

# INFORMATION SEARCH BY CONSUMERS IN THE SHOPPING ENVIRONMENT\*

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## OPSOMMING

*Verbruikers bekom inligting deur 'n verskeidenheid bronne buite en binne die winkelomgewing te raadpleeg. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die implikasies van sulke bronne vir implementering van doeltreffende markstrategie deur inligtinginwinningsgedrag by hipermarkkopers in twee produkklasse te vergelyk. Die studie toon dat 69.5 persent van kopers uit die totale steekproef slegs een winkel besoek het voor die koop. Resultate toon verder dat verbruikersdominante-bronne (invloed van familie, vriende of bure) meer dikwels geraadpleeg is as markdominante-bronne (gedrukte en oudiovisuele reklame, bevorderings binne die winkel, vertonings en persoonlike verkope) voor die koop. Hierdie bevindinge stem ooreen met resultate behaal uit 'n vroeëre studie.*

Consumer pre-purchase information search has long been a subject of marketing theory. A number of studies have shown that consumers engage in very little overt search for information, even for expensive products such as major appliances and furniture (Katona & Mueller, 1955; Claxton Fry & Portis, 1974; Newman & Lockeman, 1975). Furthermore, research findings indicate that information seeking tends to decline as consumers gain product and buying experience and buy by brand or retail store, variables that may represent learning (Newman, 1977). Brand or store names, for example, may stand as composites of information the buyer has found to be relevant. It has also been suggested from the literature that information-seeking varies directly with price, which may represent importance of purchase and opportunity to profit from search. This would imply that the proportion of buyers visiting more than one store or making more than one shopping trip before buying, would increase with the price of non-food items rising.

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In South Africa there is a serious lack of knowledge in this field, especially with regard to hypermarket shopping which represents a relatively new way of purchasing for the average urban consumer. The advent and proliferation of hypermarkets and superstores has led to shopping becoming an exercise which involves all family members. Later shopping hours, speciality departments appealing to children and husbands and the interchangeability of male-female roles, have all contributed to drawing the whole family into the store. As a result of these changes in shopping habits, researchers are increasingly turning their attention to family buying behaviour, focusing on pre-purchase information search and in-store buying activity.

Our research concentrated on the following issues: How many sources of information do consumers of small electrical appliances, car accessories and hardware equipment consult before they buy? Do these sources vary in number and kind? Who participates in the decision process at the point of purchase? How much time is spent deliberating on the shopping floor, prior to purchasing? What are the decisive determining factors for choosing a particular item?

### *METHOD*

Data were obtained from a non-probability convenience sample consisting of 652 buyers of small electrical appliances, car accessories and hardware equipment. The study was conducted at a local hypermarket in Port Elizabeth. In-store information search was detected and recorded on an observation schedule. The following activities were observed: reading of store adverts; physical examination and comparing of products, prices; seeking advice from sales staff, fellow shoppers; testing of the product and searching for a particular brand. Any verbal communication between sales staff and buyers or between shopping party members was also recorded on a check list. A deliberation index was used to record total shopping time and spending per shopping minute.

Out-of-store information search was determined by conducting an on-the-spot post-purchase interview, lasting no longer than one minute, immediately after a customer had put an item into his shopping cart. Survey questions focused on the following activities: visits to different retail outlets; telephone enquiries to other stores; reading of brochures, instruction booklets, newspaper or magazine adverts or articles; seeking advice or opinions from friends, neighbours or relatives; recalling of radio or TV commercials on the product purchased and own previous experience with the product.

Pre-purchase activities were categorized as market-dominated, consumer-dominated and neutral information sources. The sample was taken over a four-month period with field work done at various times of the day, week or month in order to obtain an even distribution of shopping behaviour at peak and quiet intervals. Three post-graduate university students acted as field workers. Each field worker observed and afterwards interviewed only one buyer at a time. In order to observe closely, yet not contaminate the behaviour of shoppers, field workers stood near the small electrical appliance, car accessories and hardware shelves and tried to present the appearance of a store clerk, taking stock with a clipboard.

### *RESULTS AND DISCUSSION*

The findings of the study as reflected in Table 1, indicate that hypermarket shoppers for small electrical appliances, car accessories and hardware equipment engage in little overt search at other stores, prior to purchase. An average of 69,5 percent of shoppers in the total sample had visited only one store prior to purchase. Reasons for this behaviour tendency are speculative though there is evidence that store loyalty, stemming from price awareness and previous experience may well account for it.

