

CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY : THE MORE IT CHANGES THE MORE IT'S THE SAME THING

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ABSTRACT

Decades of consumer research have tried to emphasize that the modern day consumer has transformed completely. The Marketing Gurus continue to churn fanciful jargons to iterate that the present day consumer is not even a semblance of his past 'avatar'. The point that is attempted to be driven home is that the present day consumer's tastes, preferences, likes and dislikes, have all changed. On the face of it one may like to endorse this school of thought. But on careful analysis, one would be reasonable enough to conclude that the consumer has not changed, his basic character remaining fairly stable over the ages. The present paper is a review based research article to discuss the issues related to this.

Key Words : Consumer, Class, Perception, Want-makers, Mass suggestion, Prestige suggestion, Pain aversion

INTRODUCTION

Jean- Baptiste Alphonse Karr was a French critic, Journalist and Novelist who also published a journal Les Guepes (meaning the Wasps). In the January 1849 issue of his journal, Karr had made a witty comment on state of affairs in the form of an epigram, "*plus ça change, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*". In English it meant *the more it changes the more it remains the same*. Over the years this has become a popular cliché to describe the state of affairs and it says- the more things change, the more they remain the same. Whether it does describe the state of affairs accurately or not may be opened to discussion, but as far as the mindset of the consumer is concerned it almost hits the bull's eye. In fact the consumer tastes and presences move in a cyclic fashion, though "*the old order changeth for the new order, yet the new order again changeth for the old one*".

The world of fashion is a classic example of this. Old fashion keeps on becoming the latest trend in a periodic cycle. What was out dated once, becomes new fashion after a gap of some time. Well, the phenomenon can be very poetically and succinctly explained by the famous quote of philosopher Heraclitus- "*Everything changes and everything returns, like the river*". Fashion is ephemeral and the new drive out the old ones. Only, the new ones too as driven out by the old in course of time, as the new also become old. However, there are certain trends that outlive time, and these are called the 'class'. Indian women's saree is one such trend. The size, the colour and even the way it is draped may change but the basic remains constant. And even the fashion that catch the emotions of the new genre, give way to the earlier ones. This is evident in the Cinema world which is one of the trend setters of fashion.

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All those years and even the decades of consumer research have tried to emphasize that the modern day consumer has transformed completely. The Marketing Gurus continue to churn fanciful jargons to iterate that the present day consumer is not even a semblance of his past *avatar*. The point that is attempted to be driven home is that the present day consumer's tastes, preferences, likes and dislikes, have all changed. On the face of it one may like to endorse this school of thought. But on careful analysis, one would be reasonable enough to conclude that the consumer has not changed, his basic character remaining fairly stable over the ages. This is because the human nature has remained stable.

To quote Luthans - "*You can take a man out of the Stone Age, but you cannot take Stone Age out of man*". Remember a very popular advertisement a few decades ago? The highly entertaining Onida TV advertisement - "*Neighbour's envy, owner's pride*". The driving force trying to push the buyer to buy the product was envy. Compare this with one of the recent advertisements of a popular detergent brand that also banks on the power of envy. It says - How can her saree be whiter than mine? So the basic Consumer nature has not changed much.

Human beings were born with three basic emotions of *love, hate* and *rage* and the story of Cane and Able in the Old Testament of the holy Bible testifies this. Incidentally, even today the human beings are born with the same emotions. The consumer psychology research, no matter, how rigorous, will still find these three emotions of the consumer important in its scheme of things. It is these emotions that are exploited to promote consumption. And they still work. Consumers are driven by desires and desires are engineered by the marketers who name these desires as needs which they claim to satisfy. Actually the needs are converted into wants through the process of marketing. Marketers therefore can rightly be called the 'want-makers'. Do we then need all those researchers and researches by the marketers and consumers psychologists to find out what does a consumer want?

HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

Jargons galore may be used to prove that today's consumer has a different personality. Is it actually so? Perhaps not. The consumer has not changed as much as he/she is made out to be. The basic need is to derive pleasure and avoid pain and the engine that drives these feelings is the 'ego'. In the famous classic story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the step mother of Snow White reflects the mindset of a typical consumer, who always wants to believe that he/she is the fairest of them all and when the mirror fails to show that all hell breaks loose. A consumer is the person who wants to win, thinks he has won but in reality loses without realizing it. It is the marketer who has the last laugh though the consumer continues to smile.

