept of learning and its marketing implication for marketers in the entire marketing process and by extension its impact on the purchase of product/package stimuli. In the process, learning constructs which serve as the media or routes through which learning takes place were identified and discussed namely: (i) motives (ii) brand comprehension (iii) choice criteria (iv) confidence (v) attitude (vi) intention and (vii) satisfaction.

Routine decision process is defined in this article as a direct result of learning. The phase of repetitive decision-making which the consumer employs to reduce the complexity of a buying situation from prior learning is here referred to as psychology of simplification. The psychology of simplification, 'brand loyalty' and 'generalization' are concepts employed by consumer to organize selective exposure to stimuli and perceptual distortion of product stimuli in the entire process of perception to fit incoming information into existing mindset and also organize support for existing beliefs. Thus, the implication for marketing and buyer's perception of product stimuli of the learning construct are modestly explained through the enumerated learning variables: (i) brand comprehension; (ii) choice criteria; (iii) confidence; (iv) attitude; (v) motive; (vi) intension; and (vii) satisfaction. Thus, in conclusion, marketing implications of learning rests squarely on the enumerated learning constructs whilst the psychology of simplification, brand loyalty and generalization provide the bases for selective exposure and perceptual bias in the entire process of perception. Fundamentally, learning as a construct has a major function in building primary demand for a product or brand in the market place. Equally necessary, is the cogent need on the part of sellers to regularly prevent the lack of product availability to develop into the concept of generalization in order to keep the hope of marketing oriented business alive.

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