Development of Evaluative Criteria

Definition of Evaluative Criteria

Before people can decide whether or not they like a product, they must decide what constitutes a good or a bad product. In other words, they should create criteria against which to measure products’ ability to solve their problems. The standards by which consumers judge the products they find during search are referred to as “evaluative criteria.” Generally speaking, evaluative criteria are “product attributes that consumers believe will provide the benefits consumers seek, and therefore the attributes they desire in the products they purchase.”

Evaluative criteria can be both tangible and intangible. For example, suppose a consumer wished to buy a new digital camera. Tangible evaluative criteria he or she might use could include being lightweight, having a powerful zoom lens, and within a certain price range. In tangible criteria might include a brand with a good reputation and being perceived as fun to use.

Formation of Evaluative Criteria

For a given purchase, evaluative criteria can be formed from one or both of two sources. First, people commonly recall evaluative criteria from memory. In brand loyal purchases, the brand itself is the only evaluative criteria because it stands for all attributes desired in a particular product. However, with routine purchases for which
a consumer has no preferred brand or for which the preferred brand is unavailable, consumers recall detailed evaluative criteria, perhaps from prior purchases, and match available brands to those criteria.

Second, for new or novel purchases, evaluative criteria can be formed during search. As consumers learn about the attributes of various market offerings, they select the desirable attributes that will become the criteria for evaluating the suitability of the brands under consideration. When criteria are formed during search, consumers update the list of criteria as new information becomes available. After the product is used and its performance assessed, the product attributes that contributed most to the product’s problem solving abilities are committed to memory for future reference.

Determinants of Evaluative Criteria.

Referring back to the material on market segmentation, we emphasized that identifying potential groups of customers begins with understanding that different people frequently buy the same product for somewhat different reasons. We referred to these reasons as benefits and separated them into motivational and preferential. Studying problem recognition, we learned that gaps between desired and actual states cause people to seek benefits that will close those gaps. Moreover, when the desire for a particular benefit becomes strong enough, consumers experience a physical or psychological discomfort sufficient to cause them to take action, which we defined as being “motivated.”

The point to this discussion is to remind you of the role motives play in consumer decision making and to tie them into the present discussion of evaluative criteria. If evaluative criteria represent the reasons why people like a particular product or brand, then it only makes sense to assume that one major determinant of evaluative criteria are consumers’ motives for buying.

For example, using Maslow’s Hierarchy to help categorize motives, suppose a woman was motivated to buy a new front door for her home by fear for her safety. Under these circumstances, she may decide that an acceptable door would be made of steel, have heavy-duty hinges, deadbolt lock, etc. Here, safety motives serve as one significant determinant of the evaluative criteria the woman used in her purchase.

A second significant determinant of evaluative criteria is lifestyle. Recall that we define lifestyle as the combination of activities, interests and opinions. Suppose the woman seeking the new steel door also cared deeply about how her house looked from the street. This feeling, a reflection of her lifestyle, could produce evaluative criteria for door color, texture, etc.

I hope you begin to see the highly interrelated nature of much of the material we cover, and how effective steps to important business planning processes like market segmentation should be rooted in sound understanding of how consumers think and behave. Without this understanding, a company cannot truly adopt the marketing concept as a guiding principle of business.

Exhibit 1. Evaluative Criteria Determinants
Exhibit 1 illustrates these relationships. It shows the two primary determinants of evaluative criteria as motives and lifestyle. It also shows lifestyle as being significantly determined by demographic and geographic characteristics. Finally, consistent with the earlier discussion of consumer market segmentation and simply for the sake of completeness, the diagram also shows motives to be in part determined by lifestyle.

The relationships shown in Exhibit 1 help marketers get a more complete picture of why consumer groups with particular lifestyles prefer products with certain attributes. Marketers can more effectively target products with certain attributes to the most promising targets, and communicate to each target that the marketers’ brands possess the attributes that are valued most.

**Stability of Evaluative Criteria**

Evaluative criteria do not remain static. They change, sometimes frequently, and can also be highly situation specific. Just as people’s demographic characteristics and life circumstances change naturally over time, so too do the motives behind their purchases. And as a consequence, the evaluative criteria produced by those motives may gradually change over time as well. Marketers rely on research to track these changes and modify marketing mixes accordingly.

Evaluative criteria do not always change gradually; they frequently change very quickly as people alter what they seek from the products they buy in response to events. For example, in graduate school, I once painfully burned my hand on a hot iron that I mistakenly left on. For my next iron purchase, automatic shutoff became a highly important evaluative criterion, whereas I had not considered it before. Thus, life experiences, among other things, can produce very rapid changes in the evaluative criteria consumers use to make purchase decisions.

