Understanding Consumer Decision Making

The Means-End Approach to Marketing and Advertising Strategy

Edited by

Thomas J. Reynolds • Jerry C. Olson

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We dedicate this book to our teachers-Norman Cliff
and Ara Parseghian (TJR) and Jacob Jacoby (JCO)—
who, by their example and direction,
helped us to question, learn, and grow

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Foreword

John A.Howard
George E.Warren
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Many, perhaps most of the ideas introduced in academic marketing since the 1950s or so have originated in other disciplines, especially economics, psychology, and sociology. One interesting aspect of the means-end approach is that it is largely home-grown in that most of its development has occurred within the marketing discipline. I was one of the first to discuss how a means-end perspective to consumers could be useful in marketing. The means-end approach was a theme I included in several books, including my 1963, *Marketing: Executive and Buyer Behavior,* my 1969 collaboration with Jagdish Sheth, *The Theory of Buyer Behavior,* and more recently my textbook, *Consumer Behavior in Marketing Strategy* (1989), and the revised second edition of *Buyer Behavior in Marketing Strategy* (1994).

In the mid-1970s, Tom Reynolds and Jon Gutman became interested in means-end ideas. They were intrigued with the idea that people think at different levels of abstraction, and therefore, consumers do not always think about products in terms of physical attributes. This focus on product attributes was common in the ubiquitous research on multi-attribute attitude models in vogue at the time. In contrast, the means-end approach suggested that consumers think about and make purchase choices at more abstract levels such as the consequences (benefits or risks) that the product provides. In some cases, consumers might even consider the personal values the product could help them achieve.

Reynolds and Gutman developed their ideas about means-end chains in an impressive stream of publications. In their vision, a means-end chain was a cognitive structure of meaning that connects product attributes to the consequences of product use. They felt these chains of meaning were critical to understanding both how and why consumers make purchase decisions. Thus, the means-end approach represents a more personalized, more emotional, more personal, more idiosyncratic vision of how consumers think and make decisions about which products to buy to satisfy their needs.

By the mid- to late-1980s, other researchers had become interested in the means-end approach and were publishing papers about it, some of which were critical. Several of these authors—Chuck Gengler, Klaus Grunert, and Jerry Olson—are represented in this volume. More recently, other researchers also represented in this volume began doing means-end research—Hans Baumgartner, Suzanne Beekman, Joel Cohen, Rik Pieters, John Rossiter, Piet Vanden Abeele, Beth Walker, Luk Warlop, and Steve Westberg.

Another interesting aspect of the means-end approach, at least to me, is how practical issues of application seem to have spurred its development. I suspect that much of Reynolds and Gutman's early thinking about the means-end approach was influenced by their use of the means-end approach in a variety of commercial applications to real business problems. Being forced to deal with the myriad of issues that arise in a practical application seems to have spurred fairly rapid progress on both conceptual and methodological fronts. A downside of the focus on business applications was the relatively few publications about many of these ideas and developments. More recently, however, the publication rate increased considerably in the 1990s as more researchers became interested in means-end chains from a scholarly perspective.

Despite its practical bent, the means-end approach does have strong roots in various theoretical concepts, mostly in psychology. Some foundational areas include Kelley's Personal Construct Theory, Rokeach's value theory, and associative network theory from cognitive psychology. As sources of inspiration, ideas, and methods, these areas have nourished the means-end approach and contributed to its development. The influence of these basic theoretical areas is reflected throughout this volume. However, despite the progress since the 1970s, the means-end theory remains to be fully and formally explicated. This book does not accomplish that goal, but it moves us a long way toward a theory of means-end chains.

To conclude, I am pleased to see how the means-end approach has developed from its intuitive beginnings and its increasing use by assorted researchers in corporations and universities. Still, even though the means-end approach is some 30 or 40 years old, many people are unfamiliar with means-end concepts and how to use them. This volume takes a large step toward rectifying that situation. I believe this book will be valuable to a wide range of academic and business researchers and marketing managers. The appropriate audiences include both the novice who may wish to read the book cover to cover as well as the seasoned means-end veteran who is likely to sample selectively from the book. All will find new ideas and inspiration here. I recommend it to your attention.

Preface

Although many marketing researchers and some academic scholars are familiar with the means-end approach to understanding consumers, only a few regularly incorporate the means-end approach into their research programs. Many others are unfamiliar with this useful perspective. Thus, more than 20 years after its introduction, many people do not understand the means-end approach or appreciate its advantages. Our goals in editing this book are to help business managers and academic researchers understand the means-end perspective and the methods by which it is operationalized and to demonstrate how to use the means-end approach to develop better marketing and advertising strategy.

