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Edited by
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MEDIA GUIDING CONSUMERS ACROSS DIFFERENT STAGES OF THE PURCHASE PROCESS

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Abstract

The media landscape has changed tremendously since the dramatic increase in the media offer, the fragmentation of the audience, and the advent of the internet and other interactive media. In line with these transitions, the way consumers search and use information to guide their purchase decisions has changed as well. Consumers use the internet to buy products and to search for product information, for example through search engines, brand websites, applications on their mobile phones, and brand communities (Shankar and Hollinger 2007). Additionally, consumers' use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter exploded (Block and Schultz 2009), and these media are also used to form opinions about products and brands. As a result, using the right media mix becomes more and more critical (Rohm and Sultan 2004). Danaher and Rossiter (2011) even believe that selecting media "for marketing communications is one of today's most complex and pressing issues for marketing managers". Therefore, there is an urgent need for insight into the way consumers search and use for information across media and combinations of media that are claimed to have influenced their decision making. The current study aims at answering the following research question: Which media are used, in what stage of the purchase process, for what type of products, and by what type of consumers?

Earlier attempts to give insight into consumers' search for and use of information across media in the purchase process such as project Apollo, Touch Points or the Simultaneous Media Usage Study (SIMM) acknowledged the value of single source data (Gritten 2007). However, these attempts are very complex to administer, suffer from respondent burden, focus on purchases in general and do not distinguish between the stages of the purchase process.

We believe that it is useful for media planners and advertisers to know which media are used in various phases of the consumer decision making process. This information can guide media planners and advertisers when deciding which messages to place in which media. Therefore, we believe that the five phases of the purchase process should play an important role in our questionnaire. Besides, we also believe that our questionnaire should not focus on purchases in general, but should focus on specific purchases, because we believe consumers are unable to correctly report their information search behavior for purchases in general.

A total of 347 respondents filled in an online questionnaire (46.9 % female, mean age 45.46, SD = 18.32). After weighing the sample was representative for the Dutch population of 16 years and older considering age, sex and education. Fieldwork was conducted by TNS NIPO and took place in July 2011.

The questionnaire started with asking the respondent to indicate which product they purchased recently (last 3 months for high involvement products or the last 30 days for low involvement products). Participants were shown two lists, one list with 22 high involvement products, and one list with 23 low involvement products. Then, one of the recently bought products or services was randomly selected. Next, participants were explained that a purchase process usually has five phases, and that the questionnaire walked them through these five stages one by one. For each stage participants had to indicate which media and information sources had been important to them, and which medium had been most important.

Preliminary results of this small-scale application showed that media were most important in the stages of the purchase process before the actual purchase was made. Media that were most influential across the total purchase process were the Internet, TV and free door-to-door newspapers. Non-advertising media that were important were conventional shops and Word of Mouth. Consumers indicated that cinema, mail and outdoor advertising were least important in influencing their purchase decision. Only some small differences were found between the role of specific media in the various stages of the purchase process.

The results of this study also have some interesting implications for advertisers and media planners. By investigating media usage patterns in different phases of the purchase process, for different types of products, for different kinds of consumers, the current study offers insights that are helpful for practitioners in the current media landscape. Results can be used to guide the optimal choice of media for advertising campaigns of different types of products. For example, campaigns for high involvement products could best rely on Internet advertising,

and online stores, while WOM should also be stimulated. For low involvement products, consumers rely more on conventional stores and traditional media like television and door-to-door newspapers. Therefore, these media should play a central role in campaigns for low involvement products. The Internet was more important for men than for women which can be used when deciding on integrating online media in cross-media campaigns.

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