

WHAT CONSUMERS OF FASHION WANT TO KNOW

A Study of Informational Requirements
and Buying Behavior

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by

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BACKGROUND OF THIS PAPER

This paper is based on experimental research sponsored by Research Group B, of the Bureau of Business Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, the University of Michigan.

This group of department stores from seven midwestern states provides financial and logistical support to basic research into consumer behavior. This paper is one in a series of reports on this behavioral research.

(This paper was submitted for publication in the Journal of Marketing Research, and therefore, its format conforms to that prescribed in the style sheet for the above publication.)

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The practice of marketing under a cloak of ambiguity appears to be diminishing with the rise of consumerism and marketers' continuing exploration of the consumer's decision-making process. No longer is the sole purpose of marketing to tailor the product to meet the marketer's preconceived idea of the consumer. Marketers are now faced with the obligation to recognize the consumer's need for information about the product and assist him in satisfying this need. The principal causes for this added obligation are two: the blossoming recognition on the part of marketers of the role information seeking plays in consumers' decision processes, and the role government has played in directing that consumers' informational needs be fulfilled.

The marketing literature is rich with material about the content of information supplied to the consumer. There is also much research relative to

the uses of information resources. However, identification of the kinds of information which the consumer requires--or, at least, wants--to make his purchase decisions is significantly absent. A review of the literature and personal interviews with retailers indicate that this absence is particularly evident in the area of fashion goods, especially in women's and men's ready-to-wear clothing.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The department store members of what is called Research Group "B" of the Bureau of Business Research at the University of Michigan have committed support both financially and by means of other resources to explore the customer's need for information as well as other aspects of the decision process. One of the projects in this continuing program was recently completed at Myers Brothers' department store in Springfield, Illinois. Women from throughout the Springfield area were invited to participate in an experimental program concerning the purchase of fashion goods.

First each woman was shown a line drawing of a shirt dress that had a very basic style. The criterion

of a basic style evolved from a pretest conducted in January, 1970, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The test was designed to prevent any substantial patterns of nonresponse which a garment styled for a particular age group might create. Each woman was told she could assume that the dress fit her correctly, but that she could not assume any other information about the dress. Then she was asked whether, on the basis of the drawing only, she would purchase the dress. After responding to this question, she was informed that she would be permitted to learn some facts about the garment, and she was given the following list of nine factors of information that would be available to her:

- Price
- Color
- Content of material
- Store (where the garment could be purchased)
- Brand name
- Department of store (where garment could be purchased)
- Instructions for care of garment
- Salesgirl's evaluation of style
- Salesgirl's evaluation of quality

The participants did not have to select any information, they could stop at anytime they wished

in the selection process, and they were permitted to choose a maximum of five factors. The content of the information selected could be different for different women. For example, two women could choose "Brand name" as a factor that would influence their purchase but receive two different brand names as information.

Finally, the women were asked again whether they would buy the dress and for what reason. The experiment was then repeated with another dress and a coat. These garments were also presented as having a basic style.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The participants in this study represented a broad range of ages and socio-economic status, and none of the segments in these spectrums were "loaded."

The responses of the participants were assigned to a matrix showing pre- and post-information buying decisions (Figure 1). The object of this matrix was to examine the potential differences, based on informational needs, among the nine types of decisions within

the matrix. The sample examined was 243 purchases, and this potential constraint on the size of individual matrix cells caused the blending or mixing of the nine decisions into larger units. Thus we examined the differences between participants whose behavior did not change after the experiment (the diagonal line in the matrix) and those whose behavior did change (the other six positions in the matrix). Then we examined the differences between those whose behavior changed positively (boxes 1, 2, and 3 in the matrix) and those whose behavior changed negatively (boxes 4, 5, and 6 in the matrix).

OVERALL RESULTS

The participants, in answering why they made their buying decision, heavily emphasized the information supplied in the experiment. Only 25 per cent indicated that style was the prime reason for the decision, while 67 per cent reported that information they had requested about the garment was the prime factor in their decision. In all, 55 per cent of the participants said price was the prime element in their decision.

Table 1 shows the aggregate percentage of participants by their choice of information factor. The results indicate the relative importance of price and physical characteristics, such as color and material, as opposed to the psychological factors of the decision, such as brand, store, salesgirl's evaluation of quality and style, and location within store. Table 2 emphasizes this relative importance by showing the percentage distribution by the order in which the informational factors were selected. The fact that 66 per cent of the participants wanted to know the price as the first "bit" of information they received and the subsequent distribution by order of choice show the added importance of the factor of price over the two physical characteristics of color and material.

CHANGERS VS. NON-CHANGERS

The findings point to price as the major factor that distinguishes persons making a change in their decision from those persons who remained committed to their original purchase decision. Of those who examined the pricing factor, price was the primary influence on 78.1 per cent of the women who changed

their decision and on 37.1 per cent of those who did not change their decision. Price was the first "bit" of information requested by 67.7 per cent of those who changed and 53.7 per cent of those who didn't. The difference between both sets of percentages is significant at the .05 level.

