

From consumerism to citizenship: a journey of involvement

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Introduction

The level of interest in sustainability, amongst the general public and within the media, is growing week by week, giving rise to initiatives from numerous stakeholders, public and private, to inform, educate and facilitate behaviour change at the level of individual households – customers and final consumers. In this paper we argue that in order to achieve this behavioural change, the ‘sustainable shopper’ must be targeted in a meaningful and relevant manner and their motivations for purchasing more or less sustainable foods be thoroughly understood in order to maintain the momentum that govt and industry have created in shifting the balance in our lifestyles from consumerism to citizenship. Different groups of shoppers behave in different ways and for different reasons, which has important implications for policy makers, NGOs, food manufacturers and retailers seeking to stimulate a change in purchasing behaviour towards more sustainable foods. In exploring the journey which the sustainable shopper makes, from consumer to citizen, we highlight the importance of ‘involvement’ - of the individual and in the product – in shaping the marketing, merchandising and communication strategies to speed up the journey and ensure more people arrive at the desired destination.

Profiling the ‘sustainable consumer’

The multidisciplinary nature and wealth of literature concerning the topic of sustainable consumption gives testament to its importance and relevance to a wide range of stakeholders. However, in assessing the drivers and barriers towards sustainable consumption, the academic literature focuses almost exclusively on the profiling of the sustainable consumer, exploring a range of factors - psychological (Shrum, McCarty et al. 1995; Arkesteijn and Oerlemans 2005, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006, 2008; Hoogland, de Boer et al. 2007; Thøgersen and Ölander 2002; de Boer, Hoogland et al. 2007), Magnusson, Arvola et al. 2003), cultural (Chan, 2001), socio-psychological (Schwepker and Cornwall 1991), demographic (Robinson and Smith 2002) – but providing inconclusive evidence!

There is some agreement regarding the relative importance of social/psychological variables and the lack of unimportance of demographic factors in profiling the sustainable consumer. Yet the most important conclusion that one draws from the extant literature is that sustainable consumers are extremely heterogeneous and cannot be targeted with blanket communication strategies (Roberts, 1996). As Vermeir and Verbeke (2008) put it:

“Consumer markets are heterogeneous, and developing a strategy to reach all consumers at the same time is a hopeless task. Consumers are clearly not a homogenous group, and raising their awareness of the issues involved within food production needs to be targeted accordingly.”

Peattie (2001) suggests that instead of attempting to categorise and understand the sustainable consumer the focus should switch to gaining a better understanding of the purchase decision, which he argues results from the trade off shoppers make between the level of compromise (e.g. price, convenience, taste) and the level of confidence in the sustainability credentials of products positioned as more or less sustainable. Peattie argues that consumers have different reasons for purchasing sustainable foods and that understanding how, why and when these change and/or differ between different consumer segments is critical if we are to achieve more effective behaviour change where it matters most – at the point of purchase.

The role of Involvement

Involvement is defined as being an 'internal state variable that indicates the amount of arousal, interest or drive evoked by a particular stimulus or situation' (Mitchell 1981). As consumers become increasingly interested in and concerned about the sustainability of the food they purchase, they become more involved in the food purchasing decision-making process and are therefore more likely to change the basis (e.g. time taken and information sought) on which they make purchase decisions. Understanding the level and nature of involvement in the purchase decision is therefore crucial if we are to identify what constitutes appropriate information and appropriate communication formats for those consumers who are already on the journey towards citizenship as well as those who have yet to determine what this journey entails, let alone where it will end in terms of the products they purchase.

The relationship between information search and consumer involvement has been studied previously (see, for example, Beatty & Smith, 1997) but not in the context of food and, specifically, not in the context of supermarket purchasing behaviour with respect to sustainable foods. Historically, food has been regarded by academic researchers as a low involvement product category, but the growing importance of credence attributes (e.g. safety, provenance, welfare, ethics, method of production) has given rise to much higher levels of involvement, the implications of which, in terms of fostering more sustainable food purchasing behaviour, have received inadequate consideration.

