Consumer Attitude in Electronic Commerce

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INTRODUCTION

As a valuable communications medium, the World Wide Web has undoubtedly become an important playground of commercial activities. Founded on a hypermedia document system, this medium plays a critical role in getting messages across to visitors, who may be current or perspective customers. In business-to-consumer (B2C) Web sites, companies are engaged in a wide range of activities including marketing, advertising, promotion, sales, and customer service and support (Berthon, Pitt, & Watson, 1996; Singh & Dalal, 1999). As a result, practitioners and scholars alike have started to examine various techniques ranging from the overall structure of the online retailing interface to individual features as banners, animation, sound, video, interstitials, and popup ads (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000; Westland & Au, 1998). Consumers are the ultimate judges of the success of any online retailing site, and consumer perceptions mediate content factors in influencing their attitude toward electronic commerce as well as individual e-tailing sites, complementing the roles played by Web site content in shaping consumer attitude.

BACKGROUND

In traditional advertising research, Olney et al. (1991) outlined a chain of links where both content and form variables were examined as predictors of attention, memory, recall, click-through, informativeness, attractiveness, and attitude. An evaluation of these outcome variables in the Web context necessarily involves new dimensions that require a higher degree of comprehensiveness due to the volume and scope of a Web site in comparison to print or TV ads. For example, Rogers and Thorson (2000) argue for the consideration in interactive marketing of such techniques as banners, sponsorships, interstitials, popup windows, and hyperlinks over and beyond ad features found in traditional media, such as color, size, and typeface in the print media, and audio, sound level, animation, and movement in broadcast.

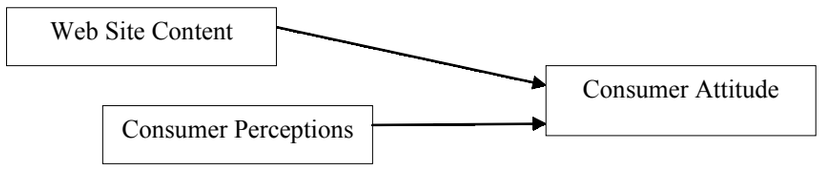
Factors related to consumer behavior, attitude, and perceptions in the online environment have been examined in recent research (Chen & Wells, 1999; Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996; Eighmey, 1997; Gao, Koufaris, & Ducoffe, 2004; Koufaris, 2002; Koufaris, Kambil, & Labarbera, 2001; Vijayasarathy, 2003). Consumer attitude mediates the effect of systems characteristics on behavioral intentions such as intention to revisit and intention to purchase products from the sponsoring companies. Past research has shown that the value of advertising derives from informative claims in an entertaining form (Ducoffe, 1995), while Web site users similarly appreciate information in an enjoyable context (Eighmey, 1997). Koufaris et al. (2001) found shopping enjoyment a significant factor attracting return visits. We consider information, entertainment, and site organization major measurement criteria and perceptual antecedents that affect user attitude toward communications messages presented through the Web (Ducoffe, 1996) and attitude toward the Web site as a whole (Chen & Wells, 1999).

This article provides an overview of current research on factors influencing consumer attitude and related behavioral consequences in electronic commerce. It reviews and synthesizes research from two perspectives: Web site content and consumer perceptions. The next section discusses research uncovering content factors that impact consumer attitude or other attitudinal consequences, while the following section examines consumers' perceptual dimensions that influence their attitude in Web-based commerce. The following diagram serves as a schema in guiding the presentation of our framework.

WEB SITE CONTENT

Content is king (Nielsen, 1999, 2003). Message content believed to be informative by a marketer

Figure 1. Schema of factors influencing consumer attitude in electronic commerce



needs to be substantiated by consumer feedback. In analyzing the informativeness of a message, content analysis complements attitudinal research by pointing out the types of information and Web site features that make a site informative, entertaining, or irritating. Web site content discussed in this article contains information, presentation attributes, and system design features.

Information

In traditional advertising research, Resnik and Stern (1977) developed a content analysis method through codifying each advertising message via 14 evaluative cues. Numerous studies used this procedure in analyzing ad messages in various media, including magazine, TV, and newspaper advertising (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). Among those studies, a few tried to connect message content with informativeness. For example, Soley and Reid (1983) find that quality, components or content, price or value, and availability information affected perceived informativeness, while the quantity of information did not. Ylikoski (1994) finds moderate support for the connection between the amount of informative claims and perceived informativeness in an experimental study involving automobile advertisements.

In a similar approach, Aaker and Norris (1982) developed a list of 20 characteristic descriptors intended to explain a commercial message's informativeness. They find hard sell versus soft sell, product class orientation, and number of distinct claims, e.g., on product quality or performance, are the most significant predictors of informativeness from a study based on 524 TV commercials.

Adapted versions of the content analysis method have been applied to analyzing Web advertising and Web sites (Ghose & Dou, 1998; Philport & Arbittier, 1997). Other studies have attempted to categorize Web site content based on technology features (Huizingh, 2000; Palmer & Griffith, 1998). The development of these approaches demonstrates the complexity of Web-based communications and reflects a need to have a more sophisticated method to understand what constitute an effective Web site. Thus, we must inevitably turn our attention to design features and techniques that contribute to the delivery of entertainment, in addition to information, in this new medium.

Presentation Attitudes

Philport and Arbittier (1997) studied content from over 2000 commercial communications messages across three established media, that is, TV, magazines, and newspapers, along with that on the Internet. The adoption of variables such as product demonstration or display, special effect techniques like fantasy, and the employment of humor reflects an attempt by researchers to assess message appeal enhanced by entertaining features. Philport and Arbittier (1997) find no distinguishing characteristic of banner ads from other media ads. Their study suggests that the impact of a message delivered through a banner is fairly limited, and the integral collection of hypermedia-based documents, related image files, and system functions as a whole is a better candidate for examining the effectiveness of Web-based communications.

Ghose and Dou (1998) linked the number of content attributes with site appeal measured by being listed in Lycos top 5% of Web sites and found that a greater degree of interactivity and more available online entertainment features increase site appeal. Huizingh (2000) content-analyzed 651 companies from Yahoo and Dutch Yellow Pages using a battery including elements like pictures, jokes, cartoons, games, and video clips. He found that entertainment