

PRE-PURCHASE INFORMATION SEARCH AND CONSUMER SATISFACTION*

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ABSTRACT

This survey examines the factors which determine consumer satisfaction with major household appliances. Hypotheses relating to pre-purchase information search, and product satisfaction as well as previous satisfactory store experience and subsequent repurchase behaviour are proposed and empirically tested, using data obtained from 55 consumers who patronized a large Eastern Cape hypermarket. Results indicate that product satisfaction is related more to market place variables than actual search behaviour. Repeat shopping intentions are associated with previous shopping experiences at the particular store, while the latter also contribute to product satisfaction. Marketing implications and future research directions are briefly discussed.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie ondersoek verbruikerstevredenheid met groter huishoudelike toebehore en die aanleidende oorsake daarvan. Hipoteses wat die verband tussen vooraf inligtinginwinningsaktiwiteit en produktevredenheid ondersoek, asook vorige bevredigende winkelondervindings en gevolglike heraankoopgedrag, is empiries getoets met 'n steekproef van 55 verbruikers in 'n groot hipermark in die Oos-Kaap. Die resultate suggereer dat produktevredenheid meer verband hou met markplek-verwante veranderlikes as met inligtingsinwinningsgedrag. Herhaalde koopvoornemens is geassosieer met vorige bevredigende koopervarings by die betrokke winkel terwyl laasgenoemde ook bydra tot produktevredenheid. Bemerkingsimplikasies en toekomstige navorsingsriglyne word ook kortliks bespreek.

Several studies have shown that consumers engage in relatively little information search, even when the financial commitments involved indicate that search may be well justified (Katona and Mueller, 1955; Claxton, Fry and Portis, 1974; Newman and Lockeman, 1975). These researchers found that even for expensive products such as major appliances and furniture, limited information search occurred. Studies carried out in South Africa on information search patterns by hypermarket shoppers revealed similar results (Rousseau, 1982; 1984). For example, prior to purchase, buyers of small electrical appliances, car accessories and hardware equipment engaged in little overt search at other stores.

Four reasons may explain the low level of information search. (Newman, 1977). (a) Consumers may not perceive information as easily obtainable and hence do not try to get it; (b) consumers may perceive that information is available but do not obtain it because they do not know how to use it to make a choice; (c) information search may be low because consumers do not think they need it and (d) consumers may not care.

With respect to the first explanation it is possible that the cost of information search (telephone calls, store visits, exposure to aggressive salespeople) exceeds its perceived value. The second explanation suggests that consumers do not realize the significance of certain attributes such as product life cycle, e.g. in selecting a refrigerator. Thirdly, consumers may feel that

they can rely on prior experience based on such factors as previous purchases, information obtained earlier and satisfaction with the product and store.

Finally, consumers may not search much because their choices involve little perceived risk, either financial or social.

The third possibility, namely that prior experiences such as pre-purchase information search and store knowledge may be linked to product satisfaction was the focus of the research reported here. This paper endeavours to assess whether consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction is related to the amount of information search and more specifically, whether product satisfaction is related to market-place satisfaction.

Consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction is generally conceptualized as the outcome of a consumer's subjective comparison of expected and received product attribute levels (Fornell and Robinson, 1983). The functional relationship between what was expected and what is received has been examined mostly in the context of psychological theory. Examples include discrepancy theory (Gilly and Gelb, 1982); two-factor theory (Maddox, 1981); and attribution theory (Folkes, 1984).

Experimental research on brand choice behaviour (Jacoby et al., 1974; Westbrook and Newman, 1978; Kourilsky and Murray, 1981) suggests that satisfaction may be related to purchase decision activity. These investigators found that feelings of satisfaction with brand choice increased as respondents were exposed to greater amounts of pre-purchase information and economic reasoning in family budgetary decisions.

