

Selective Perception and Consumer Dissatisfaction  
(or . . . The Case of The Rabid Rabbits)

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ABSTRACT

Consumer dissatisfaction can exist at two sequential points in time - at the time of the initial unsatisfactory experience, and then at the time of receipt of a company's response to a complaint. One of the causes of this second type of dissatisfaction may involve the process of selective perception - particularly if strongly and emotionally held personal values are involved.

Introduction

As the area of Consumer Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior continues to emerge, a number of articles have been written which model the consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction process, which discuss measurement and design issues, and which consider the strategic issues with which a company should be concerned. (Hunt, 1977; Day, 1977; Day and Hunt, 1979).

The process itself includes stages of consumer behavior, beginning at an individual's recognition of need, continuing through actual experiences which create satisfaction or dissatisfaction (and may then generate complaining behavior), finishing with an individual's subsequent satisfaction/dissatisfaction or subsequent behavior that occurs as a result of a company's response to the complaining behavior.

The purpose of this paper is to support the notion that dissatisfaction may exist at two sequential points in time - first, at the time of the initial unsatisfactory experience ("primary" dissatisfaction), and then at the time of reaction to a company's response to a complaint ("second level" dissatisfaction). This paper will also suggest that one of the causes of this "second level" dissatisfaction may involve the process of selective perception, particularly if strongly and emotionally held personal values are involved. Finally, this paper will discuss the strategic implications of the effects of such selective perception.

Background

The case situation which will be discussed in this paper involved a cosmetics company which was alleged in a newspaper article to be doing tormenting, needless experiments on animals such as rabbits, hamsters, and guinea pigs. The experiments, which actually were done by the companies in order to determine the premarket safety of their cosmetics and toiletries, had been referred to in the article as unnecessary, according to a FDA spokesman. The article, which was illustrated by an endearing picture of bunnies, and a subtitle referring to the rupturing of internal organs (see Exhibit 1), identified Revlon, Avon, Gillette, and Germaine Montell as the companies doing these experiments.

While most companies in the cosmetic, toiletry and fragrance industry do indeed conduct animal research, one of the companies mentioned above specifically does not do such research. In fact, the president and chairman of that company are personally

opposed to such research. That company, therefore, prepared a reply to any consumers who complained that started as follows:

"Thank you for your letter; I completely understand your feelings. My own feelings were very similar when I read this wildly inaccurate and unfair article.

We never torture animals. We have never killed or even hurt a single one. We do not do the notorious LD 50 test." (Company Files)

The company felt that its response was direct and forthright and, as such, would be favorably received by the individuals who had complained.

A study was then done among 301 of the subjects who had complained to that company about its use of animal experimentation. These complainers had received the letter shown above. A total of 76 responses to the study were received.

The original purpose of the study was to determine the degree of social concern and activism among the complainers, the channels used by complainers, and the degree to which complaining behavior could be accurately determined by a blind questionnaire.

The major finding of interest to the cosmetics firm, however, turned out to be the fact that almost 75% of the respondents indicated that they were not very or not at all satisfied with the response they had gotten from that company! Remember, they had received a response that directly and specifically agreed with the attitude of the complainer. The complainer, however, had not correctly perceived or interpreted the message that had been received from the company.

Who Should Be Interested

This case should be of interest to any companies who are faced with the dilemma of how to prepare responses to communications from consumers who are deeply involved and committed to business-related, value-oriented issues.

Examples of such key emotional issues might include the following:

- . Dangers of Nuclear Power
- . Excess Business Profits
- . Animal Experimentation
- . Polluted Environment  
(Air, Water, Land)
- . Gasoline Shortages
- . Carcinogenic Chemicals  
(Saccharin, Red Dye, etc.)
- . Aerosol Containers

- . Deceptive/Unfair Advertising
- . Excessive Noise Levels

The types of questions that companies need to have answered include the following:

- . What is the real concern of the complainer?
- . Is the complainer a relevant customer of the company? Is the complainer a key influence in the general community?
- . What are the company policies that the complainer perceives?
- . What are the actual company policies?
- . Are the company policies different from what the complainer perceives them to be?
- . What would the company like to communicate to the complainer?
- . How can this best be done? Should it differ between the complainer who perceives the policies correctly and the complainer who perceives them incorrectly?
- . Are there any consumer behavior processes at work that could block out or distort the company's communications? If so, how can such distortions be dealt with most effectively?