There are several possible reasons for the rather slow growth of interest in means-end theory and its applications, many of which are addressed by the authors of these chapters.

1. Essentially, the means-end approach is a qualitative method, although it is more structured than many qualitative methods. Most market researchers are comfortable with quantitative methods, but fewer researchers feel comfortable using qualitative methods. In particular, some researchers are uncomfortable with the high amounts of subjective interpretation they must perform in using the means-end approach.
2. The means-end approach requires in-depth, one-on-one interviews with consumers, which can last from 1 to 2 hours. Analysis of the interview data requires extensive effort in coding (summarizing and categorizing) and interpreting the meaning of the results. Perhaps the high amount of effort in data collection and analysis explains the reluctance of some to use the means-end approach.
3. To date, it has been rather difficult for researchers to learn about the means-end approach. Many details concerning the rather involved methods have not been discussed in print. The theoretical foundations of the means-end approach have not been well articulated, either. Moreover, many of the articles about the means-end approach are published in a variety of scattered, somewhat obscure journals and books. Thus, the fragmented and somewhat inaccessible research literature concerning the means-end approach contributes to its relative obscurity.
4. Some researchers question the reliability and validity of laddering interviews in producing useful data. In particular, the repeated question probes used in laddering (“Why is that important to you?”) seem too aggressive or too leading to some researchers.

5. Another problem concerns a lack of clarity about the theoretical foundations of the means-end approach. Because few researchers have dealt with theoretical issues and because much of the published work on means-end chains has an applied tone, many researchers feel the approach is merely an application technique with little or no theoretical value. Thus, the theoretical underpinnings of the means-end approach remain somewhat obscure.

6. Finally, managers have not always been able to see how they can use the customer insights gained from the means-end approach to solve particular marketing problems.

In this book, we seek to address each of the above mentioned problems with the means-end approach. The authors of the various chapters discuss methodological issues regarding interviewing and coding, present applications of the means-end approach to marketing and advertising problems, and describe the conceptual foundations of the means-end approach. The book contains a mix of original and previously published articles in roughly a 65:35 ratio. We included several previously published articles because we want the book to serve as a single, convenient source of information about the means-end approach.

The book is divided into five parts:

I. Introduction
II. Using Laddering Methods to Identify Means-End Chains
III. Developing and Assessing Advertising Strategy
IV. The Means-End Approach to Developing Marketing Strategy
V. Theoretical Perspectives for Means-End Research

The target audience for this book includes academic researchers in marketing and related fields, graduate students in business, marketing research professionals, and business managers. The book is intended as a reference book containing ideas about the means-end approach and its applications; however, it could be used as a textbook supplement for MBA or PhD courses on consumer behavior, advertising, or marketing strategy.

We sincerely hope that managers, researchers in business and academia, and students will find the means-end approach discussed here to be interesting and useful in their work.

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This book was a long time in coming, and we are indebted to the many individuals who helped make it possible. Most importantly, we thank the authors

who produced excellent chapters for this book and then waited patiently for them to appear in print. We appreciate their creative thinking and good humor. In the same spirit, we thank our editors, Ray O'Connell and Anne Duffy at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, for their encouragement and helpful suggestions. Jerry thanks his graduate students, Michael Mulvey, Torsten Ringberg, and Glenn Christensen, for their valuable help. Finally, each of us (Tom and Jerry) thanks the other for the good ideas, hard work, and friendship we have shared since the 1970s.

—Tom Reynolds and Jerry Olson

I

INTRODUCTION

1

The Means-End Approach to Understanding Consumer Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to introduce the means-end approach to those readers who are not familiar with the approach and to refresh the memory of those with greater experience. To those ends, the means-end approach and its conceptual foundations are described and how managers can use the means-end approach to understand consumer decision-making is discussed. Specific chapters in the book cover all these issues in greater detail.

INTRODUCTION

The title for this book reveals the main goals. The chapters in this book describe the means-end approach to understanding consumer decision making and show how such understanding can inspire and guide managers' decisions about marketing and advertising strategy. The fundamental idea underlying the means-end approach is that decision makers choose courses of action (including behaviors such as the purchase of particular brands) that seem most likely to achieve important outcomes. The "means-end approach" is an umbrella term that refers to a set of methods for interviewing consumers about the reasons for their decision choice and interpreting consumers' responses in terms of linkages between outcomes.