There are three main categories of involvement:

Product involvement, which refers to the attributes of individual products and the importance consumers attach thereto. Thus, complex foods (e.g. organic, fair trade, highly processed, occasional purchases), with multiple attributes will generally be regarded as being associated with higher levels of involvement than simple products (e.g. staple foods and commodities purchased routinely). Sustainability is a complex issue and, as such, sustainable foods may be classified as high involvement, appealing primarily (if not exclusively) to those people with an interest in sustainability in general and sustainable foods in particular.

Consumer involvement, which refers to the fact that more involved individuals will search for more information, rely on more sources, consider more attributes and have more advanced information processing than less involved consumers. For Beharrell and Denison (1995), consumer involvement is an expressed interest, concern or, more broadly, feelings that an individual has regarding an issue, a product, a brand or even a category. Engel and Blackwell (1982) present a dichotomous categorisation of consumers as being either highly involved or not involved at all. However, this dichotomous view fails to recognise that a) the level of individual involvement may vary across food categories (e.g. a young mother may be more involved in the purchase of baby food than in the purchase of staple items, such as milk and bread) and for different meal occasions (e.g. a lunchtime snack purchase is likely to evoke lower levels of involvement than shopping for a dinner party). Arguably, the majority of consumers feel involved, to varying degrees and at various times but are neither pure citizens (thinking always of the implications of their purchase decisions on the welfare of others) nor pure consumers (thinking exclusively of their individual needs and wants, irrespective of the implications for social welfare).

Purchase involvement, which is explained by the fact that for some food purchases the importance attached to situational factors (e.g. merchandising, availability, point of sale material, promotions) prevail, resulting in the purchase being triggered at the point of purchase but interest decreasing rapidly after purchase. Unlike consumer involvement, purchase involvement is regarded as a continuum, with some situations (e.g. top-up shopping or individual snack purchase) being associated with low levels of involvement and others (e.g. shopping for special occasions or for people with medical or sensitive conditions) being associated with high levels of involvement.

These three categories of involvement are not independent. Indeed, some authors argue that consumer involvement is highly dependent upon the product category and situational factors, particularly with respect to food (Marshall and Bell 2004). Moreover, the impact of involvement on purchase decisions may be direct (moderating) or indirect (mediating). For example, low

involvement products and low involvement shopping missions will, by themselves (ie directly) be associated with reduced information search and lower levels of risk avoidance – behaviour change with respect to these products/situations need to be intrinsic (ie through changes to product formulations, packaging, sourcing) and not (extrinsically) dependent upon consumer choice. In contrast, highly involved shoppers (e.g. young mothers or people with allergies) will tend to take more time when shopping, process more information from various sources (pre, during and post purchase) and the probability of this will increase with high involvement products, where the perceived risks (e.g. safety, performance) are greater – behaviour change for these people may well be triggered by point of sale material, on pack information and a wide range of media activity designed to raise awareness and prompt consideration of alternatives. However, the impact of involvement in this case is as a mediator, as it is the result of the mother's care for the health of her children. In these circumstances, understanding the drivers of involvement are critical in the design of marketing, merchandising and public information strategies to affect behaviour change.

But what about consumers who are not involved (for whom food is merely a fuel) and products/shopping missions associated with low levels of involvement (which account for a substantial proportion of the food we buy)? How does involvement theory help us to overcome engage with these shoppers, more regularly and/or across a wider range of products? This is the real challenge for governments industry and NGOs and demands more innovation in the way we position sustainable foods and engage with this most challenging group of consumers.

