AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EVOKED SET DECISIONS AND FINAL PURCHASE CHOICE

Ronald P. LeBlanc, Idaho State University

Abstract

Consumer purchase decisions are studied at two separate phases of the decision process; evoked set selection and final purchase choice. The data collected suggest that there is an independent relationship between decision strategies used at each stage. This may explain why some researchers view consumer decision making as a stochastic process.

Introduction

One of the major goals of marketing academics and practitioners has been the development of tools and models which predict consumer behavior at a level that is greater than expected by chance. Models of buying behavior have progressed from the black box of stimulus response theory to the current decision making model based in cognitive psychology. Measurement approaches have changed from the freeform approach of the motivational era to the well structured format of measuring attitudes.

The predictive accuracy of the present deterministic approach to predicting consumer choices is, however, no greater than that achieved by stochastic models. Stochastic models (Bass 1974) imply that brand choice is substantially stochastic and prediction of individual choice with deterministic models will always have limited success. If, however, one assumes or accepts the tenants of cognitive psychology that man is an information processor, then one must ask the question: Why is the deterministic model of choice not achieving better predictive accuracy? This paper is an initial attempt to examine a possible explanation.

Background

The present model of consumer decision making is a five stage process that includes these stages:
1. Problem Recognition
2. Search
3. Evaluation
4. Purchase
5. Post-Purchase Evaluation.

Authors may present the stages using slightly different names (Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell 1973; Markin 1974) but this cognitive model is well accepted. The purchase stage, or choice process, has been the major focus of brand managers and marketing academics. The dominant measurement tool has been some variant of Fishbein's model of an attitude (Fishbein 1963). The attitude model is a very useful measurement tool because of the ease of defining it in operational terms. It also has intuitive merit, as measuring a persons cognitive component and valuative component should provide information about how consumers evaluate products and make purchase choices.

The operational model of what an attitude is has come under intensive study. The components of an attitude have been studied (Bagozzi et al 1979, Sheth and Talarzyk 1972), the construct validity tested (Bettman et al 1975), and scaling issues addressed (Haley and Case 1979). Empirical (Wilson et al 1975) and experimental (Lutz 1977) investigations have provided the background for extending the operational definition to include extended behavioral intentions models (Laroche and Howard 1980).

Research into the use of decision strategies by consumers progressed on a separate track. Bettman (1977), Park (1976), and Wright (1974, 1975) contributed to the literature on when and how consumers' used compensatory and noncompensatory decision rules. There has not been a synthesis of the implications of these two separate research tracks and their interaction with the underlying consumer decision making model.

This paper identifies and explores two interrelated problems. The first problem is with the stages of the generally accepted model of consumer decision making. The second problem is with the underlying information processing model assumed by an attitude model.

Problems

There is a consumer decision making process, documented in the literature, that is not explicitly identified in the present five stage decision model. At issue is a decision process which consumers use to select evoked sets. Howard and Sheth (1969) introduced the concept of evoked sets and Narayana and Markin (1975) expanded it to include awareness sets, inept and inert sets. The strategic implications of a brand
being in or out of the evoked set was recently addressed by Howard (1988).

Existence of awareness sets and its subsets presents a problem. If evoked sets exist then there is a choice process occurring before purchase choice. Search activity identifies an awareness set and consumers choose from the awareness set a set of acceptable alternatives, an evoked set. Then there is a subsequent choice process in which brands from the evoked set are evaluated and a purchase choice is made. For the sale of a specific brand then, being in the evoked set is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being the brand of choice. This will always be the case if awareness sets and evoked sets are larger than one brand. Howard's (1988) discussion of the strategic implications of a brand being in or out of the evoked set addresses measurement problems with the use of Fishbein (1963) based models.

Consumer decision making is recognized as a two stage decision making process (Johnson and Russo 1984), but major models of the consumer decision making process (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1986) do not reflect the "two" stages. A model which reflects the "two" stage decision making process would contain the following stages:

1. Problem Recognition
2. Search (internal and external)
3. Awareness Set Identification
4. Evaluation of the Awareness Set and Choice Processes Leading to an Evoked Set
5. Evaluation and Choice from an Evoked Set

This decision process reflects consumer information processing in an "extensive decision making" situation. For less complex decision making, the consumer would not have to activate stage 2 external search and stage 3 awareness set development. Purchase decisions would be made from established evoked sets. Howard's (1988) arguments deal with the different problems faced by brand managers when their brand is in or out of evoked sets.

Modification of the decision process of the consumer to better reflect evaluation and choice processes does not eliminate the problems in forecasting consumer choice. A second problem lies with measures used in studying and predicting purchase choice. It is generally assumed that consumers use noncompensatory decision rules in making evoked set selection, and compensatory or lexicographic decision rules in making final purchase choice.

The Fishbein-based models of an attitude all assume a compensatory decision making rule. If consumers are not using a compensatory decision process at final purchase choice or are using a compensatory process for evoked set selection, using a Fishbein based model will lower predictive accuracy.

This exploratory study of consumer decision making investigates the use of information processing strategies at both the evoked set selection stage and at final choice. The purpose of the study is to identify decision strategies used at each stage of decision making. Additionally, the issue of a relationship between decision strategies used by consumers for selecting the evoked set and the subsequent purchase decision are explored.

**Methodology**

Studying consumer decision making needs to be done at two levels. The first level is at evoked set selection, and the second is at purchase choice. This presents a major research problem. Final choice can be studied by interviewing respondents at the time of purchase or shortly thereafter. Selection of evoked sets from an awareness set is another matter. Awareness sets and subsequent evoked sets develop only in the minds of the consumer over some period of time. There is no outwardly visible state displayed by the consumer, short of 'window shopping', which might alert a researcher that evoked set decisions are in process. However, 'window shopping' activity may only be expanding awareness set size.

This problem was dealt with by developing an inventory of twenty-five consumer shopping good products. The items, displayed in Table 1, include products that are in early stages of their product life-cycle and products that are in their mature stage. Respondents were first asked to identify products on the list that they had already purchased. For these products, data collected included year and month of purchase and purchase price. This was done to aid the respondent in recalling purchase history of products already in their inventory.

This allowed the identification of the most recent item purchased. For this item the data collected included the brand purchased, other brands considered, and the decision strategy used for the purchase decision. Identification of the purchase choice decision strategy used structured protocols of five strategies; weighted and unweighted compensatory, lexicographic, conjunctive and disjunctive. The structured protocol