The chapters in this book emphasize understanding consumer decision making, in contrast to merely predicting the choice outcomes of decision making. The latter type of research usually bases predictions of a decision choice on consumers' ratings of the importance of many potentially salient decision criteria. Unfortunately, being able to accurately predict choices offers relatively little strategic direction to the manager because this approach provides little or no understanding of why these criteria are important to the consumer. In contrast, means-end research concerned with understanding consumer decision making not only identifies which choice criteria are salient to the consumer, but digs deeper to explain *why* those factors are important to a decision maker. Many of the chapters in this volume illustrate how such deep understanding can powerfully guide and inspire managers' strategic thinking.

In this chapter we begin by describing how marketing managers should think about consumer decision making. Then we briefly review the conceptual foundations of the means-end approach or model and describe the basic means-end model. Finally, we discuss how this approach can help both business and academic researchers understand the most fundamental aspects of consumer decision making. The various chapters in this volume cover each of these issues in much greater detail.

WHAT DO MARKETERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CONSUMER DECISION MAKING?

Marketers face many difficult issues in their work: What value (meaning or equity) does my brand have? How can I induce consumers to adopt a new brand? How can I position a brand without cannibalizing my current brands? For decades, marketing researchers have studied consumer decision making in an attempt to provide answers to such questions. Unfortunately, much of that work fails to provide a deep understanding of how consumers make decisions.

Understanding consumer decision making is a two-step process. First, the marketing problem of concern must be framed as a specific decision made by consumers. Second, managers need to understand precisely how consumers go about making that decision. Both steps are reviewed in this section. First, we identify four fundamental issues that managers must address in order to frame the consumer decision—consumers, decision focus, decision context, and choice alternatives. As seen in the following, these four issues can be posed as formal questions that managers and researchers should answer. Doing so frames the marketing problem as a specific consumer decision and thus focuses the researcher on the most relevant aspects of decision making. Second, we identify the two key issues that underlie an understanding of that decision: (1) What are the salient choice criteria that consumers consider in evaluating alternatives, and (2) Why are those factors important to the consumer?

Who Are the Relevant Consumers

Consumers, of course, are vital to all types of business organizations. A common and succinct description of a business emphasizes the importance of consumers (customers or buyers): The purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer. In most for-profit business organizations, marketing has the major responsibility of developing strategies that will create customers (by inducing people to buy a product for the first time) and keep customers (by influencing people to buy the product multiple times).

Developing effective marketing strategies requires identifying which consumers are most relevant to the marketing problem and thus are the key decision makers. Although this issue can be straightforward, answering this question can be challenging and complex (see chaps. 11 and 12, this volume).

Decisions About What?

Consumers make decisions about many things, of course. It is important to recognize that all decisions involve choices among alternative behaviors or courses of action. That is, a choice decision always involves the selection of one possible behavior or action from a set of at least two alternative behaviors (Peter & Olson, 1999). Strictly speaking, people do not choose product A or brand B. Instead, they choose to buy, consume, recommend, sell, or return brand A rather than brand B. That is, one decides whether to buy a Coke or a Pepsi, shop at Giant or Safeway supermarket, or drink the last beer or save it until tomorrow. This means that consumer decision making is about evaluating and selecting alternative behaviors or actions.

Focusing on behaviors as choice alternatives rather than the typical marketing research focus on physical products, brands, or stores may seem a minor or subtle point, but it has important ramifications for both researchers and managers. By recognizing that consumers chose among behaviors, not objects, decision-making research is placed in context because behaviors always occur in an environmental context. A heightened behavior perspective also reveals that all marketing strategies are actions taken by the marketer that are intended to influence certain actions of consumers.

Although much decision-making research is narrowly focused on brand purchase behavior, consumers actually make decisions about many types of behaviors. These decisions include such issues as what information sources to consult, when to shop, where to park, what stores to patronize, what alternatives to even consider, and how to pay for a purchase. Some of these decisions may be trivial to the success of a marketing program (Where should I park?), whereas other (nonpurchase) decisions may be just as important as brand choice and, therefore, could be the focus of research and marketing strategy. For instance, in order to buy certain products, consumers must make a series of decisions about a sequence of behaviors. Researchers should identify the key decision (behaviors) in the sequence. For instance, to buy an exclusive brand of women’s clothing, one must first decide to shop in a specialty store that carries this line. Thus, the store choice decision has a critical influence on consumers’ decision to purchase a particular brand of dress.

In sum, it is critical that managers identify which consumer behaviors are most relevant for the marketing problem of interest. Developing a valid answer to this apparently easy question can be quite challenging (for an example, see chap. 11, this volume).

What Is the Decision Context?