**Characteristics of Evaluative Criteria**

As noted earlier, evaluative criteria are typically product attributes that consumers desire in their purchases. These attributes make up the standards by which consumers decide whether or not they like a particular product. Marketers take an interest in three characteristics of evaluative criteria: the nature of the criteria used in a given decision, their importance to that decision, and the number of criteria used to reach the decision.

*Nature of evaluative criteria.* The nature of evaluative criteria simply refers to the specific criteria being used in a given purchase. Some criteria are common to many products and purchase situations, such as price, quality, brand or store reputation, length of warranty, availability, etc. Other criteria pertain only to specific products such as automatic shutoff for an iron. Marketers should hold a clear understanding of the criteria most frequently used by different market segments so that their market offerings can meet those criteria.

*Importance of criteria.* The importance of individual evaluative criteria also greatly interests marketers. Just as consumers clearly differentiate the importance of desired benefits, they naturally make similar distinctions regarding the importance of the product attributes that provide those benefits. A great deal of research exists that attempts to document how consumers apply levels of importance to the evaluative criteria used for purchases. Unfortunately, no clear pattern has emerged.

Regarding the importance of evaluative criteria, consumer psychologists have reached two broad conclusions. First, consumers do mentally assign absolute
levels of importance to certain product attributes. Generally this occurs with “must have” product attributes as opposed to “nice to have” product attributes. For example, a person buying an iron may decide that no iron without automatic shutoff will be included in their consideration set. Thus, in an absolute sense, automatic shutoff holds very high importance as an evaluative criterion.

Second, consumers assign relative levels of importance to product attributes. Consumers frequently consider how two or more product attributes rank relative to each other. Consumer psychologists know this because consumers frequently make tradeoffs between product attributes rated as approximately equal in absolute importance. For example, they may decide to buy an iron with a respected brand name even though it was heavier than they liked and did not have a steam setting.

Marketers can use consumer perceptions of evaluative criteria importance to enhance the appeal of their products. One obvious way is to produce market offerings that possess the attributes consumers value most. Another less obvious way is for marketers to try and educate consumers about the importance of the attributes their products possess. In other words, marketers can suggest consumers use certain evaluative criteria in their purchases. This tactic becomes particularly important when two or more competitive brands are perceived by consumers as largely interchangeable. In these situations, a marketer will try to encourage consumers to value the few unique product attributes possessed by his or her brand, even if they may not be central to product performance.

Such planning not only helps produce products maximally appealing to particular target markets, but also assists marketers in positioning their products against competitive offerings.

Number of criteria used. Finally, marketers also take interest in the number of evaluative criteria used to reach a decision. Certainly, the limitations of short term memory constrain the number of criteria that a consumer can mentally juggle. As a general rule, relatively high involvement decisions result in more evaluative criteria being used. While numbers are difficult to ascribe, current thinking is that unless consumers write down thoughts on various criteria (which remarkably few do even for very large purchases), consumers use fewer than six criteria for any given purchase.

Interestingly, even purchases made jointly by couples also tend to use fewer than six criteria. Generally, during the alternative evaluation, couples simply settle on a single set of criteria to use. As such, this set of criteria is of a size that either could handle well individually.

Attitude Formation

The second stage of alternative evaluation is the formation of attitudes. Again, and as noted earlier, the entire process of alternative evaluation occurs in conjunction with search. This includes attitude formation. The steps are separate and distinct, but are not sequential. They all occur simultaneously and iteratively during consumer decision making.

The Nature of Attitudes.

The word attitude is often used synonymously with “opinion.” This is in part correct, but an attitude is actually a simpler concept. Attitudes merely reflect the degree to which we like or dislike something and do not encompass the reasons why. Opinions may also include the reasons behind an attitude. With this in mind, we define attitude as “a learned predisposition to respond in a given way to some attitude
Attitudes consist of two components, beliefs and evaluations. Beliefs refer to “aspects of a product that consumers accept as factually correct.” For our purposes, beliefs pertain to the consumer’s assessment of whether or not the brand meets one or more of his or her evaluative criteria. These beliefs may or may not pertain directly to product attributes. For example, a consumer can easily examine a new suit and quickly decide whether it is made of quality materials. However, the consumer may also spend considerable time trying on the suit to determine whether he believes others will like the way it looks on him. In the first case, the consumer holds a relatively easily verifiable belief about a straightforward product attribute. In the second case, the belief does not directly pertain to a product attribute, but rather to how others will perceive the suit or how the consumer looks wearing it.