The consumer doesn't buy what he needs. He buys what he thinks he needs. These are wants that are created by advertisements made by the marketers. The question is how do the marketers arouse those wants. Simple enough if one can observe carefully. Going by the holy book remember what happened in the Garden of Eden. Despite God's sincere advice to Adam and Eve not to eat that particular apple what happened was exactly the opposite. They ate the apple and were condemned. Who could coax and cajole them to eat that fruit. Well the devil in the guise of a serpent. *Advertisements thus are devilish in design and devil can be called the father of marketing*. In this particular case the message was simple. It was an appeal directed towards the ego of Adam and Eve. Of course, the devil considered Eve to be the more gullible of the two. Little wonder marketers still pick up cues from there. But that can be the subject matter of another debate. As of now we can settle for the fact that it was the ego that was aroused and then the fodder in the form of allurements was provided by suggesting that eating that fruit would make Adam and Eve the winners. Whether they actually won or lost is again a debatable issue but that they consumed the fruit is the crux of the story. And the craving for the fruit was created by the Devil.

Ever since, wants are being created and consumers made to consume. 'Consumer is the king' is thus the slogan that gives a false sense of Kinghood in the mind of the consumer who actually is a pawn in the mind game created by the marketers.

The marketer has successfully changed the world by changing the consumption pattern and we, the gullible, believe that the consumer has changed. What is the reality? Carefully analyzing the whole scenario we would realize that marketer has succeeded not because the consumer has changed. Rather, the opposite. He has succeeded because the consumer has not changed. Of course, the tastes, preferences and desires have been altered. But that is precisely because the basic character of the consumer has not changed. His weakness to submit to the demands and dictates of the ego has made him a bonded slave of desires. And so he gets allured to the tall and fantastic claims of the marketer. He therefore believe infantic claims like children who take a particular food drink grow one and a half times more than children who do not. Incidentally, this kind of an advertisement defies the standard definition of a consumer. Though the mother does not consume the product she for all practical purposes remains the consumer and not the child. The customer and consumer definition in this and many other cases may not hold good. But that is largely the subject matter of an academic debate. The fact is consumption and the trick used to promote consumption. These two are the basic subject matter of Consumer Psychology.

WHAT DOES A CONSUMER WANT?

This is the most important question that every marketer or consumer researcher wants to answer. And the answer to these questions help in designing, defining and describing features of products and services. The assumptions are that consumers have changed, their wants and desires have all changed. The basic flaw in this assumption is that the underlying factors that determine consumer wants and desires have all changed. The fact is that they have not changed. That is

their penchant for seeking pleasure and satisfaction through the things they consume. It is hedonism that rules, all other desired features of products and services, notwithstanding. Let us have a look at those features first. Ask any consumer why did he buy a certain product and the answer would be because he needed it, wanted it, and liked it. And why did he prefer that product over the others available in the same category? The answer would be because better quality or competitive price. Need, want or like fall in purely psychological domain except for the physiological needs. Similarly quality is a mythical assumption as also the competitive price. In fact, except the issue of availability, the quality and pricing depend on perception of the consumer. It is this perception that marketers are able to create through bombardment of ideas, concepts and information, thus creating some kind of a self-hypnosis. Everyone thinks he/ she is buying the best but what is the notion of this best. Quality? Price? Experience? Durability? Or all four in one product or service. Usually it is all four that the consumer wants in his/her buy. There is a popular saying in the vernacular languages about the best product. It is "*Sasta, Sundar aur Tikau*". In English it becomes cheap, pleasing and durable. But these days it is also said that if you seek all these three attributes in one product you will be disappointed. The idea being that it is not just possible. There was a popular Hindi film of the late seventies titled "*DulhanWahi Jo piya Man Bhaye*" meaning only that bride is beautiful which the groom likes. There are no standard notions of a beautiful bride. It depends on the perception. Or as the age old saying goes "beauty is in the beholder's eye. And it is true or else how could there be so much of difference of opinions about ratings on quality. Best is just a perception or else Marketing Gurus Al Ries and Jack Trout would not have asserted that it is better to be first than to be best in their Marketing classic-22 Immutable Laws of Marketing.