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE CHANGERS

The pretesting resulted in the hypothesis that those who make a positive change make greater demands for information--that is, they require more "bits" of information--than those who make a negative change in their decision.

We assigned a series of weights to informational choices of all participants in the rank-order in which the information was selected. For the informational factor selected first we assigned a weight of 5 and then, in descending order, the weights of 4, 3, 2, and 1 for the second through fifth choices. Thus, if 20 persons selected price as a first choice they would receive a weighted score of 100 (20 x 5).

The participants making a positive change in their decision used 88.3 per cent of the potential

weighted score, while those making a negative decision used 75.1 per cent of their potential score. This difference is significant at the .05 level.

When the weighted score measure is used for all informational factors, there are no significant differences between the two groups who changed their decision except in the area of material content and color. Those who changed positively use these physical factors more heavily than do those who change negatively. The results of using the weighted score measure are shown in Table 3, and reinforcement for the difference between the decision changers is seen in Table 4, which details the percentage of participants who continue to seek information through the first of three choices. This again indicates that positive changers use more informational factors in their decision process than do negative changers.

Table 5 gives the informational factors that each of the three types of participants -- positive changers, negative changers, and nonchangers -- chose in the rank-order in which they were selected. There are no apparent differences in the order of importance of the types of information for the three classes of participants.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The participants in this experimental study indicated that they used information supplied by the seller when buying fashion goods. A significantly large number of people described the information received as a prime factor in their buying decision. A ranking of the informational factors by importance of use shows that price and the physical properties of the garment contribute to the buying decision more than psychological factors do.

The element of price is significant in distinguishing those who change behavior as a result of the information received from those who do not alter their decision process. Among the consumers who did make a change, those who changed their behavior in a positive direction used more "bits" of information than those who changed negatively. Further, the positive changers used information about the physical characteristics of the material and color of the garment more heavily than did the negative changers.

CONCLUSIONS

The object of this study was not to examine fully

the criteria for choice in the buying decision for fashion goods, but rather to identify the different informational requirements that different buyers of ready-to-wear clothing demand in the process of making their buying decision.

The relative unimportance of psychological factors, especially brand names, is in sharp contrast to the emphasis which much fashion advertising puts on the importance of brand names.

The results of this study add some support to the rising trend called consumerism: The results show that information about price and, second, about the physical properties of fashion clothes is in large part the basis for a consumer's buying decision; therefore, his demands for such information are consistent with his behavior. What's more, the study shows that those who move toward a positive buying decision apparently need more information than those who move toward rejecting a garment. This latter finding is significant for marketers. It re-emphasizes their new obligation to make available to a susceptible market target the information necessary to make buying decisions.

Illustrations

Figure 1

PRE-INFORMATION AND POST-INFORMATION
BUYING DECISION MATRIX

		Post-Information Buying Decision		
		YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Pre-Information Buying Decision	YES	X	4	5
	NO	1	X	2
	DON'T KNOW	3	6	X

Table 1

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS REQUESTING
INFORMATION FACTORS

Information factor	Overall percentage of participants re- questing the factor
Price	86
Color	74
Material content	64
Brand name	44
Store identification	35
Garment care	35
Department of store where sold	16
Salesgirl's evaluation of quality	9
Salesgirl's evaluation of style	9

Table 2

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS IN ORDER OF CHOICE OF
INFORMATION FACTOR SELECTED

Factor	Choice				
	1	2	3	4	5
Color	12	34	28	14	8
Material content	13	24	19	16	8
Brand name	6	9	12	17	20
Price	62	22	13	4	...
Store identification	2	3	10	20	18
Department where sold	1	2	3	4	15
Garment care	2	5	12	17	15
Salesgirl--quality	1	...	2	4	8
Salesgirl--style	1	...	1	4	8

Table 3

WEIGHTED-SCORE PERCENTAGES

Informational factor	Positive changers	Negative changers
Brand name	20.0	24.0
Price	85.0	88.9
Material content ^a	65.0	49.8
Color ^a	66.0	53.3

^a Significantly different at the 5 per cent level. Source: Samuel Richmond, Statistical Analysis (2d ed.; New York: Ronald Press, 1964), pp. 205-206.

Table 4

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS SEEKING
INFORMATION THROUGH THREE CHOICES

Choices	Positive changers	Negative changers
1	100.0	97.8
2	100.0	82.2
3	85.0	60.0

Table 5

RANK-ORDER OF WEIGHTED SCORES OF FIVE MOST
FAVORED INFORMATION FACTORS

Rank-order	Positive changer		Negative changer		Nonchanger	
	Factor	Score	Factor	Score	Factor	Score
1	Price	85	Price	200	Price	588
2	Color	66	Color	120	Color	400
3	Material	65	Material	112	Material	299
4	Brand	20	Brand	54	Brand	197
5	Store identifi- cation	29	Store identifi- cation	21	Store identifi- cation	104

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