The checklist, as outlined above, is designed to apply to emotional, value-oriented issues. Other studies have already been conducted on traditional complaint problems (which included, for example, products that failed to live up to expectations, performed poorly or broke, resulted in personal injury or property damage, or were not adequately covered by guarantees). Such studies, together with proprietary studies done by companies, have shown that corporate responses that are fair (which believe the complainer is telling the truth), prompt (where the complainer receives a reply within two weeks of writing), and generous (involving refund or replacement of the product in question) do generate "second-level" satisfaction. (Diener, 1975).

The question here, however, is one of effectively dealing with consumer attitudes and beliefs that are value-oriented and that may trigger perceptual distortions of company communications.

#### Selective Perception

The purpose of this next section of the paper is to review the theories of consumer behavior that relate to selective perception, including selective attention and selective distortion.

It has long been felt that consumers perceive stimuli in a selective way (accepting, rejecting, interpreting) because individual minds simply don't accept, process, and interpret the stimuli in the same way. (Engel, 1964).

One of the reasons for selectively eliminating some stimuli is that otherwise a perceptual overload might be created in the brain, within a limited capacity of an individual brain to process information.

Another reason for such elimination might be a perceptual defense that occurs when, because of a strong value orientation, a barrier is erected to any stimuli not in congruence with the value orientation. (Postman, Bruner and McGinnies, 1948).

Suppose, however, as in the case of the article about the bunny rabbits, the stimuli is not eliminated, but is accepted. This selective attention could have been aroused because of a heightened awareness of stimuli that agree with or are congruent with an individual's needs, interests, or values.

Individuals, after all, see what is personally significant to themselves, with significance being defined in terms of the emotional relationships between the individual and the stimuli. (Cantril, 1957). Thus, individuals who hold strong emotions regarding animals may be more likely to perceive, notice, or accept an article about cruelty to animals.

In the case under discussion in this paper, some quotes from the original letters of complaint can be used to show the degree of the emotionalism that was generated.

"...I am a frequent purchaser of your products. However, I will boycott all of your products, and urge others to do the same, unless you end the cruel and needless use of animals in your testing procedures. This experimentation is not required or necessary and has been declared "stupid" by Dr. Scheuplin of the FDA."

"...To inflict such pain and suffering on those poor animals is barbaric!"

"...Since normal, sane people do not eat cosmetics, I can't see why you find it necessary to subject animals to such torture."

"...The horrifying thought that poor unfortunate animals had to endure inhuman, heartless and needless torture so I can look good and smell good sickens me."

"...Why not torture yourself. You are no better - if as good - than any other of God's creatures."

It is possible to accept the fact that consumers, because of their strongly held emotional beliefs and values, can be provoked into writing letters of complaint to companies. Such letters, particularly in the current decade, will usually generate a response, and that response can either try to a) explain a company's policies or b) deny the policies that are perceived by the complainer. The response then has become a new stimuli to the consumer, and it, separately from the "primary" dissatisfaction, has the ability to create a "second level" of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Certainly the company in this case expected a "second level" satisfaction to be created, since their response agreed with the values and attitudes of complainers.

This, however, was not the case. The chart below shows how respondents to the survey answered the question "How satisfied were you with their response?"

Respondents  
(76)

Degree of Satisfaction

Not at all satisfied	57%
Not very satisfied	16
Neutral	—
Somewhat satisfied	19
Very satisfied	8

For those who had not been satisfied, the reasons for the dissatisfaction ranged from a conviction that the company had lied (answers were double talk, lies, patronizing, copouts, weren't honest) or had tried to avoid their concern (answers were vague, didn't address the issue, were sugar coated, tried to gloss over the matter). Thus, the complainers either didn't believe the company, or hadn't even accurately read the company's unequivocal denial of its use of animal experimentation.

