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Antecedents to Electronic Commerce

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Abstract

Uses and gratifications theory has proven useful in past examinations of new media innovations and customer adoptions and usage patterns, and this study builds from that research tradition to provide an understanding of consumer motivations for commercial Web site access and use. Preliminary results indicate that individuals are most motivated to access and use a site by the informational content the site provides as opposed to the experiential processes of browsing which might be enhanced or delivered through the site.

Introduction

This research is based on an in-depth review of Uses and Gratifications theory and recent marketing applications which involve the study of motivations for commercial Internet use, as well as on results of on-line research conducted with the well-known HotWired Internet site. The key theme of the study is the determination of specific motivations for Web site use by consumers. For purposes of familiarization and background, a brief literature review is presented, followed by a discussion of the HotWired study. The article is concluded with a discussion of implications for electronic commerce.

The New Information Order

As we enter the information age, it will be important to revise our understanding of consumer motivations for shopping and media use. New commercial opportunities have presented themselves and are just being explored in the form of on-line retailing. Concurrently, the Internet in the particular form of the World Wide Web represents a new and revolutionary promotional medium, and while some authors suggest this new medium will behave in ways very similarly to other "mass" media (e.g., Peterson et al. 1997), others suggest that we should engage in fresh investigations of consumer motivations for Internet use based on the paradigm that was used to successfully understand the motivations for use of the significant media innovations of the past (Eighmey 1997b; McDonald 1997; Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996).

This research paradigm is known as Uses and Gratifications, and is based not on media type, but rather on understanding user benefits accrued and sought from media. One of the earliest theorists of the U&G approach, Klapper (1963), focuses on what people *do with* the mass media. Individual media choices are motivated by particular self-defined uses and goals (Lin 1977), which is an important aspect of motivations for commercial Web site use when considering the Internet.

The information order is changing, with the flow of information reversing from marketer-consumer to consumer-marketer (Sheth 1992); where companies in the past have traditionally attracted customers by sending general promotional messages via broad-reach media such as television and popular magazines, customers and audience members can now use the Web to directly access promotional and product information from the companies in which they are interested. Thus, the Web site is becoming the ultimate medium for market segmentation at the individual consumer level (Drèze and Zufryden 1997). The implication of a reversed and individualized flow of market segmentation is that businesses will have to understand the motivations that bring consumers *to them,* lest they fail to attract a consumer base for purposes of electronic commerce.

The HotWired On-Line Study

This study presents not only emerging marketing and information systems perspectives on Web use motivations, but will also present a demonstration of the application of Uses and Gratifications perspectives to the determination of consumer Web use motivations. With the cooperation of the publishers of Wired Magazine and their commercial Web site, HotWired, we engaged in a series of on-line focus groups to elicit the trait terms that site users felt were descriptive of the benefits derived from use of the Internet resource. Ninety-eight site users participated in the focus group activity, providing a rich source of data for beginning the process of assessing user motivations on the Internet.

Four questions were presented through HotWired as stimuli for consumer consideration, and trait terms elicited in the consumer responses to the questions were categorized for analysis. The questions were:

1) What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about what you enjoy most about accessing the Web?
2) What other words describe what you enjoy about interacting with the Web?
3) Using single, easy-to-understand terms, what do you use the Web for?
4) What on-line activities are most important to you?

Responses were analyzed for frequency of response, and were also qualitatively analyzed in a categorization scheme representing content gratifications (what's on the site -- the product or deliverable of much E-commerce) and process gratifications (the experience of using the site) as discussed by Cutler and Danowski (1980) and Stafford and Stafford (1998). In results, as shown in the

Table, by far the most commonly stated use and gratification for the World Wide Web is *information.* This is a clear indication of the importance this information-age commodity plays in consumer use of the Web. Commercial Web enterprises are likely to prosper to the extent that they are information rich or information related.

Information was also the leading response to the follow-up probe (the second question), and for this question, the next most frequent item was "access." In short, information seems to emerge as the clear response with regard to uses of and gratifications from the World Wide Web – serving as the first, most important quality to come to mind for a significant fraction of respondents, and then serving as the second or third items that came to mind for a great deal of those who failed to note it first.

The third question, which probed for specific uses and allowed for unlimited responses also confirmed the ascendancy of information as a primary use and gratification;   the second most common response was the related term "research," followed by "news," "software" and "entertainment." Question four, which probed the importance of specific Web uses, identified e-mail as the most important activity to respondents. News and information were also frequently mentioned in response to this question.