Understanding consumers’ decision making requires careful attention to the context in which the decision occurs. Context can be understood at micro (immediate) and macrolevels. All behaviors occur in some specific context, which includes the immediate physical environment and the social environment (presence and influence of other people, including friends, relatives, and sales people). Specific behaviors are also influenced by broader contextual factors, such as one’s economic situation, cultural influences, and social roles. Marketers should attempt to understand the most powerful contextual influences on the consumer (see chap. 11, this volume, for a good example).

What Are the Choice Alternatives?

Once researchers know the consumer group of interest, the behaviors of greatest relevance, and the context in which those behaviors (and the decisions) occur, they can then address the fourth issue—identifying the relevant choice alternatives. To study decision making as it naturally occurs, researchers need to know the specific choice alternatives that consumers actively consider in making their choice decisions? Typically, a consumer considers only a limited number of choice alternatives at any one time—perhaps only two or three. These two or three choice alternatives create a microcontext for the decision-making process that constrains the choice criteria consumers consider in the decision and influences the relative salience or importance of those criteria.

Framing the Marketing Problem as a Consumer Decision

To use the means-end approach most effectively in solving marketing problems, managers should frame each marketing problem as a consumer decision (or as a series of decisions for complex problems). Each of the issues previously discussed is a step in the framing process. The process of framing the marketing issue or problem as a consumer decision can be formalized by requiring the researcher or manager to answer four questions:

1. Who are the relevant consumers or customers whose decisions I need to understand?
2. For those consumers, what particular behaviors or actions (shopping, brand choice, or consumption decisions) are most relevant to my marketing problem?
3. What are the social and physical contexts in which those behaviors or actions occur?
4. What choice alternatives does the consumer consider when making the key decisions in those situations?

Developing answers to these questions refocuses the managers attention by framing the marketing problems as one or more consumer decisions. Once the consumer decisions of major interest are known, the means-end approach can be used most effectively in understanding the two main issues in decision making: (a) What choice criteria do consumers use to evaluate the choice alternatives and choose among them?; and (b) Why do consumers find these particular choice criteria to be personally relevant (salient or important)?

In summary, answering the four framing questions clearly identifies one or more consumer decisions. Although the framing questions are not necessarily easy to answer, it is critical that they can be answered in as much precision and detail as possible. Often, dealing with these four questions requires deep thinking by managers and possibly some preliminary research and analysis. Several of the chapters in section IV of this volume illustrate this reframing process and its power (e.g., see chaps. 11, 12, and 13, this volume).

UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

To understand consumer decision-making managers must address two issues: (a) What choice criteria do consumers use to evaluate the choice alternatives and choose among them?; and (b) Why are those particular choice criteria personally relevant to the consumers?

What Are the Salient Choice Criteria?

Eliciting the salient choice criteria is fairly straightforward. One can simply ask consumers to tell you what they are. Most elicitation methods are variations on such a direct inquiry. The key to success in identifying the actual choice criteria consumers use in decision-making is to insure that the decision context is activated in the consumer’s mind when the elicitation question is asked. This requires a detailed understanding of the decision context, including the immediate physical and social environment in which the decision occurs as well as broader and less tangible contextual factors, such as consumers’ lifestyle, socioeconomic variables, and broad historio-cultural factors. Finally, the set of considered choice alternatives provides yet another contextual influence on the choice criteria that consumers use to make a decision choice.

To elicit the choice criteria consumers actually use in a decision, researchers must activate the appropriate contextual basis for the decision. They can do so by establishing the key contextual factors in their questioning. For instance, one might ask the direct question: “When you are choosing among brands A, B, and C of cola soft drinks for an afternoon work break (or for a drink after exercise, etc.), what factors do you consider in making your decision?” It is quite possible that the salient choice criteria, or at least some of them, will vary from one set of considered choice alternatives to another. That is, a consumer is likely to use different choice criteria when choosing between a 4-wheel drive pickup truck and a small Mercedes Benz sedan than when selecting between a Mercedes Benz sedan and a BMW sedan.

Why Are These Choice Criteria Personally Relevant?

Personal relevance is the cornerstone to understanding consumer decision-making, and understanding personal relevance is the main advantage of the means-end approach. It seems obvious that consumers’ purchase decisions are heavily influenced by the perceived personal relevance of the choice alternatives. That is, consumers are likely to select those choice alternatives that are seen as more useful for their needs (relevant for achieving goals and values). To understand personal relevance, marketing researchers have examined a variety of concepts such as involvement, product importance, attitude, interest, value, commitment, and even brand loyalty, but personal relevance remains an elusive concept. Most marketing research is content to measure the extent of personal relevance by identifying the specific concepts consumers use to evaluate alternative products or brands in a decision choice and having consumers rate their importance. Embarrassingly, little research has focused on understanding why these particular concepts are seen as salient choice criteria—that is, why do consumers perceive these concepts to be personally relevant for their needs. Understanding the reasons *why* a concept is a salient factor in the decision-making process is critically important for understanding consumer decision making. Because the means-end approach is well suited to address issues of “the why of personal relevance,” it is particularly useful for understanding consumer decision making.

