CONSEQUENCES OF PRODUCT TRIAL: DOES THE DISCONFIRMATION MODEL FIT?

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a model for the consequences of product trial. In particular, the disconfirmation model of satisfaction is applied in a product trial setting and incorporated with the traditional disconfirmation model of brand expectations and attitude formation. The primary objective is to develop a product trial model that can be investigated to begin to ascertain under which conditions product trial can work best.

INTRODUCTION

Product trial has long been an ignored part of consumer behavior research. In the consumer search literature many studies have been conducted to study the phenomenon of search (Beatty and Smith 1987; Punj and Staelin 1983; Schmidt and Spreng 1996; Srinivasan and Ratchford 1991; Urbany, Dickson, and Wilkie 1989). Yet none have identified product trial as a source of information in the consumer search process.

Product trial is defined as a consumer’s first direct consumption experience with a brand. The studies that have focused on trial have focused on the interaction of product trial and advertising (Deighton 1984; Deighton and Schindler 1988; Hoch and Ha 1986; Kempf and Smith 1998; Marks and Kamin 1988; Smith 1993; Smith and Swinyard 1982, 1983, 1988) or on the disconfirmation of expectations model of satisfaction (Anderson 1973; Assael and Kamins 1989; Kamins and Assael 1987; Oliver 1980a; Olson and Dover 1979). Trial can be the result of a trial purchase, a free sample or a hands-on demonstration. Since trial is a form of direct experience with a product and since research has shown that attitudes formed from direct experience with an object or product are stronger, are more confidently held, and are better predictors of behavior than those formed via indirect means such as advertising (Fazio and Zanna 1978, 1981; Marks and Kamins 1988; Smith 1993; Smith and Swinyard 1983, 1988), it is surprising that the search literature does not contain more studies of attitude formation via trial. It is also surprising that few studies have investigated characteristics of product trial itself and the subsequent effects on satisfaction and attitude formation. Kempf and Smith’s (1998) study identified a trial processing model and subsequent effect on brand attitude formation separately and then incorporated into an advertising/trial framework.

The purpose of this paper is to start investigating and identifying elements and/or models of consumer behavior that might have an effect on understanding product trial. In particular, does the disconfirmation model apply to trial expectations as it applies to brand expectations? Millions of dollars are spent annually on point-of-purchase taste tests, mail-outs of free samples, and hands-on demonstrations of products and services. Further, billions of dollars are spent on advertising which many consumers do not even process because they click their remote controls to other channels or flick through magazines. This research should help to begin to develop trial models and add insights for the more effective allocation of promotional dollars to induce product trial and less on advertising.

CONFIRMATION / DISCONFIRMATION PARADIGM

This model is highly regarded as the most explanatory of the consumer satisfaction process. The paradigm suggests that consumer satisfaction results from a process of comparison. Theoretical support for the model comes from the adaption level theory, which states that one perceives stimuli only in relation to an adapted standard (Helson 1964). The standard is a function of perceptions of the stimulus, the context, and the organism. Once created, the adaption level serves to guide subsequent evaluations since positive and negative deviations will remain in the general vicinity of one’s original position. Oliver (1980a) applied this theory to the study of consumer satisfaction by arguing that expectations about product performance can be seen as an adaption level. He suggested that expectations create a frame of reference for comparative judgments.

According to the model, consumers judge satisfaction with a product in comparison with their expectations about the product performance. If the performance is above the expectations, an increase in satisfaction is expected. If the performance is below expectations, a decrease in satisfaction is expected. Depending on the level obtained below expectations, dissatisfaction will occur.
The definition of satisfaction can be stated as “the consumer’s response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations or some other norm of performance and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption” (Tse and Wilton 1988, p. 204). Olson and Dover (1979) also define expectations as “pretrial beliefs.” The idea of pretrial beliefs is central to Smith and Swinyard’s (1982, 1983, 1988) Integrated Information Response Model. Disconfirmation is thus expected to affect consumer satisfaction. Oliver (1980a) found that disconfirmation was positively related to consumer satisfaction. Positive disconfirmation (perceived performance above the expectation) increased consumer satisfaction, while negative disconfirmation (perceived performance below the expectation) decreased consumer satisfaction.

It has been found that raising expectations may enhance consumer ratings of product performance (Anderson 1973; Olshavsky and Miller 1972). However, the effects of expectations on consumer satisfaction seem to be more complicated than for perceived product performance. While raising expectations about a product may enhance perceived product performance, it may also increase the magnitude of disconfirmation. However, Oliver (1980a, 1980b, 1981) empirically shows that expectations and disconfirmation are unrelated. Researchers have also asked the question: Does expectation influence consumer satisfaction indirectly only through disconfirmation or does it affect consumer satisfaction directly as well? The results have been mixed. Some studies have found the direct effect of expectations on consumer satisfaction, in addition to the indirect effect mediated by disconfirmation (Bearden and Teel 1983; Churchill and Suprenant 1982; Oliver and Linda 1981; Swan and Trawick 1981; Tse and Wilton 1988; Westbrook and Reilly 1983). On the other hand, the direct path from expectation to consumer satisfaction was not examined or significant in other studies (Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins 1987; Churchill and Suprenant 1982; Oliver and Bearden 1983).

The disconfirmation model has recently been challenged by Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky (1996) claiming that “desires” also play a role in the formation of satisfaction levels. Product trial itself is “a desire for information,” whether it is a trial purchase or a trial. One cannot be mired in semantic differences or standards of comparisons. It is a fact that any product information leads to the formation of expectations. This model in itself does not contradict the disconfirmation of expectations model, but merely dissects a very specific piece of human processing into smaller pieces.

TRIAL EXPECTATIONS

In order for disconfirmation of trial expectations to exist, there must first be trial expectations. Brand expectations can be influenced by advertising or other information sources such as prior experience, independent reports, salespeople, or word-of-mouth reviews. The search and satisfaction literatures offer explanations of this construct and its usage. But a new concept, “expectations of the trial,” is different. Expectations of the trial are based on trial characteristics which have previously not been explored. A consumer might expect a forced trial situation in a lab to be “fixed.” That is, the product or service will work or taste as it should, leaving a “positive” impact and subsequent evaluations. Along similar thinking, the idea of a “fair” versus a “rigged” trial may lead to different expectations. A common experience for consumers is that, when they bring the product to the home or workplace to use, the product does not work, taste, or look as it did in the store where it was purchased. Were the ingredients or mechanisms altered by the merchant who was in collusion with the manufacturer or distributor? Was the lighting set in a certain manner to make the dress appear to be green when it was really blue? If there had not been some promotional mailing or ad inviting the customer to come in for a free trial, or if a sample had not been sent to him in the mail, would the outcome of the trial have been different from the situation where he came in to try the product on his own (self-determined)?

Other characteristics of product trial that may influence trial processing goals through expectations include whether the trial experience is a “free” trial versus a “trial purchase.” This will depend on the nature of the product. Risk or cost comes into play. A consumer may be willing to spend money to try a new 55-cent candy bar (trial purchase), but not $1400 on the final sale of a used computer. He would rather want the store or manufacturer to permit him to “use” the computer for a week or some other period of time (free trial). A free trial could bias the subsequent attitude toward the product in a positive direction because the consumer is already thinking he has gotten “something for nothing.”

Other trial characteristics that may lead to different expectations of trial include the duration of time the consumer has to try the product. Trial experience location (e.g., in-home or out-of-the-home) is related to this