For services marketers, it seems clear that information products such as news, entertainment, software, and intelligence are likely to be quite successful on Web-based sales sites, based on their synergy with existing consumer uses and gratifications for Web use. For product marketers, it appears that product sales will succeed or fail to the extent that associated commercial Web sites can supply the rich product information desired by potential consumers.

Discussion

This article serves the specific purpose of discussing motivations for Web-site use, and reports the results of a study that develops descriptive terms indicative of the qualities users find most important and compelling in Web sites. These results are the basis for beginning an Internet-specific analyses of gratification and usage dimensions in accordance with accepted methodology (e.g., Bantz 1982; Levy and Windahl 1984), and will form

an important contribution to the evolving stream of research and knowledge on Web use motivations precisely because the motivational scheme developed here come from Web users responding to questions about Web use.

It seems, based on the HotWired study, that marketers who wish to use the Web as a commercial vehicle must create informative sites with drawing power. The results here come from consumer-driven elicitation processes; hence, "information," though a key response, remains a rather vague term. Actual information can include many types of data (e.g., stock quotes, addresses, product information, etc.), there is no way to indicate from the current results how often individuals are actually seeking product information, as opposed to other forms of information.

However, these results can lead to the formation of provocative working hypotheses for researchers and practitioners who seek to continue building an understanding of Web user motivations which lead to patronage activity.

The ascendancy of information as a primary Web user gratification in this study seems to be mildly in conflict with the viewpoint of Hoffman and Novak (1996), who posit that *flow*, or the act of browsing the Web, is gratifying, in and of itself. That is, while there are certainly process gratifications identified in this exploratory study, they do not appear to provide the *key* uses and gratifications sought by Web users; rather content gratifications, such as information, seem to be the more desired motivations.

The most important consideration appears to be not why users are logged onto the Internet, or even why they navigate it, but what might cause them to either seek out or, once found, spend commercially-productive time with *a specific site*. Thus, the key contribution of this study lies not in explaining the motivations that lead individuals to use computers attached to the Internet, but the specific motivations that cause users to attend to specific commercial messages and sales offers at single, specific Internet sites.

References available upon request

*Q1: What is the first word that comes to mind when you think about what you enjoy most about accessing the Web?
*Q2 : What other words describe what you enjoy about interacting with the Web?
*Q3 : Using single, easy-to-understand terms, what do you use the Web for?
*Q4: What on-line activities are most important to you?
   **In addition, 10 items were mentioned 3 times, 27 items were mentioned twice, and 97 items were mentioned once.

Table - Frequency of Responses in HotWired Study**

Response	Q1*	Q2*	Q3*	Q4*	Total	P/C
			Question			
Information	29	31	40	14	114	C
Email	3	2	15	29	49	C
Research	1	4	31	9	45	C
News	0	5	20	16	41	C
Software	0	4	18	9	31	C
Chatting	2	4	7	11	24	P
Entertainment	0	6	18	0	24	P
Communication	1	8	12	2	23	C
Fun	4	8	8	0	20	P
Access	3	11	2	1	17	P
Work	0	0	13	2	15	C
People	0	6	7	0	13	C
Web Sites	0	2	4	6	12	C
Speed	6	6	0	0	12	C
Updates	0	0	8	4	12	C
Freedom	4	4	0	3	11	P
Interaction	2	7	1	1	11	P
Games	1	1	6	3	11	C
Knowledge	1	4	6	0	11	C
Surfing	0	1	6	4	11	P
New	3	5	0	2	10	P
News Groups	0	0	0	9	9	C
Technology	1	5	2	1	9	P
Resources	1	2	5	1	9	C
Education	0	2	6	0	8	C
Interesting	2	5	1	0	8	P
Easy	2	6	0	0	8	P
Stocks	0	1	4	2	7	C
Answers	0	1	4	2	7	C
Browsing	1	1	1	3	6	P
Variety	2	4	0	0	6	P
Learning	1	3	2	0	6	C
Weather	0	0	3	3	6	C
Progressive	0	5	0	0	5	P
Friends	0	1	3	1	5	C
Shopping	0	0	4	1	5	P
Search Engines	0	0	0	5	5	P
Relaxing	0	1	2	1	4	P
Sports	0	1	2	1	4	C
Ideas	0	3	1	0	4	C
Money	0	1	3	0	4	C
Searching	0	1	0	3	4	P
Current	0	1	2	1	4	C
Homework	0	0	3	1	4	C
Government	0	0	4	0	4	C