Consumer's perception depends on various attributes related to environment, stimuli and personality. But the significant determinant is always the personality. Psychologist William

James puts it very neatly when he says that what you perceive depends on the external stimulus, but equally significantly it also depends on your mind. Indian philosophy describes this phenomenon as the Rope and the Snake illusion. Your action depends on your perception. If you perceive a rope as a snake you will run away scared. On the contrary if you perceive a snake as a rope you may well hold the snake as if it were a rope. In several experiments this has been tested.

Famous Violin player Joshua Bell who used to charge thousands of Francs for one night performance once sat in the guise of a beggar in a metro subway in Paris. Though he went on playing the violin for the whole day he could hardly get a few Francs. A similar experiment was repeated by popular Indian singer Sonu Nigam in Mumbai. He sat on a busy street of Mumbai singing like an ordinary beggar and could earn a paltry 12 Rupees. Though Nigam is a highly sought after performer who charges in Lakh for a single performance. This is what perception does. Despite all those researches on consumer psychology the most effective appeal still remains the 'mass suggestion', the 'prestige suggestion' and the 'pain aversion'. A very interesting example of mass suggestion is the once famous Orient Fan advertisement "*Woh PSPO nahi Janata*", meaning he doesn't know what PSPO is and the implication is that he is not aware of a very basic thing which everyone knows. Mass suggestion appeals to the consumers because it helps him identify with the popular social group, one from the class rather than the odd man out. Prestige suggestion is the appeal that is used through the celebrity endorsement to make the consumer identify himself with the big league. It creates a feeling that since those big people are doing it, I need to do it. Appeals to fear aversion or pain avoidance are done through the advertisements that emphasize the "*heaven's would fall*" feeling. That is, if you don't do this the worst may happen. All consumer behavior in sum and substance is about these three appeals and their varied manifestations. These appeals

worked in the Garden of Eden, they still work. Moreover, there is always that intriguing and unpredictable aspect about the consumer that cannot be known. So in a nutshell the psychology of the consumer has the two main dimensions. One is the *generic* one that was always there and the second one is the *specific* one that cannot be predicted. Thus the great fuss raised over Facebook posts or Cambridge Analytica data analysis is much ado about nothing. No amount of big data analysis would help us in addressing the specifics whereas you do not need any analysis to find out consumer generics.

CONCLUSION

In the year 1975 a multi-starrer Bollywood (popular name for Mumbai based film industry) with several top stars of Hindi film world was released. It was a mega project by the standards of those days and was propagated as one. It proved to be big hit. The film was *Sholay* directed by Ramesh Sippy. In the same year a significantly low budget film based on a religious theme having much less known actors and a director with no big name was also released. It proved to be a bigger hit in terms of Return on Investment. The film was *Jai Santhoshi Maa*. The message is very clear. The psychology of the consumer is like as iceberg. Only one tenth is in the domain of consumer researches whereas nine-tenth is beyond. So for all practical purposes, consumer psychology is still there where it was, the so called expert opinions are more based on assumptions rather than objective reality. Data or no data, it is the insight that is crucial. And insights cannot be learned from data alone.

The fact is that consumer psychology has not changed much and the reason is that human nature has remained fairly stable. Greed, fear, pleasure and pain continue to drive a consumer's psyche, research or no research.

A survey was carried on 10 thousand consumers from 10 different European countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Rumania, Spain, and Sweden in the year 2013. It explored several

dimensions of consumer behavior including online shopping. The findings suggested that the online shopping is just adventure seeking behavior driven by the novelty and sometimes convenience factors, but the shopping experience still matter as consumer prefer the convenience of local shops and town centers. The consumers like to visit local shops more than any other shopping destination. Particularly, when it comes to buying clothing or grocery. Driving to the stores gives that feeling of outing and pleasure shopping. More importantly, getting a feel of the product is a more rewarding experience. So as of now, though those e-commerce platforms may make a lot of noise, consumers still prefer the conventional mode. People want to shop locally and feel the product before purchasing. Online shopping is catching up but not quite so. And is confined to certain regions for certain pressing reasons and not just shopping.

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