

Reconceptualising the Consumer Journey in the Digital Age – An Exploratory Study of the United Kingdom Retail Sector

This extended conceptual abstract which describes research that is still in progress provides an analysis of the evolving factors that influence buyer behaviour in the vitally important retail sector. The research originated as a consultancy project concerned with buyer behaviour undertaken on behalf of a specialist Pay Per Click advertising agency in a UK university business school/commercial sector collaboration which then evolved into a research project in its own right.

Group M, which is the global media buying organ of WPP (the world's largest communications services company), forecasts that online advertising spend in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2015 will be over £8 billion. Given that total advertising spend in the UK alone is expected to be £15.7 billion in 2015 this means that the UK is set to become the first country in the world where more than 50% of advertising expenditure will be on digital media (Gray, 2015).

The conceptual nature of the literature on the buyer decision-making process appears to lag behind these developments in digital marketing. The current literature (including many highly regarded undergraduate textbooks on marketing) extol a broadly similar model which is variously referred to as the 'buyer decision process', 'the consumer decision-making process', 'the simple buying model', 'the consumer proposition acquisition process' or 'the sales or conversion funnel model'. Ready examples of these are found in, for example, Kotler et al's (2012) *Principles of Marketing*, Fahy and Jobber's (2012) *Foundations of Marketing*, Jobber and Ellis-Chadwick's (2013) *Principles and Practice of Marketing*, McNeil, Lamb and Hair's (2011) *Introduction to Marketing*, Bains, Fill and Page's (2011) *Marketing* and Charlesworth's (2015) *Digital Marketing*. In all of these texts, the model that is presented is essentially linear in nature, although sometimes it is expressed horizontally, sometimes vertically and occasionally in other texts it is illustrated as a step-by-step process. The stages in the model are generally termed, for example, as 'need recognition', 'information search', 'evaluation of alternatives' and 'purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour'. According to Charlesworth (2015), the classic sales or conversion funnel model (Figure 1) and its variants all derive from the AIDA concept (Awareness, Interest, Desire,

Action). This model was developed in the latter decade of the nineteenth century and popularised by E.K. Strong in his book ‘The Psychology of Selling’ which was published in 1925 (Charlesworth, 2015). In the digital age, the currency of such models is open to question.

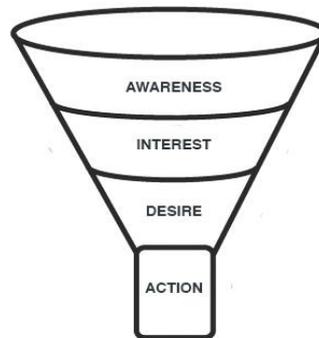


Figure 1 The basic sales funnel (after Charlesworth, 2015)

Moreover, the contemporary age is characterised by ‘Digital Darwinism’ which is a term that apparently first appeared in the title of a book by Schwartz (1999). The futurist, Brian Solis, points to the rapacious exponential obsolescence and growth of technological capabilities and he describes Digital Darwinism as “the phenomenon where technology and society evolve faster than an organization can adapt” (Solis, 2014). As a result of the rise of the digital age and an ever-widening gap between technology, business resources and capabilities we are now seeing a shifting paradigm in the field of consumer behaviour, specifically with regards to the consumer decision-making process.

The complexity of the consumer decision-making journey and the difficulty that is posed when attempting to map it has created challenges for marketers. In particular there is a growing need to gain insight into the behavioural processes of potential consumers in order that meaningful interventions can be made at key stages in the decision-making process. A number of authors have highlighted the changes that digital marketing has brought and Edelman (2010) has made a valuable early contribution in proposing a new consumer decision journey which moves away from the linear approach. Many of the UK’s most successful retailers e.g. Topshop, John Lewis and Marks and Spencer have found a multi-channel approach to be most effective wherein customers can evaluate and purchase goods either online or in-store through the use of different channels or by using a combination of channels at different points in the process.

The research responds to these issues by seeking to reconceptualise and remodel the evolving notion of the customer decision making journey which, in turn generates a model that can be subjected to further extensive empirical testing of its adaptive applicability to the online retail sector. Grounded against the lacunae identified in the literature, the research methodology was based around a case study approach and it also included semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2003; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti and McKinney, 2011). As the research develops it will include more semi-structured interviews together with elements of participant observation (Waddington, 2004).

The research used a qualitative methodological approach (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) to generate a new model of the customer decision making journey - Customer Journey Model (CJM) - which responds to the issues, factors and timeliness identified in the literature and the case context (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The emergent model represents a customer journey that may be subject to multi-faceted online and offline stimuli. It is intended that the CJM for the digital age will provide retailers with a better understanding of the B2C customer decision-making process than traditional linear models can provide. Given this greater understanding retailers may be able to refine and personalise their online offerings to anticipate the needs of individual consumers. It is further hoped that this enhanced understanding will enable retailers to take steps that could result in improved profitability through a better understanding of customer needs. The research will therefore be of primary interest to marketers, online retailers and academics.

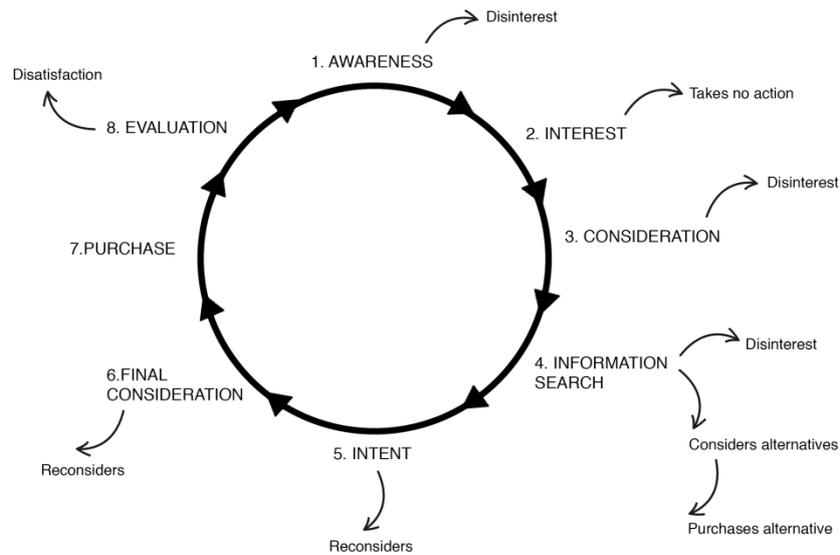


Figure 2 Customer journey model for the digital age (Tamsin Scott, 2015)

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