THE MEANS-END CHAIN APPROACH

In this section, we briefly review the means-end approach, giving special attention to the basic assumptions underlying its conceptual foundations. We also present a brief historical overview of the development of the means-end approach. Finally, we describe the component parts of the means-end model. These issues also are treated in the various chapters in this volume.

Foundational Assumptions

The conceptual foundation for the means-end approach rests on a few simple, yet powerful assumptions or ideas. Although most of these ideas are probably familiar to most marketers, they have not been integrated to form a coherent perspective on consumer decision making. The means-end approach constitutes a major step toward that goal.

- *Problem Orientation:* Because consumers experience many problems in their daily lives, consumer decision making may be framed as problem solving, which focuses on needs or goals (desired states) or deficiencies (discrepancies between what one wants and what one has). A problem-solving orientation emphasizes that consumers try to solve their problems by deciding to engage in various actions intended to achieve their goals (or reduce deficiencies). Some of these actions may include the purchase of products and services. Chapters 17 and 18 concern the relation between the means-end model and consumers' motivations and goals, respectively.
- *Focus on Consequences:* The means-end approach emphasizes the consequences or outcomes of a decision—as experienced by the consumer. The basic assumption is that when people buy a product, they actually are buying one or more experiences (consequences). Those outcome experiences could be achieving the goal, or they might be a subgoal related to some larger, overall goal. The means-end approach explicitly assumes that these desirable experienced consequences are the most salient considerations in decision making.
- *Positive and Negative Consequences:* Many salient consequences are positive experiences that consumers want to experience. However, other consequences are negative or aversive experiences that consumers are seeking to avoid or minimize. In chapters 12, 13, and 15, Reynolds describes these positive and negative consequences as *equities* and *disequities,* respectively. The overarching means-end principle in decision making is that consumers seek personally relevant alternatives that provide positive consequences (benefits) or avoid negative outcomes (risks).
- *Types of Consequences:* The means-end approach distinguishes between two major classes or types of consequences, whether positive or negative. Many salient consequences are rather tangible and direct experiences that are likely to occur immediately after a decision, usually during or soon after product consumption—"I wasn't hungry after eating that candy bar." In means-end terminology, these are called *functional consequences.* In contrast, other self-relevant consequences are more emotional, personal experiences. Some of these experiences can occur long after the purchase decision—"I still feel good

wearing this dress," or, "People continue to notice my five-year-old car." These psychological and social consequences, respectively, are termed *psychological consequences* in the means-end approach.

• *Linkages or Connections:* The means-end approach focuses the greatest attention on the linkages between components—attributes, functional consequences, psychosocial consequences, and values. The linkages are critical because they carry the majority of the meaning.

• *Personal Relevance:* The functional and psychosocial consequences that are most instrumental or central to a person's major life goals and core values are the most personally relevant to that person. Because the means-end approach identifies which consequences are most strongly connected to important end goals and values, it helps in understanding the basis for personal relevance.

• *Intentional Conscious Decision Making:* Finally, the means-end approach implicitly assumes that consumers' goal-directed purchase behaviors are *voluntary* and *conscious.* That is, we assume purchase decision making requires a conscious choice among at least two alternatives (buy brand X or buy brand Y, or buy the medium size or the giant size). Although the purchase process may eventually become habitual, largely automatic and unconscious, it is assumed that a conscious decision-making process did occur at some time in the past. If so, the basis for that decision can be modeled with the means-end approach. Consumer decision making may be influenced by many emotional and symbolic factors, some of which are tacit and unconscious. The means-end approach does not address how such factors may affect decision making, although it may provide hints about such influences.

To summarize, the means-end approach assumes that consumers decide which products and services to buy based on the anticipated consequences (experienced outcomes, need satisfaction, goal or value achievement) associated with each considered alternative. Typically, these consequences derive from consumers' actions involved with owning and using the alternative brands in question. The means-end approach claims that the most important choice criteria in a decision are the *anticipated experiences or consequences* associated with the various choice alternatives. Stated differently, consequences (not attributes) are the consumers' focal concern.

The means-end approach recognizes that consumers are concerned with both positive and negative experiences (benefits to be sought or risks to be avoided). Thus, consumers evaluate choice alternatives in terms of both the positive and negative consequences that are most personally relevant to them. As a general principle, therefore, consumers are likely to select the alternative that maximizes the positive outcomes and minimizes the negative ones.

