

Help your Customers buy from you!

by Bruce A. Love

One of the primary goals of business is to sell. Understanding the customer and influencing their buying decisions is key to accomplishing this objective. While consumer buying behavior is a very complex process influenced by individual, psychological, social, and cultural factors, having a basic understanding of the consumer decision making process can have positive results for your bottom line.

Consumer decision-making can be viewed as a 5-step process. As a business owner, you will want to affect this process at every step along the way to encourage sales. The process begins with the recognition of an unfulfilled “need.” While marketers cannot create consumer needs, they can help customers recognize that certain needs exist. For example, an advertisement (newspaper, radio, TV, or other) can trigger a “sudden awareness” that that bothersome bathroom drip, if left unattended, will cost thousands in water damage if not taken care of properly. An advertisement issued by a plumbing contractor can create a sense of urgency to have the problem (need) dealt with quickly and professionally.

Once a need is recognized, consumers begin to search for alternatives that will address their needs. While consumers may draw from prior experiences for alternatives, additional information may be sought. In the case of the drip, homeowners may seek advice from knowledgeable neighbors, visit local home improvement stores, or start searching the yellow pages. Many businesses place ads in phone books for the purpose of being placed on the short list of considered alternatives. In theory, the bigger the ad, the more successful and competent the business will appear to shoppers, and the more likely they are to be chosen.

Consumers next evaluate each option against specific needs and constraints. These criteria may include price limitations, style preferences, desired features, etc. Companies can make this information available in printed literature, or place such information on company web pages.

Knowledgeable sales people can also facilitate information dissemination. Service-oriented businesses sometimes offer free consultations. They recognize that consumers want to evaluate alternatives and know that to be considered, they must be easily and affordably accessible for evaluation. By making information clear, convenient, and affordable, it is possible to move the customer quickly to step 4.

Step 4 is the actual purchase decision. At this point, the consumer is ready to buy, but sometimes needs encouragement to do so. The key to positively affecting the consumer at this stage is to make the purchase an easy and pleasant experience. For some retail businesses, music, scents, and store layout can play important roles in making shopping an enjoyable experience. Short checkout lines and knowledgeable, competent, courteous, unobtrusive sales personnel can also make a more pleasant environment.

When the sale is complete, the role of the business owner is not done. Friendly return policies and warranties can help cement the sale in step four, but it is during the final post purchase step that these policies can provide assurances to the consumer that they made the right choice by buying from you. This is important for future sales and encouraging positive word-of-mouth testimonials from your customers. Post purchase follow-ups are especially important for high-priced products and services. After such purchases, consumers often go through a period of uncertainty as to whether they made a wise decision. Some sales people will follow-up on a large sale with a call, a card, or even a small gift.

By understanding the basics of consumer buying behavior, you will be able to apply various marketing tools for very strategic purposes at every step during the consumer’s decision-making process. This will help consumers arrive at the “right” decision – buying from you!

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