Making the transition

The current interest in sustainability and the development of initiatives to raise public awareness of climate change and stimulate behaviour change at an individual (household) level is predominantly government led, with the UK Government, arguably, leading the charge. This is admirable, as it demonstrates government recognition that the reason for the mess in which we now find ourselves is the result of market failure, driven as it is by consumer wants rather than consumer needs. However, the downside is that 'nanny state', in yielding it's big bureaucratic stick at the masses, the bulk of whom are in denial, ignorant or acutely aware of the other 'sinners' - many of whom have bigger (corporate) budgets to exact change in their culture, processes and everyday practices - who have yet to seek 'repentance', is falling into the trap of treating individuals (purchasers and consumers) as homogenous in their need for information and intention to purchase and motivation for behaviour.

The reality, we know, is that heterogeneity rules and one size rarely fits all. Moreover, attacking individuals for being excessively consumer (self) orientated and unaware of (or worst still uncaring about) civil society and the implications of individual actions for social welfare is likely to prove ineffective in converting the masses, who are fundamentally uninvolved in food purchasing and consumption, such is the (lack of) food culture in so many so called 'developed economies'.

This current state is illustrated in figure 1, with the masses – consumers – situated in the bottom left quadrant, in which the staple foods and commodities proliferate the shopping baskets, and the converted – citizens – situated in the top right quadrant, in which the credence goods (high product and purchase involvement) associated with sustainable production are to be found.

The top left quadrant is where you find consumers who are difficult to 'convert' to the sustainability cause due to their loyalty (high product involvement) to existing brands and habitual (low purchase involvement) shopping patterns.

The bottom right quadrant are the promiscuous shoppers who demonstrate little brand loyalty but relish the weekly challenge of beating the budget and hunting down the promotions. For these shoppers the radar is finely tuned to detect just one thing – BOGOF!

Faced with this heterogeneous array of shoppers, governments around the world appear hell bent on taking the masses, dragging and screaming from the ghetto (bottom left) directly to the promised land (top right) through a largely generic process of awareness raising, education and guilt creation. Those most likely to respond to such stimuli are already there – the masses have other motives for behaviour and intentions to purchase, many of which are merely reinforced when 'nanny state' wields the big stick.

Figure 1 – The current state of involvement



If there is any merit in focusing on involvement as a means for understanding better the process of effective and timely behaviour change (can we wait for future generations to see the light?) then it must be that it provides a rationale for much greater segmentation of the target market (shoppers in all four quadrants have very different wants, motives and intentions) and, correspondingly, much greater differentiation in the strategies used to foster behaviour change across the different groups.

Figure 2 illustrates the alternative routes to the 'promised land' that exist for those with a latent desire to behave more citizenly but are not sure how and may be a little reluctant to change their habitual purchasing behaviour.

Quite simply, rather than seeking to take people down the direct path from consumerisms to citizenship, this engagement model promotes working within existing frames of reference (levels of involvement) and existing mechanisms that people recognize, are familiar with and respond to. So, why not promote sustainable products by placing them at the end of an aisle and offering two for the price of one – the promotion seekers will at least spot them, some of them will fail to resist and a few will come back for more, even when they are not promoted as they learn a new behaviour for themselves. Likewise, working with existing brand owners, new products can be developed with sustainable attributes and others modified so that the sustainable option is introduced via a known and trusted language, which over time creates a habitual citizen out of a compulsive shopper.

Figure 2 - Alternative transition routes



Conclusions

The complexity of involvement as a theoretical construct and its impact on purchasing behaviour highlights the futility of consumer profiling in isolation – the observed heterogeneity of food purchasing behaviour is the result of a combination of factors relating to product attributes, personal characteristics and situational variables.

We know that people respond differently to different messages communicated in different ways. Simply telling people to behave more like citizens and less like consumers in order to ‘save the planet’ is unlikely to have the desired effect. What is required is an alignment of incentives – the right products, aimed at the right people and presented (marketed and merchandised) appropriately. Just as marketers relish the prospect of servicing a fragmented market with an array of niche products and services, so Governments, NGOs and industry leaders with a CSR mission worthy of the name should adopt a more holistic (integrated), differentiated and targeted approach to the challenge of behaviour change and sustainable consumption.

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