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Impact of Personal Beliefs in Business-to-Business Buyer Decisions

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Contribution Acknowledgement – All authors contributed equally. Funds for list purchases and incentives were provided by the Blue Bird Corporation and by a grant from the J. Whitney Bunting College of Business at Georgia College.

ABSTRACT

For school transportation buyers, who have depended on diesel for decades, gaining knowledge of complex and dynamic information is complicated by the growing number of alternative fuel vehicles. As with a number of business purchases, school bus acquisitions represent a major expense for school districts. It a multi-faceted decision and is typically made by a group of influencers who weigh the various alternatives and have extensive input in the purchase process. As would be expected from a process of this nature there are many elements that are considered such as product cost, safety, reliability, maintenance costs, and anticipated fuel expenditures. As with many B2B decisions the general assumption, both by the bus companies and the school districts, is that while each district has different goals, price points, and expectations, these purchases follow a basic model of economic utility. The purchase that is expected is the one in which utility is maximized and cost is minimized. However, psychological ownership implications have the potential to help practitioners in understanding and predicting the important dimensions of customer value in the business-to-business context that influence the purchase decision. Therefore, a survey study was conducted that examined the importance of a variety of elements of the purchase decision with a clear sub-focus on sustainability as well as some demographic and psychographic questions. Individuals listed in two industry databases were contacted with an invitation to take the survey. Of those individuals 498 USA and Canadian school bus decision-makers and influencers responded. The primary relationship that was of interest was whether personal interest in sustainability and alternative fuel vehicles altered perceptions or behavior in the business decisions of the respondents (H_1 : Owners of hybrid vehicles will be more likely to purchase alternative fuel buses.) The hypothesis was supported. An implication for academicians from the study is that for Business-to-Business (B2B) purchasing individual perspectives of those carrying out policies have a significant influence on purchase decisions. Furthermore, from the study it can be seen that individuals in the buying center add value to economic theory of rational choice by bringing their personal knowledge to the buying center decision. While this has been accepted as a major aspect of individual decision

making, it implies a much stronger weight to the psychological aspects of purchase in B2B decision than is currently accepted in modeling B2B buyer behavior. For practitioners, this study shows that it is very important for salespersons to know the personal driving habits of the buyers in a group as their behavior weighs on their interpretation of the benefits of other alternative fuel products in B2B setting. Alternately, if an influencer is not an alternative fuel owner then it will be much more difficult to make the argument for conversion to an alternative fuel bus fleet. In summation, because buying centers are made up of people with varying roles, previous knowledge from personal experience could impact final decisions. This knowledge of a gap and the personal experience with similar products provide just the opportunity needed to adjust the marketing mix needed to make the sale.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Doreen Sams is a tenured full professor of marketing and the Mentored Undergraduate Research and Creative Endeavor Faculty (MURACE) Coordinator at Georgia College and State University. She has taught at Georgia College since 2005. She is a member of the editorial review board of the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practices and reviews articles and presentations for several other journals and conferences. She has published a book chapter and articles in several academic journals related to sustainability, as well as founding the GC Shades of Green annual events. She earned her doctorate from the University of South Florida.

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Ron Smith is a lecturer of marketing at Georgia College and State University. His teaching experience following a lengthy corporate marketing career includes: Principles of Marketing, Sports Marketing, Retailing and Services Marketing. Prior to coming to Georgia College, Ron was Director of Marketing for Blue Bird Corporation where he was heavily involved in research and product development in the United States and Canada market where he championed the first OEM propane powered alternative fueled Green Bus, and was responsible for coordinating integrated marketing communications strategies. Additional practitioner experience included Sika Corporation, Plastics Research Corporation, American Blind and Wallpaper, Commercial Building Products, The Stanley Works, and General Motors Research. Ron also honorably served in the U.S. Air Force and earned a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Lawrence Technological University.