In another study on consumers' prior experiences and perceptions in auto repair choice (Biehal, 1983), satisfaction increased with external search and with the number of times the repair company had been used previously. Swan (1977) found that satisfaction with a store influenced post-shopping attitudes, which in turn influenced intentions to shop again.

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* The research on which this study is based was funded by the Human Sciences Research Council. The author wishes to thank Sylvia Miller and Bill Birkenbach for valuable assistance and advice.

Westbrook and Newman (1978) reported greater dissatisfaction amongst consumers who were not highly satisfied with the previously owned appliance.

The present study tested three hypotheses, all suggested by the literature cited above.

H1. The greater the quantity of information search prior to purchase, the greater the likelihood of product satisfaction.

H2. The higher the degree of satisfaction with previous shopping experience at a particular store, the greater the likelihood of satisfaction with products bought at the store.

H3. The higher the degree of satisfaction with previous shopping experience at a particular store, the greater the likelihood of repeated shopping intentions.

METHOD

Data on pre-purchase information search was gathered, using methods similar to those of Newman and Rousseau in previous studies (Westbrook and Newman, 1978, Rousseau, 1982; 1984). Information source usage was determined by a series of aided-recall questions as well as in-store observations. Survey questions designed to detect out-of-store information search focused on the number of stores visited, telephone enquiries made, consultation with friends, family members and recall of newspaper, magazine, T.V. and radio commercials. In-store information search was detected and recorded on an observation schedule. The following activities were observed: reading of store advertisements, physical examination and comparing of products and prices, and seeking advice from sales staff and fellow shoppers.

An index of information seeking similar to that used by Newman and Westbrook (1978) was created. One point was assigned for one mention of each of these types of activity: reading point-of-sales literature, talking to appliance salespersons, speaking to friends, neighbours or relatives, recall of newspaper or magazine advertisements, and consultation of neutral sources such as consumer reports or instruction booklets prior to purchase. In addition, one point was awarded for each retail outlet visited before buying and one point for each telephone inquiry made. The range of possible scores on the index for pre-purchase information search was from zero to twelve.

Product satisfaction/dissatisfaction was measured with twelve

specific survey questions about respondents' feelings and experiences during the post-purchase period. Respondents rated their product experiences, product expectations and after-sales service on a five-point itemized scale ranging from "unhappy" to "pleased". Satisfaction with previous shopping experiences at the particular store was also measured as part of the post-purchase interview.

Satisfaction was scored by assigning one point for each response per item (predictor) indicating a favourable experience. Tables 1(a) and (b) show the predictor items used. As can be seen from these tables the range of points on the index was zero to twelve for product satisfaction and zero to five for store satisfaction. The item sample was tested for internal consistency by means of coefficient alpha. A correlation of .92 was obtained.

Intercepts of major household appliance buyers were taken from the sales floor at the store. Major household appliances (i.e. stoves, refrigerators, washing machines) were chosen because they are expensive products for which consumers usually do extensive information search. Moreover, these products may develop performance problems after purchase, causing dissatisfaction.

The sample (N=55) was taken over a three-month period during the first half of 1984 and prior to the increase in G.S.T. and finance charges. As no respondent could be classified as totally dissatisfied with products bought (i.e. gave negative ratings on all items measuring satisfaction/dissatisfaction) the sample was split into satisfied and less satisfied customers. Respondents who had indicated dissatisfaction on six or more of the items on the rating scale were classified as less satisfied.¹

As a control measure for changes in rating scores owing to a longer period of product exposure, a follow-up procedure was employed six months after the initial ratings were received. A sample comprising of satisfied and less satisfied respondents was asked once again to rate their experiences with their products on the same rating scale. A correlation coefficient $r(38) = .71$ ($p < .01$) was found between the original and follow-up ratings.

1. More detailed information on choosing the sample and/or method of scoring can be obtained on request from the author.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using the scoring methods described above, there was clear evidence of satisfaction, as favourable responses far outweigh, unfavourable ones. Using the percentage of responses that were classified as favourable or unfavourable for each item on the two measures, the following figures were produced.

