

Influence of Product Category on Consumer Information Search Behavior

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Summary

Because most of the purchase decisions are made during the consumers' search for product information, retailers need to understand for what type of products consumers would be willing to spend time and effort in order to find the information they need, and what sources they would use to find the relevant information. To help marketers understand consumers' information search process, this research study investigates whether (1) consumers' preferences to search for product information on the Internet vary by the product category, (2) product category determines the amount of time consumers are willing to spend to search for product/service information, and (3) the information sources from which consumers seek product information vary by the product category.

Past published literature suggests that product category is one of the factors affecting the extent of consumers' information search. Therefore, close attention to the relation between consumers' search behavior and product category is essential and therefore tested in this study. Using the definitions of the four product categories: *search* by Nelson (1974); *experience-1* and *experience-2* by Klein (1988), and *credence* by Darby and Karni (1973), this study hypothesizes that product category will significantly influence consumers' preference to search for product information on the Internet.

The findings of several research studies indicate that consumers significantly differ in decision and search times, and that the time intervals differ according to the product under study (Kleimenhagen 1966-67; Hempel 1969; Newman and Staelin 1971). In order to find whether the time involved in the information search process would make a difference in consumers'

preference to search for information on the Internet, this study hypothesizes that the amount of time consumers are willing to spend to search for product or service information will significantly differ by the product category.

Deriving from the published research on internal (prior knowledge on brand name or product) and external information sources including friends/relatives/ acquaintances, advertisements, the Internet, product brochures from the manufacturers, newspaper/magazine articles, store visits, customer service 800 numbers, and product packages, the author hypothesizes that the Information sources from which consumers seek product information will vary by the product category.

The data for the study was collected in two stages. In the first stage, nineteen undergraduate students from a large urban university in the Southeastern United States were provided with the definitions of the four product types developed by Nelson (1974), Klein (1998), and Darby and Karni (1973). Then, the students were asked to list four products that they felt represent each category. From their responses, computer mouse, radio, barbecue grill, and vacuum cleaner were selected to represent search, experience-1, experience-2, and credence product categories, respectively. In the second stage, the data were collected via a self-administered questionnaire to a convenience sample of 365 adults in two major metropolitan areas in the Southeastern United States.

The findings indicated that the preference to search for product/service information *online* for *experience-1* products was significantly higher than for a search, experience-2, and credence products. The respondents were more likely to spend significantly less time searching for product/service information for a *search* product than experience-1, experience-2, and credence products. This is because the information for a search product can easily be obtained

from an advertisement, sales brochure, or the product's package; therefore, the risk involved in making a wrong purchase decision for a search product is much less than for experience-1, experience-2, and credence products. Lastly, the respondents in the sample indicated that they would first seek information from friends/relatives/acquaintances across the four product categories. Additionally, the remainder of sources from which the respondents sought product information varied across the four product categories.

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