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Hidden Characteristics II: Versioning

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1 Motivation

Willingness-to-pay is classic //hidden characteristic//: buyer knows how much a good is worth to her, seller doesn’t know.

- If seller faces lots of competition, may not matter: competition forces \( P = MC \), independent of WTP
- But what if \( \Pi = P \times Q - \text{Total Cost} = MC \times Q - \text{Total Cost} < 0 \)? For example, if \( MC = 0 \)?
- Then \( P > MC \): now WTP does matter for \( P \) (can’t set \( P > WTP \))

If WTP heterogeneous, might want to (might //need// to if competition forces it) charge different users different amounts: get more from those with high WTP

- Differential pricing
- How to sort buyers into different WTP classes?
  - Perhaps WTP correlated with observable characteristic (seniors, students, business v. vacation travel, etc.) (“Partially observable” characteristics)
  - What about the unobservable part? Get buyers to reveal through self-selection (choose from a menu of contracts)
  - Self-selection on what dimensions?
    * quantity
    * bundle of features
    * quality
  - These last two are instances of versioning
2 Graphical analysis of versioning

- Single item
- Two types of buyers, low and high WTP for quality. (Draw two WTP for quality curves (how much WTP for each incremental unit of quality)
- If full information, firm would charge A to low types for quality \( x_1^0 \), and charge A+B+C to high types for \( x_2^0 \)
- But, if not full information, self-selection not incentive compatible!
  - Seller gets all surplus, buyers get 0
  - If high type pretends to be low type, takes \( x_1^0 \) for price A, gets to keep surplus \( B > 0 \). See Figure 1.

![Figure 1:](image)

The graphs show the willingness-to-pay for various qualities by two different consumer types: those with high WTP and those with low WTP

- Suppose seller offers high quality for A+C
  * high types get to keep surplus B, no incentive to lie
  * seller gets increase of C in revenues
- Seller can do better: degrade product for low type
* reduce quality to low type to $x_1$
* lose blue shaded from low type, gain green from high type
* at starting point, marginal loss on low types is zero, gain on high types positive, so unambiguous increase by lowering low-type quality at least some
  - How far to lower low-type quality?
    * if $\{N_L, N_H\}$ of each type, go until $N_L \Delta_{\text{blue}} = N_H \Delta_{\text{green}}$
    * Special case: if $N_L = N_H$, then go until the dividing line is bisected

**QUESTION:** What is the incentive compatibility constraint above?

$$u(q_2) - t_2 > B$$