TABLE 1(a)
PERCENTAGE RESPONSES TO MEASURES PREDICTING PRODUCT SATISFACTION/DISSATISFACTION

Predictors	Percentage Favourable	Response Unfavourable
Performance	96	4
Reliability	94	6
Safety features	90	10
Price evaluation	84	16
Savings due to product usage	84	16
Product expectations met	88	12
Repurchase as indicator of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction	84	16
Recommendation to others as indication of satisfaction/dissatisfaction	86	14
After sales service	98	2
Guarantee commitments carried out	96	4
Sales staff attitudes toward problems with product	100	–
Management/manufacturers willingness to replace faulty products	94	6
N = 55	Total	100%

TABLE 1(b)
PERCENTAGE RESPONSES TO MEASURES PREDICTING STORE SATISFACTION/DISSATISFACTION

Predictors	Percentage Favourable	Response Unfavourable
Availability of quality or fashion merchandise	80	20
Selection and variety of merchandise	86	14
Price appeal	72	28
Sales clerk service	64	36
Returns and adjustment	60	40
N = 55	Total	100%

To test the first hypothesis total information search and product satisfaction scores for each respondent were examined. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test showed no significant relationship between the two sets of scores, ($r = .13$ NS) for the total sample. Splitting the sample into satisfied and less satisfied groups produced no significant correlations, $r(43) = .20$ for the satisfied group; $r(8) = -.15$ for the less satisfied group.

The third hypothesis was also supported by the data. A correlation of $r = .40$ ($p < .01$) was obtained between previous shopping experiences at the store and repeat shopping intentions. Table 3 shows the proportion of repurchase at each satisfaction level. A t-test for significance of differences between proportions of repeat and no repeat shopping intentions was also performed resulting in $t(54) = 2.65$ ($p < .05$).

TABLE 3
PROPORTION OF REPURCHASE AT EACH SATISFACTION LEVEL

Satisfaction levels	Satisfaction with previous shopping experience (percent)	Repeat shopping intentions (percent)	No repeat shopping intentions (percent)
Pleased	54	44	6
Mostly satisfied	26	22	7
Mixed	16	4	11
Mostly dissatisfied	4	3	3
Total (N = 55)	100%	73%	27%

The findings indicate that expressed satisfaction with a purchase-decision process for major household appliances is more a function of store satisfaction than pre-purchase information search. The pattern that emerges suggest that quality of service at the shop, selection and variety of merchandise and price appeal are more important in product satisfaction than actual search. Repeat shopping intentions are also in part a function of satisfactory previous shopping experiences.

These findings have important implications for marketers. More attention should be paid to providing pleasant shopping environments. Sales staff should be trained to be informative and supportive when approached by customers in the store. Care should be taken not to provide information overload via

media and personal information sources as this may prove threatening and confusing to the average shopper.

Limitations of the study should be mentioned here. Although the findings of the study partially support that of other research in the field (Biehal, 1983; Swan, 1977), it should be borne in mind that the results are based on a relatively small sample. The fact that only a few respondents could be identified as less satisfied shoppers may further point to measurement error or unwillingness to give negative responses. The attempt to introduce a control measure of test retest was only partially successful due to sample attrition. Only sixty percent of the original sample could be retrieved in a follow-up procedure.

CONCLUSION

Keeping these limitations in mind, some tentative conclusions may be drawn. First, future research needs to incorporate more fully consumers' prior shopping experiences and store loyalties in studies of product satisfaction. Secondly, future research should focus not only on external sources of pre-purchase information search (i.e. from the environment) but also on internal sources (experiences stored and used in the memory) when attempting to relate search behaviour to consumer satisfaction. Finally, future research needs to examine more fully consumers' tendencies to respond favourably to survey questions dealing with satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Unlike laboratory experiments, where prior experiences can be manipulated to a degree (Bettman and Park 1980), field studies have to rely on self-reported data, which implies that future research will need to consider carefully what aspects of prior experiences need measuring, how these measures can be reliably and validly obtained, and when they should be introduced in the decision process (i.e. intercepts on the store floor, personal home interviews or mail questionnaires).

