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# Measuring and modelling brand attitudes

By Chuck Chakrapani

It is easy to forget that the product is at the very core of brand equity. It is the basic influence and the prime mover. We hear about the product from friends and other people. Advertising talks about the product. Producing and delivering a product that satisfies customer wants and needs is the primary purpose of a customer oriented firm. Successful marketing depends on this premise.

Obviously, a brand can be much more (or much less) than the product it represents. A number of variables, in addition to the product, such as pricing, and distribution channels contribute to the value of a brand. But in this article we will start with the core of a brand, the product.

How do consumers develop their opinions about the quality of a product? How do they form their attitudes toward a brand?

## Perceived quality

Every product has a purpose (or several purposes). An automobile gets you from point A to point B. A watch shows the time. Yet the main purpose of a product is not the same for all consumers. An automobile can also be a way of expressing one's personality. A watch can be jewellery. The main purpose of the same product can vary from consumer to consumer.

Perceived quality can be defined as the consumer's evaluation of how well a product or service performs in relation to its intended purpose. Service and quality is an overall assessment based on customer perceptions of:

1. the purposes of the product;
2. the importance a customer attaches to each purpose; and
3. how well a brand is perceived to perform each purpose.

Marketing researchers have long attempted to understand how consumers form opinions about perceived quality. Naturally, there can be no single answer for all products. For instance, Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml (1985) identified 10 dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer and tangibles. (They later reduced these to just five: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness.) Garvin (1987) identified seven dimensions: *Performance* (on primary product characteristics), *features* (secondary characteristics that complement the primary characteristics), *conformance* (to quality standards), *reliability* (consistency of performance), *durability* (expected economic life of the product), *serviceability* (easy maintenance) and *style and design* (aesthetics and utility). For a summary see Exhibit 1.

## Salient beliefs

No matter how many attributes or groups of attributes we use, we still have to assess how such attitudes contribute to the overall perception of quality. Psychologists suggest that because consumers' cognitive capacity is limited, only a few of these beliefs (attitudes) can be activated and consciously considered at any one time. These are referred to as *activated beliefs* or *salient beliefs*. Only the salient beliefs activated in a given context can be influential in the overall context.

**Exhibit 1****Factors related to perceived quality****1. Berry, Parasuraman & Zeithaml (1985)**

- reliability,
- responsiveness,
- competence,
- access,
- courtesy,
- communication,
- credibility,
- security,
- understanding the customer,
- tangibles.

**2. Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman (1989)**

- reliability,
- assurance,
- tangibles,
- empathy,
- responsiveness.

**3. Garvin (1987)**

- performance,
- features,
- conformance,
- reliability,
- durability,
- serviceability,
- style and design.

***Multiattribute Attitude Model***

In marketing research, a great deal of attention is focused on assessing how different beliefs contribute to a given attitude. These are referred to in marketing research literature as *multiattribute models*.

Of the many multiattribute models in existence, the *Fishbein model* (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975) is one of the most popular. The basis of the Fishbein model is that evaluations of salient beliefs cause overall attitude. Overall attitude therefore is a function of two factors: the strength of the salient attributes associated with a brand and the evaluation of those beliefs. Formally, the model can be stated as:

$$A_b = \sum b_i e_i$$

where,

$A_b$  = attitude towards a brand

$b_i$  = the strength of the belief

that the brand has attribute  $i$

$e_i$  = the evaluation of attribute  $i$

Sum = sum over all salient beliefs

This multiattribute attitude model integrates the process through which brand knowledge (perception) is

combined to form an overall evaluation or attitude.

The Fishbein model does not, however, claim that consumers actually perform the calculations to arrive at the strength of an attitude. The model is an idealization and is expected to approximate the strength of attitudes given a person's beliefs. It is not meant to describe the actual cognitive process of a consumer.

### ***Using the Fishbein model***

The Fishbein model has two components: *belief strength* of attribute  $i$  ( $b_i$ ) and *evaluation of a brand* of attribute  $i$  ( $e_i$ ).

#### **Exhibit 2**

##### **a. Measuring belief strength $b_i$**

*How likely is it that Mercedes Benz automobiles will have maximum safety features in all their models?*

Extremely likely 7 6 5 4 3 4 3 2 1 Extremely unlikely

##### **b. Measuring belief evaluation $e_i$**

*How important is it that an automobile manufacturer build in maximum safety features in all their models?*

Extremely important 7 6 5 4 3 4 3 2 1 Extremely unimportant

Belief strength is the perceived probability of association between a brand and the salient attributes. To measure belief strength, we may ask consumers to rate the probability of association between a brand and each of the salient beliefs. For sample questions that may be used to measure belief strength, see Exhibit 2a.

Consumers' past experience with a product or a brand influences their beliefs. Other sources such as advertising, and sales calls also influence consumers' beliefs. However, influences that are not based on experience tend to be weaker for most products. For instance, a consumer is more likely to believe that a "Big Mac tastes good" if he or she has actually tasted a Big Mac, rather than if the consumer had simply heard that it tastes good. For this reason, direct experience with a product tends to have greater impact on attitude towards a brand  $A_b$  (Dover & Olson 1977). It is for this reason that marketers try to induce experience with their brand through free samples and discount coupons.