The point here is not to let the phrase “factually correct” be confused with being easily verifiable or devoid of opinion. For example, some people believe as “factually correct” that Ford automobiles are poorly made and likely to break down. Others believe as “factually correct” that Ford automobiles are well made and should provide years of trouble-free service. So beliefs can pertain to easily verifiable product attributes, or they can pertain to less verifiable aspects of product performance.

A consumer’s evaluations refer to the importance and valence of each belief. Importance is a simple enough concept. It means the degree to which the belief influences the purchase decision. “Valence” of the belief is also a straightforward concept; it simply refers to whether the consumer feels positively or negatively about the product attribute.

Depending on the consumers and the circumstances, evaluations can differ sharply even about a belief shared by two people. For example, consider a father who wishes to buy a car for his teenage son. Suppose they look at a Ford Mustang. Both may share the belief that the car is very fast. And both may also feel that speed is a very important attribute for a car. However, the son may feel very positively about driving a fast car, while the father may feel very negatively. Thus, the belief about the product attribute is shared by both father and son. And in this example, father and son also both share the importance part of the evaluation. However, the valence of the evaluation differs greatly between the two. And as we shall see shortly, under many circumstances, consumers will combine beliefs and evaluations to form attitudes.

How consumers form attitudes: The Elaboration Likelihood Model

Accurately predicting the circumstances under which consumers will form a positive or a negative attitude would be extremely useful to marketers. Unfortunately, research has not found any reliable and generalizable means of doing so. However, marketers do have a sound theoretical basis for predicting whether consumers will form strong and enduring attitudes or whether their attitudes can be easily changed. And, applied creatively, marketers should find this information to be quite useful.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion is a time tested and intuitive theory that provides a basis for understanding when consumers’ attitudes will be strong and inflexible and when they will be subject to change. The model, first developed in the 1970s by two social
psychologists at Ohio State, has been tested in literally thousands of research studies. Its predictive abilities have held up very well. What’s particularly useful for marketers is that the ELM can provide insights useful for developing marketing strategy.

Basic premise of the ELM. The basic premise of the ELM is simple: The more people think about something, the stronger their attitudes will be. Think about friends you know who are politically active. Think about how difficult it would be to change their minds concerning the issues about which they’re most passionate. These opinions endure because they’ve received lots of thought.

Like political and social issues, some brand choices also engender strong feelings. Indeed, strong feelings of brand loyalty are precisely what marketers ultimately hope for from all customers. For many consumers, selection of brands frequently represents the culmination of a careful search process, deliberate evaluation of alternatives, and perhaps positive experience with the product that reinforced the selection. Competing brands face a very difficult battle convincing such consumers to switch to an alternative brand. Moreover, smart marketers develop programs to keep brand loyal customers contented and to raise the costs of switching brands.

Thus, as simple as it seems, the basic premise of the ELM holds great importance for marketers. For one thing, it strongly suggests that marketers should try to encourage consumers to think about their products, which, in a crowded marketplace, is not an easy task. It’s difficult enough to attract a consumer’s attention much less to get them to think about a brand, particularly in a favorable light. Even so, marketers make constant attempts to encourage consumers to give thought to their brands. They add features or product options; they devise unusual pricing schemes; they create often annoyingly memorable advertising all in an attempt to keep brands in the minds of...
consumers. The net effect is not only a crowded marketplace, but also a noisy and frequently offensive one.

Most of the time, consumers devote thought to the brands they believe they may have need for. In other words, consumers will more willingly devote thought to one or brands in a product category when they recognize a problem that a particular brand may solve. Under those circumstances, when necessary, consumers will initiate search for information about a set of brands. The question for marketers is how extensive the search is, and how much time consumers have to consider the various attributes of each brand for their suitability to solving the consumer’s problem.

The ELM, which is diagramed in Exhibit 2, offers plausible explanations for how this processing occurs and the strength of the attitudes that emerge from that process. Moreover, the processes implied by the ELM also imply ways that marketers can improve the odds that consumers considering products in a category will give some thought to a particular brand or brands. As the Exhibit illustrates, the ELM postulates that attitude formation takes place along one of two “routes.” These two routes incorporate different modes of thinking and result in attitudes of varying strength.

Central route processing. The first route to persuasion described by the ELM is referred to as the “central route.” As the name implies, when processing information along the central route, the information being processed is central to the mind’s activity. Therefore, when processing information centrally, much of the brain’s cognitive capacity is devoted to handling the information.

