Public Abstract

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Title:CYNICAL CONSUMERS: DANGEROUS ENEMIES, LOYAL FRIENDS

Some consumers are fed up with what they see as selfish, deceptive and manipulative behavior from companies. Consumers are also angry about companies' self-centered disregard for the interests of others – their employees, the environment, geographic neighbors, and consumers themselves. This research studies consumer cynicism. Consumer cynicism is a perception that firms are willing to take advantage of consumers and others to get what they want, even to the point of deliberate dishonesty. Cynical consumers perceive a widespread problem with corruption in the marketplace, not just a few bad apples.

Many marketing experts believe that consumer cynicism is increasing, or at least becoming more visible. Cynical consumers are also becoming more powerful, in part due to the internet, which makes it easier for consumer activists to organize, communicate with each other, and to make public their grievances. For example, consumers can and do post negative reviews, publicize negative stories using blogs, chat rooms and forums, and even create web pages attacking companies. AdBusters and Commercial Alert, both major national anti-commercial organizations, have active and popular websites drawing thousands of visitors daily. This research demonstrated through statistical analysis of surveys that cynical consumers are likely to be consumer activists. They also tend to mock companies and the marketplace system and encourage others to join them.

Some cynical consumers express their frustration by actively working for change. Others express their anger at the corrupt system by withdrawing from the marketplace. Different people withdraw in different ways. Some consumers try to spend less and live simply. Others avoid impulse buys or advertising. Consumer rights advocates might characterize both the activism and the withdrawal behaviors as positive, proactive protests. But from business' point of view, cynical consumers could be seen as dangerous enemies.
But cynical consumers can also be very loyal to the few firms that they do trust. Because they see most firms as untrustworthy, trust is especially important to them. This research showed cynical consumers are more likely than the general population to act on the loyalty they feel for their favorite brands by paying a higher price and spreading good word-of-mouth to others.

The consumer cynicism concept initially came from interviews with ordinary consumers. In a state-of-the-art scale development procedure, this research did a series of studies to develop a questionnaire or scale that can be used to measure the level of a person's cynicism in future research by consumer groups, businesses or researchers. The main study discussed is a large-scale national survey of U.S. consumers.