TABLE 1

PATTERNS OF RETAIL SOURCE USAGE EXPRESSED AS PERCENTAGE  
RESPONSES BY SAMPLE GROUPS

RETAIL STORES VISITED	GROUP I N = 152	GROUP II N = 250	GROUP III N = 150
Visited 0 - 1	55 %	67 %	72 %
Visited 2 - 3	34 %	29 %	22 %
Visited 4+	11 %	4 %	6 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %
Mean *	1,81	1,49	1,39
Interpretive label	Small electrical appliance buyers in previous study	Small electrical appliance buyers in present study	Car accessories/ hardware equipment buyers in present study

\* Main spending per shopping minute

TABLE 2

PATTERNS OF INFORMATION SOURCE USAGE EXPRESSED AS PERCENTAGE  
RESPONSES BY SAMPLE GROUPS

	GROUP I R = 366**	GROUP II R = 442	GROUP III R = 386
Use of Market Dominated Sources			
Total R indicating source usage	44 %	37 %	31 %
Main source	32	25	24
Use of Consumer Dominated Sources			
Total R indicating source usage	51 %	57 %	61 %
Main source	50	56	53
Use of Neutral Dominated Sources			
Total R indicating source usage	5 %	6 %	8 %
Main source	4	5	4
Interpretive label	Small electrical appliance buyers in present study	Small electrical appliance buyers in present study	Car accessories/ hardware equipment buyers in present study

\*\* R in all tables indicates the total number of responses.

The study further revealed considerable reliance on consumer-dominated sources that is influence of relatives, friends and neighbours in pre-purchase information search. Table 2 suggests lesser reliance on market dominated sources, that is newspaper and magazine adverts, pamphlets and brochures, audio-visual commercials, promotions displays and personal selling via telephone conversations. The table also shows few consultations of neutral sources such as consumer reports, articles and instruction booklets.

An interesting observation emerged though in that respondents tended to favour market dominated sources when asked to suggest reliable information sources to others. While respondents themselves had visited few retail stores, engaged in few telephone enquiries and consulted mainly relatives, friends or neighbours, to others they recommended visits to various retail outlets to check product and price ranges or consulting sales staff. This anomaly in responses may point to lack of insight into consumers' own buying behaviour in that they may well believe they act rationally whilst the opposite may be the case. The expressed reliance on consumer-dominated sources in their own search behaviour may also be

interpreted as of secondary importance in that respondents might have forgotten their initial exposure to the product via market-dominated sources, i.e. advertising as a primary source.

With regard to interaction patterns during in-store information search the study showed that most conversations focused on performance and economic features of the products considered. It further seems as though functional qualities were discussed more frequently with fellow shoppers than with sales staff and that price and maintenance cost were popular issues for deliberation. The low level of interaction with sales staff may however have resulted from their absence on the sales floor during observation periods.

Comparing results obtained from a previous study with that of the present study, indicate that shopping parties seem to be growing in popularity. In the pilot study done in 1981 only 14 percent of the sample of 152 shoppers for small electrical appliances were observed shopping together and seeking advice from fellow shoppers, prior to making a decision on the shop floor. This percentage has increased to 51 percent in the present study with 250 buyers of small electrical appliances. In the hardware and car accessories department 33 percent of the buyers were observed shopping together and seeking advice from fellow shoppers. On average people took longer to make up their minds on buying small electrical appliances than on buying car accessories and hardware equipment. The mean spending per shopping minute was also larger for small electrical appliances than for car accessories and hardware equipment (see Table 1).

### *CONCLUSION*

By way of summary it may be stated that regarding patterns of information search relating to number of stores visited and use of consumer dominated sources, this study revealed no significant differences between the groups investigated. Therefore in planning marketing strategies marketers may assume that consumers do little if any explicit information gathering at other stores, that a substantial amount of search activity both on a perceptual and verbal level takes place within the store and that consumers weigh the opinions of others heavily in their search activity. Store managers should also combat potential consumer dissatisfaction stemming from lack of sales staff to serve clients in speciality departments at hypermarkets and superstores, by appointing temporary staff during peak hours and accommodating product demonstrations on the sales floor.

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