Before devoting significant cognitive capacity to a processing task, two conditions must be met. One, consumers must be able to process the information. This condition suggests that they comprehend the information contained in the communication. Ability to process the information also suggests that consumers are not distracted from the processing tasks at hand. Two, consumers must be motivated to process the information. Being able to process information is no guarantee that they will want to process it. Processing along the central route requires both of these conditions be met.

When processing along the central route, consumers combine their beliefs about whether a product under consideration possesses certain attributes and their evaluations of the importance of those beliefs. This general approach to central processing is referred to as “multi-attribute processing,” though certain variations have been described by consumer psychologists.

One type of multi-attribute processing is called the “compensatory model.” Under the compensatory model, consumers assign mental importance “weights” to each desired product attribute and then consider their beliefs about whether a brand possesses each of those attributes. As all the beliefs about all the brands have been “weighed,” the brand with the best combination of valued attributes receives the most positive attitude.

A less well-researched but potentially important variation of multi-attribute processing occurs using what consumer psychologists refer to as the “noncompensatory model.” When forming attitudes using this model, consumers establish a minimum acceptable level for each product attribute, but for certain critical attributes will not accept a brand that does not meet the minimums – no matter how it’s rated on the remaining attributes. Brands that possess the critical attributes are evaluated further, probably following a compensatory approach.

Critics of the multi-attribute processing view argue that the
compensatory and noncompensatory models are too rational and do not account for the very influential emotional aspects of consumer purchase. I disagree. Selection of evaluative criteria (i.e., the attributes upon which brands will be judged) as well as their importance to the purchase decision easily account for the emotional dimensions of purchase. What consumers decide is important reflects the emotional as well as the rational sides of human preference. Viewed this way, multi-attribute processing models may not explicitly contain emotional factors. However, this by no means should suggest that emotional aspects to purchase are unaccounted for by these models.

Peripheral route processing.
Returning to the diagram in Exhibit 2, when either ability or motivation to process is absent, processing occurs along the “peripheral route,” the second of the ELM’s routes to persuasion. The notion of peripheral processing suggests that the mind can still process information “off to the side” and not a part of any main information processing task at hand. The human mind possesses the capability to simultaneously perform many tasks. As such, information processing tasks can be divided with one task taking the lion’s share of cognitive capacity while other information is processed “off to the side.”

Peripheral processing differs from central processing in its fundamental approach to attitude formation. Because, under the peripheral route, the persuasive communication is not the central information processing task faced by a consumer, peripheral processing requires far fewer cognitive resources than central processing. This limited quantity of “brainpower” changes how persuasion occurs as well as the strength of attitudes formed this way.

Peripheral processing produces attitudes in one or both of two ways. One, “context effects” occur when a consumer’s mood at the time of exposure to a persuasive communication affects the resultant attitude. For example, suppose a student returns home one evening after a particularly enjoyable date. His mood is excellent. He turns on the television while his mind replays the events of the evening. Although he pays little attention to the television, his giddy mood creates a more positively receptive environment – or context – for any commercials that air.

On the other hand, suppose the young man’s date for the evening returns home in a sour mood as she recalls his boorish and ungentlemanly behavior. As she steams about the wasted evening she turns on the television. Her bad mood creates a negatively receptive context for any commercials. In both cases, mood potentially affects attitude.

Two, “execution factors” exert a strong influence on attitude formation under peripheral processing. Execution factors refer to how the content of the information itself was communicated. In this instance, content includes all aspects of the communication’s execution. If the communication was an advertisement, execution factors would include images, music, slogans, models, jokes, etc.. If the communication was a personal salesperson, execution factors would include such things as attire, vocal intonations, and facial expressions.

When processing peripherally, prominent execution factors drive attitude formation far more than product attributes or other evaluative criteria. Because his or her mind may be focused elsewhere, a consumer does not devote the cognitive resources needed to seriously process information. Therefore, he or she forms weak, tentative attitudes based on execution factors.

For example, consider a consumer watching television when a car commercial
airs. Not being in the market for a new car, the consumer goes to the kitchen to make a sandwich while the commercial plays. She hears the car manufacturer’s jingle and finds the music quite enjoyable. As a result, she forms a mild positive opinion about the commercial, and by extension the car manufacturer. Because the attitude was formed based on a music jingle, it’s weak and could be changed with more relevant information.

Despite their tenuous nature, attitudes formed peripherally may still prove quite useful to marketers. A simple positive predisposition toward a brand may be all that’s necessary for a consumer to seek additional information about it should the occasion ever arise. Therefore, many marketers intend their communications to be processed peripherally in hopes that when consumers face a problem potentially solved by the marketers’ brands, they will search for better information and then process that information centrally.