In conclusion, the means-end approach provides a conceptual framework for understanding how consumers use choice criteria in the decision process and a methodology (laddering interviews) for identifying those factors. Essentially, the means-end approach treats consumers' choice criteria as means-end chains of linked consequences at different levels of abstraction. Thus, the means-end approach can identify what choice criteria are used by consumers to evaluate and select among choice alternatives and also explain why those particular choice criteria are salient or self-relevant to consumers. In this sense, then, researchers can use the means-end approach not only to describe consumer decision making but also to understand it.

A (Very) Brief History

The conceptual and measurement (laddering) basis for the means-end approach was developed over the past two decades through the efforts of Tom Reynolds and Jonathan Gutman. In marketing, the current interest in the means-end approach began with the seminal work of Gutman and Reynolds in the late 1970s (cf. Gutman, 1978, 1982; Gutman & Reynolds, 1979). The roots of the means-end approach, however, extend back much further to early economists' visions of consumers who calculate expected utility by considering the value of the consequences of their actions and to earlier work in marketing.

Various marketing scholars have explored aspects of a means-end approach, although no one has yet developed a complete and formalized means-end theory. Among the earliest of these was John Howard (1963, 1977) whose several books and general model of buyer behavior (Howard & Sheth, 1969) included many means-end ideas. In the early 1970s, Grey Advertising developed an interesting benefit chain model (Young & Feigen, 1975) that generated considerable interest. Myers' (1976) benefit structure analysis added to that interest. A flurry of means-end flurry of activity occurred later in the 1970s with an early means-end chain proposed by Geistfeld, Sproles, and Badenhop (1977), Cohen (1979), and Hirschman (1979). All of these discussions shared several common characteristics and assumptions that reveal their means-end nature. Each author recognized that consumers' product-related knowledge exists at different levels of abstraction and that these levels are hierarchically related. Although each model portrayed these levels a bit differently, most included the concrete level of actual, physical product attributes as well as a more abstract and personal level containing emotions, goals, and values.

Other important theoretical ideas and measurement techniques that contributed to the development of the means-end approach include the personal construct theory of George Kelly (1955) and the important marketing concept of benefit segmentation (Haley, 1968). With the ubiquitous multiattribute work of the 1970s, researchers became used to measuring product attributes, functional benefits, and consumers' values (Rokeach, 1973; Vinson, Scott, & Lamont, 1978). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, researchers began to combine these early intellectual elements with ideas from cognitive psychology about associative networks and levels of abstraction to form what is now called the means-end approach (cf. Gutman, 1982, 1984; Olson & Reynolds, 1983).

Despite initial interest in the means-end approach, relatively few researchers worked with means-end approach during the 1980s. Reynolds and Gutman (cf. Gutman & Reynolds, 1979; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984, 1988) were the primary proponents of the means-end approach during this period. More recently, researchers have attempted to refine and clarify the conceptual foundations of the means-end approach (Gutman, 1990, 1991; Walker & Olson, 1991), although that process is by no means complete. Several chapters in this volume contribute to a clearer theoretical exposition of means-end approach (especially see Section V, this volume), but additional work is necessary to complete this project.

As is typical in other domains, means-end researchers devoted most of their attention to methodological issues, including developing measures and refining the analysis procedures. In particular, researchers worked to develop the personal interviewing procedures called laddering. In 1988, Reynolds and Gutman published an important paper on laddering techniques, which is reprinted here as chapter 2. (In addition, this volume contains two chapters on laddering methods: chap. 3 presents a critical commentary on laddering problems with laddering, and chap. 4 discusses further advancements in laddering techniques). The methodological focus also addressed data coding and data analysis, including computer-assisted data analysis (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995); alternative ways of modeling means-end data (Aurifeille & Vallette-Florence, 1995; Vallette-Florence & Rapacchi, 1991), and alternative graphic presentations of means-end maps (Gengler, Klenosky, & Mulvey, 1995).

To summarize, the published research to date has increased our knowledge about the means-end approach, its techniques, and its applications. Unfortunately, most means-end research is proprietary, consulting applications to practical marketing problems. However, several of the projects that have been released to be made public are represented in this volume (see Sections III and IV, this volume).