How many salient attributes do we need to include in our model? Fishbein believes that there are likely a maximum of seven to nine salient beliefs about an attitude object. When it comes to brands we could reasonably expect that the number of salient beliefs would depend on the product. For low involvement products, the number of salient beliefs could be as low as one or two, while for high involvement (self-relevant) products it could be many more.

As noted earlier, associated with each salient belief is *belief evaluation* ( $e_i$ ). It is an measure of how favourably the consumers perceives a attribute. In research, we measure  $e_i$  by asking consumers to evaluate how they feel toward each salient belief. For sample questions that may be used to measure belief evaluation, see Exhibit 2b.

The belief evaluations are weights applied to the saliency of a belief. As such, given two beliefs of equal salience, the belief with a stronger  $e_i$  will contribute more to  $A_b$ .

### ***The nature of salient beliefs***

Consumers' evaluation of salient attitudes are not the same across different situations. For instance, decaffeinated coffee may be perceived favourably on most usage occasions. However, on consumption occasions where a consumer wants to be awake, decaffeinated coffee may carry negative weight.

Nor are consumer evaluations constant over time. Consumers may change their evaluation of how good or bad an attribute is when they learn about its other consequences. For instance, packaging that may have been looked upon favourably in the past may develop a negative connotation if it is perceived to be environmentally harmful.

### ***The use of salient beliefs***

The idea of saliency has very relevant implications for marketing a product. Air travellers may complain about airline food, but would they be more loyal to an airline if it served better food? Would customers who complain about price become loyal if the firm dropped the price? The answer is, as we may well guess, probably not.

There are quite a few variables on which products and brands may be evaluated, but many of them may simply not be salient.

Even when an attribute is salient, it may not be salient to everyone. On-time departure and arrival of flights may be much more salient to business travellers than to vacationers.

The points we've made so far are not just of theoretical interest. Many customer satisfaction questionnaires (which are in fact brand evaluations) contain a number of questions that deal with the extent of satisfaction with various aspects of service. Now if many of the attributes do not turn out to be salient, resources could be spent on improving aspects of service that do not contribute to Ab in any significant way.

Again, understanding that saliency of an attribute can vary from segment to segment will prevent the researcher from overlooking something important through too general an analysis. An attribute that may turn out to be non-salient at the global level may be salient to a small but highly profitable segment of consumers.

Although the model

$Ab = \sum b_{ie}$

is predictive in its structure, it is also used for *diagnostic purposes*. By analyzing the salient beliefs that give rise to attitudes towards different brands, marketers can examine how their strategies are working and fine tune them to improve their impact. For instance, unlike the 1980's, currently even affluent customers want value for their money and expect quality at a minimal incremental cost (Power et al., 1991). The saliency of this attribute across different product categories has resulted in revised marketing strategies - for example products and services like discount brokerage, no-frills banking, and pay-only-when-you-use mobile phones.

The *situational influence* of product usage is well-known. Consumption of soft-drinks, for example, may depend on the occasion, time of the day, and the weather. Wherever there is a situational influence, the salience of attributes will have to be related to the situation. (See Exhibit 3.)

### **Exhibit 3** **Salient beliefs**

#### **a. Nature of salient beliefs**

1. Variation over time
2. Variation across segments

#### **b. Uses of salient beliefs**

1. Prediction
2. Diagnostics
3. Situational factors

### ***Four brand attitude change strategies***

Building brand equity may also involve charting strategies to change consumers' attitudes towards our brand. There are four ways in which this can be achieved.

1. We can *add a new salient belief* with a positive ei. This is a common attitude change strategy. For instance, when Mac introduced its multicolour computer models, it added a new salient belief that *appearance* is a desirable feature of a computer.
2. We can *strengthen an existing positive belief*. This is a particularly good strategy when our brand is not competitive in many salient features. For instance, if our brand is not competitively priced, does not deliver any special benefits but is perceived to offer excellent after-sales service, we may emphasize this feature and strengthen it.
3. We can *improve the evaluative aspects of an existing strongly-held belief*. Suppose consumers believe that milk provides calcium. Milk marketers can associate more and more benefits to the consumption of calcium, thereby changing the evaluative aspects to favour our product (or brand).
4. We can *increase the salience of an existing belief*. Here our tactic is to convince the customer that the attribute is more self-relevant than it is generally assumed. A car manufacturer may emphasize their safety features and the benefits associated with them. This approach is aimed at enhancing the salience as well as the evaluation of this feature of our brand. (See Exhibit 4.)

#### **Exhibit 4**

#### **Brand attitude change strategies**

1. Add a salient belief
2. Strengthen an existing belief
3. Improve the evaluation of an existing belief
4. Increase the salience of a belief

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