Execution factors work through two processes to influence attitudes under peripheral processing. The first is called “simple transference.” As its name implies, transference works when people transfer their attitude toward one object onto a related object. Again, simple transference, like all attitude formation under peripheral processing, produces relatively weak attitudes. Even so, marketers frequently find the phenomenon useful for inducing trial.

For example, consider Michael Jordan endorsing a product such as Ballpark Franks. These commercials contain little in the way of detailed arguments and evidence of why Ballpark Franks are superior to other brands. Even if they did, odds are slim that viewers would pay much attention. Instead, the company hopes that people with a generally favorable impression of Michael Jordan will transfer some of that feeling to the product itself and that will be sufficient to keep Ballpark Franks on consumers’ consideration sets the next time they’re considering purchasing hot dogs. Of course, once consumers try the product, they’ll evaluate its performance through central processing and ultimately form a stronger more enduring attitude.

The second process through which execution factors produce attitudes under peripheral processing is the use of “choice heuristics.” A heuristic is a simple guiding rule that helps consumers simplify decision making. When consumers lack the time to make a well-considered decision, they may revert to a choice heuristic.

For example, suppose a consumer, pressed for time, stands in the aisle of a store scanning over-the-counter cold medicines. He sees one with the words “doctor recommended” prominently displayed on the package. He thinks, “Doctors are experts and experts are usually correct.” So he grabs the package and leaves. Rather than examine this and other packages carefully for information on product use and effectiveness, he uses a simple choice heuristic to save time. The heuristic led him to form a weak but sufficiently positive attitude to buy the product. As in the previous example, once he tries the product he can evaluate its performance using central processing and form a stronger opinion.

How Marketers Change Attitudes.

Let’s begin by saying that not all attitudes can be changed. Even in the arena of personal consumption, where presumably people would be receptive to better deals, attitudes toward certain brands may become so thoroughly entrenched that changing those attitudes is virtually impossible.

Such circumstances, however, are the exception and not the rule. Although consumers may maintain consistent
preferences for a large number of brands in a large number of product categories, few are so entrenched that they couldn’t be changed given the right circumstances. Of course, for marketers to create those circumstances requires resources, which means that marketers must decide whether changing attitudes is worth the expense.

Recall that beliefs and evaluations are the two components of attitudes. Therefore, logically we can conclude that to change attitudes marketers can either change beliefs or they can change evaluations. Of the two approaches, changing beliefs is generally considered easier. Because, for the most part beliefs are essentially objective facts, presenting consumers with new factual information can be relatively straightforward. Of course, doing so requires that marketers know what beliefs need changing, which in turn suggests a need for research.

More difficult is changing evaluations. Remember, we’re focusing on changing existing attitudes, not creating new ones. Therefore, the consumers in question likely have some experience with the product category and therefore a basis for their attitudes. Convincing experienced consumers that what they consider important is in reality unimportant poses a more difficult challenge than influencing the initial priorities of novice consumers.

The task of changing existing attitudes arises when marketers wish to pursue customers who routinely seek certain products or brands to solve a given problem once it’s recognized. For example, a marketer aggressively pursuing the regular customers of a competing brand or a marketer introducing a new technology into a market with established preferences are circumstances under which attitude change would be necessary. No matter the circumstances, and no matter whether the marketer attempts to change beliefs or change evaluations, attempts to change attitudes should be approached cautiously. The risk of efforts backfiring is high.

Have you ever made a purchase that someone later criticized? One natural response is to become somewhat defensive. Similarly, marketers cannot brashly confront experienced consumers with claims that directly contradict previously held beliefs or with assertions that consumers’ priorities are misplaced. Doing so will likely cause consumers to screen out the discrepant information or worse, to counterargue and hold more tightly to their existing beliefs and evaluations.

Instead, marketers should carefully select the information they use to counter existing beliefs or evaluations, being aware of consumers’ “latitudes of acceptance” and “latitudes of rejection,” which are illustrated.
in Exhibit 3. Around any presently held belief lies a range of discrepant information that the consumer will accept as true because the discrepant information does not differ excessively from their present belief structure. Information excessively discrepant from presently held beliefs will be rejected.

When attempting to change even moderately held attitudes, marketers must attempt to gradually move consumers’ beliefs in increments that do not fall outside of their latitudes of acceptance. As you might expect, the more strongly held a belief, the narrower the latitudes of acceptance.

**Sources**

Some information about evaluative criteria was adapted from


Material about attitudes and attitude formation followed