The Basic Means-End Model

In the most general means-end formulation, consumers have three levels of product-related knowledge—product attributes, the consequences or outcomes of using a product, and the broad goals or values that may be satisfied by use of that product (cf. chap. 4 in Peter & Olson, 1999). These three levels of consumer knowledge are combined to form a simple, hierarchical chain of associations:

Attributes → Consequences → Values

This set of associations is called a means-end chain because consumers see the product and its attributes as a means to an end. The desired *end* involves satisfaction of self-relevant consequences and values. The *chain* is the set of connections or linkages between attributes, consequences, and values. These linkages or associations have a hierarchical quality in that they connect concepts at a more concrete level of meaning (product attributes) to concepts at a more abstract level (values).

The means-end approach implies that product attributes, per se, have little or no importance or relevance to consumers. Instead, attributes have meaning and value for consumers largely in terms of the consequences they are perceived to bring about. The end consequence in a means-end chain is often a personal goal or a life value the consumer is striving to achieve.

The simplest means-end chain model links attributes to consequences to values. Some researchers have proposed more complex means-end chains that distinguish finer gradations of attributes and consequences. Consider the six-level model described by Olson and Reynolds (1983).

Concrete Attributes → Abstract Attributes → Functional Outcomes →
Psychosocial Outcomes → Instrumental Values → Terminal Values

This means-end model connects the tangible, concrete attributes of a product to highly abstract and intangible personal and emotional values (goals or needs) through a chain of increasingly relevant abstract outcomes that also become increasingly personal, emotional, motivating, and self-relevant. Most researchers agree that this rather complex, six-level model is not necessary for most business applications or even for most theoretical purposes. Thus, a four-level model has eventually become the “standard” (most common) means-end chain.

Attributes→Functional Consequences → Psychosocial Consequences
→ Values or Goals

To summarize, the means-end approach first identifies which choice consumers consider in evaluating alternative actions and selecting a chosen alternative. These personally relevant factors are the basis for consumers’ preferences and are likely to be the most powerful components of an effective positioning strategy. Second, the means-end approach provides the critical understanding of why these factors are salient in the decision-making process by identifying the personally relevant consequences of the choice criteria, as seen by consumers. These consequences can exist at different levels of abstraction, from immediate functional outcomes to more personally psychological consequences to highly personal and subjective life goals or values.

Importance of Consequences

Understanding consequences is key to understanding the means-end approach. Although consequences can be modeled at varying levels of abstraction (cf.

Gutman, 1982; Olson & Reynolds, 1983), two levels of consequences are sufficient for most marketing analyses. During consumption, product features or attributes produce immediate and tangible consequences that are experienced directly by consumers. (A laundry detergent "gets stains out.") These outcomes are called *functional consequences*. In turn, functional consequences can lead to higher level, more personal consequences that are more affective or emotional. These outcomes can be of two *types—psychological consequences* (I feel like a good homemaker) and *social consequences* (Others will notice my clean clothes). We combine both types of outcomes into psychosocial consequences.

The means-end approach emphasizes that the connections, links, or associations between concepts at different levels of abstraction carry or create the meaning of any one concept. The meaning of any one concept is given by the other concepts to which it is connected. Stated differently, the reasons why each attribute is salient (or personally relevant) are given by the chains of consequences each attribute produces or leads to. Thus, means-end chains of linked consequences are the basis for the evaluation of the attribute (Is this attribute a good thing or a bad thing [for me]? How good or bad is it [for me]?).

A related implication of a focus on consequences or outcomes is the accompanying focus on behavior. Most of the consequences associated with the attributes of a product occur, either directly or indirectly, as a function of behaviors performed by consumers. This simple point is very important. By themselves, attributes can not have direct consequences. Rather, consumers must perform behaviors, particularly product usage behaviors, that then generate those consequences. This simple point is so obvious that one can miss its importance. Attributes, taken alone, have no consequences, and thus have no relevance. Consequences occur only when the consumer buys and consumes (or uses) the product and thereby experiences the consequences of use. For example, to experience the consequences of pleasurable taste and hunger reduction of a candy bar, one must first buy the candy bar, open the wrapper, and eat the candy bar. If the consumer does not perform these behaviors, the consequences will not occur. Note that the consequences the consumer experiences are partly due to the product attributes and partly due to the consumption behaviors of the consumer (eating very fast produces a different experience than slowly eating and savoring the candy bar). Of course, marketers might also be interested in other types of consequences associated with candybar consumption, such as littering, in which case they would be interested in other behaviors, such as discarding the wrapper.

APPLICATIONS OF MEANS-END THEORY TO CONSUMER DECISION MAKING

The essence of the means-end view of consumer decision-making is that consumers make decisions to solve problems (obtain desired consequences), and those consequences are relevant considerations in decision making because of their perceived relation with the goals or values that are salient in that decision context. Thus, in making decisions about which products or brands to buy, consumers necessarily focus on consequences (outcomes or experiences), rather than attributes. Stated differently, products or product attributes, per se, are not inherently important to consumers. Rather, consumers think about likely solutions to their problems when making purchase decisions.