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Figure 1 shows the results in summary form with individual scores grouped in three index categories. The graph clearly shows no relationship between information search and product satisfaction. More information search did not result in more product satisfaction nor did less information result in less product satisfaction. We therefore have to reject hypothesis one.

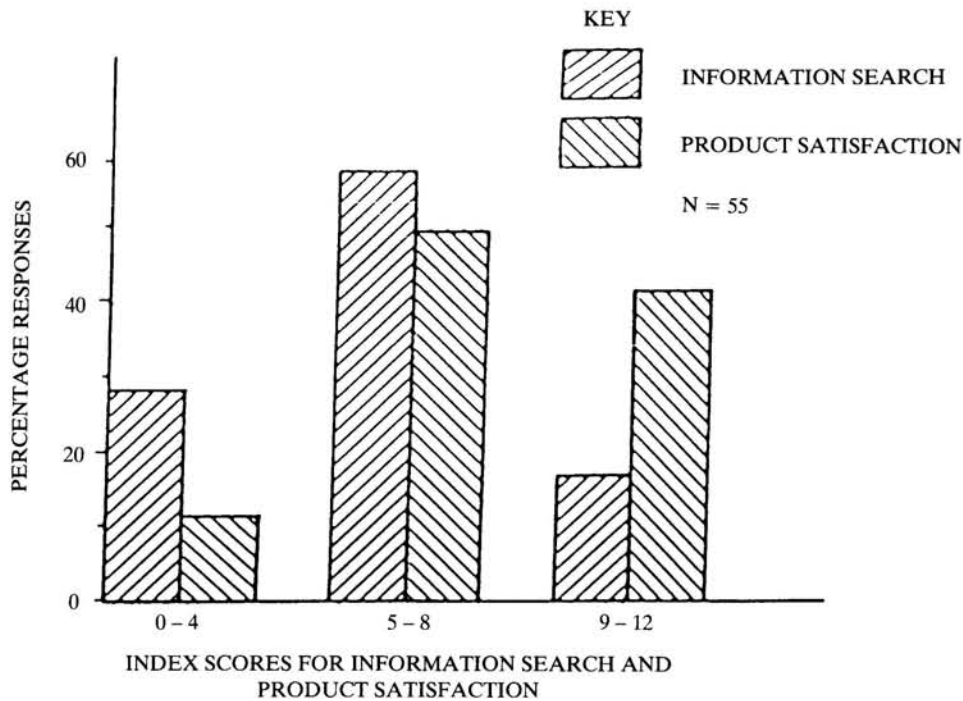


FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION SEARCH AND PRODUCT SATISFACTION SCORE BY RESPONDENTS

The second hypothesis was supported. A positive correlation of $r = .39$ ($p < .01$) was obtained between previous store satisfaction and product satisfaction scores. Table 2 shows that eighty percent or more respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with previous shopping experiences and products bought at the store (i.e. they were either pleased or mostly satisfied).

Product attributes mainly responsible for the high degree of product satisfaction were performance and reliability. Store attributes which cause satisfactory shopping experiences were mainly availability and selection of merchandise (refer to tables 1(a) and (b)).

**TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE RESPONSES AT EACH SATISFACTION LEVEL
FOR PRODUCT AND PREVIOUS STORE EXPERIENCE**

Self reported levels of satisfaction	Product purchased	Previous shopping experience
Pleased	46	54
Mostly satisfied	38	26
Mixed	6	16
Mostly dissatisfied	8	4
Unhappy	2	0
Total (N = 55)	100%	100%

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