How could such a straight-forward response be so misunderstood? Again, the theories of selective perception are relevant. For example, once a stimuli has been accepted, it is organized and given meaning. (Robertson, 1970). This meaning is frequently a compromise between the reality of the stimuli and the individual's personal interpretation of that stimuli. After all, each individual already has unique experiences, knowledge, needs and expectations that create predisposed attitudes. These attitudes, or mental set, form a tendency to perceive events and to color or interpret those events according to personal values.

Thus, each individual sees the world in a different way. Reality, to an individual, is that person's perception of what has taken place. That person acts and reacts on the basis of their own perceptions, not on the basis of objective reality. Thus, a company can respond to a complainer in a way they feel will be effective, yet that complainer's perception of the response may not be in congruence with the company's intent. At that point, reality for the complainer is their own perception of the response.

An individual's self-selected cultural role can also affect their perceptions. If individuals view their roles as those of responsible protectors of animals, they will view companies who use animals for testing in terms of their own cultural norms. (Webster, 1975). They will, needless to say, be strongly prejudiced against a company that they think harms bunnies.

In fact, a process of selective distortion might be occurring. Selective distortion, or perceptual bias or defense, occurs when, because of a value orientation, a barrier is erected to any stimuli not in congruence with that value orientation. (Postman, et. al., 1948). Conversely, one perceives stimuli more accurately and rapidly when they are congruent with value orientations. (Engel, 1964). Finally, threatening stimuli will be distorted that are not consistent with one's needs, values or beliefs. People hear, therefore, what they want to hear, rather than what has been said. (Berelson and Steiner, 1964).

The complainers in the case under examination have received a response which, in reality, agreed with their beliefs. They did not, however, perceive this congruence.

The reason that the perceptual distortion may have occurred is that the complainers anticipated the return letters or the stimuli and, as a defense, reinforced a perceptual fixation so that habitual attitudes wouldn't change, even after different stimuli were received. (Howard and Sheth, 1969).

Thus, if the manufacturer had responded with logical reasons as to why they had conducted animal experimentation, the complainers would not be persuaded of their logic.

And, if the manufacturer responded that they were innocent of animal experimentation, the complainers would be so convinced of their guilt, that the response would either not be seen or, if seen, not believed. This, indeed, was what occurred in this case.

Finally, perceptual distortion can occur because people see what they expect to see based on their preconditioned set. Thus, in this case, they perceived that the company would deny their experimentation on animals, thus the letter they received must have contained that denial. The mind always tries to move to closure ... to make assumptions that will complete a picture. (Allison and Uhl, 1964).

In addition, there may also be a source effect at work. Statements from a credible source might be believed, but companies who are believed to experiment on animals can't be considered to be credible.

Conclusions

Increasingly, companies are involved with issues that have unusually heavy emotional significance to their consumers. Such issues can include animal experimentation, environmental pollution, deceptive advertising, etc. In these cases, the consumers will frequently be motivated to complain to the companies, and the companies must formulate effective responses. If the companies are not careful, however, the responses themselves might create a further, "second-level" of dissatisfaction. This can happen because of the heavy value orientation of the consumer and the subsequent selective perception and selective distortion that occurs with regard to the response.

In the case studies in this paper, a company's response indicated complete agreement with the values of complainers. The complainers, however, because of their attitudes toward animal experimentation either did not understand the company's response or chose to believe it a lie.

The difficult question that remains, and that this paper does not attempt to answer, is to what degree does this phenomenon occur across other issues of social concern, and, if it occurs frequently, to what degree can companies cope with it effectively. There are several solutions that come to mind - namely the testing of various responses and even of response modes (i.e., by telephone rather than letter) - but these still need to be formulated and tested on an individual company basis.

The purpose of this paper, then, has been to identify the role of selective perception and distortion in the consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction process and to warn companies of the distortions that might occur with regard to emotional, value related issues.

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