Once a marketing problem has been clearly framed as a distinct consumer decision, the means-end approach (laddering interviews and data analysis) is used to address two key issues concerning consumer decision-making: What choice criteria do consumers use to evaluate and choose among the choice alternatives? Why are these choice criteria personally relevant to these consumers?

To dig deeper in consumers' decision-making process, it is especially critical to identify the choice alternatives that each consumer considers in the focal decision of interest. The specific choice criteria and their particular relevance (meaning) to the consumer are highly constrained by the unique contextual details of the choice situation. The decision context includes the choice set of alternatives that the consumer considers. For example, the researcher might ask: "Over the past year, what brands of soft drinks did you buy?" Thus, a buyer of cola soft drinks might identify three brands that he or she sometimes buys—Coke, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper. These brands constitute the *consideration set* of choice alternatives the consumer might consider on any given choice occasion. This consideration set of choice alternatives has a critically important contextual influence on the choice criteria.

Eliciting Choice Criteria

There are various ways of eliciting choice criteria. (Several chapters in this volume provide detailed examples). As one example, the researcher might first establish the relative portion of a consumer's purchase choices devoted to each alternative by simply asking: "Over the past year, what percentage of your purchases would you say go to each brand?" The consumer might respond: "Coke 60%, Pepsi 30%, and Dr. Pepper 10%." With this context, established, the interviewer can then elicit choice criteria for each choice decision comparison: "When choosing between Coke and Pepsi, what factors do you consider?"

Identifying Equities

Alternatively, the researcher could ask a more direct question designed to address a deeper aspect of the decision-making process: “Why do you buy Coke more often than Pepsi?” Also, “Why do you buy Pepsi more often than Dr. Pepper?” Such questioning is designed to elicit the positive factors that attract the consumer to one brand, relative to another, in a very specific choice context. If those positive factors are strongly connected with a particular brand by many consumers, they can be considered equities by the marketing company. *Equities* are the positive factors that attract consumers to the brand. In a real sense, these equities are the basis for *brand equity,* as they provide much of the financial value of a brand. These various equities about the brand are really a set of mental representations (perceptual orientations or meanings) in the minds of a group of consumers.

Identifying Disequities

Likewise, the negative factors that influence consumers’ decision making (choice criteria that repel consumers from a brand) also must be identified and understood. These negative factors, if associated with a particular brand by many consumers, might be considered disequities. *Disequities* are the aversive factors that keep consumers from buying a brand or from buying it more often. These unfavorable meanings in consumers’ minds reduce or limit the financial value of the brand—they reduce brand equity.

Disequities can be elicited in a similar fashion to equities. Continuing the soft drink example, the researcher could ask: “Why don’t you buy Coke more often (or, all the time)? Why don’t you buy Pepsi more often than Coke? Why don’t you purchase Dr. Pepper more frequently?” This line of questioning will elicit negative choice criteria that are specific to each brand.

Understanding Personal Relevance

Once the four framing issues have established the context of a clearly defined decision, including specific choice alternatives (e.g., buying Coke vs. Pepsi vs. Dr. Pepper), the means-end interviewing can proceed to determine the reasons why the choice criteria are personally relevant to the consumer. This requires laddering interviewing methods (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984, 1988). The interviewer then can ask laddering questions (“why is_______important to you?”) to establish the reasons why these choice criteria are important (salient, or self-relevant) in the consumers’ decision-making process. (See Section II of this volume.) The elicitation methods for identifying choice criteria and the subsequent laddering interview will vary depending on the decision history of each consumer. For instance, if one consumer buys only Coke, all laddering would focus on the reasons for that preference (potential equities) and perhaps reasons why other brands are unacceptable (disequities for other brands).

Grounding in Context

Much of the past decision-making research treats brand choice decisions in general terms; context is not considered at all or only in a shallow manner. Thus, researchers usually take a more general approach to eliciting choice criteria. “When you think about buying soft drinks, what factors do you consider in your decision?” Now we can recognize that this approach mostly elicits positive reasons for buying one or more of the brands, but these choice criteria are not linked to particular brands. Thus an analysis of brand equities and disequities at the brand level is not possible. This then severely restricts the decision-making insights that can yield useful marketing strategies at the brand level. Many of the chapters in this volume provide excellent examples of the importance of context.

SUMMARY

The means-end approach is a powerful tool for business and academic researchers. The means-end approach is particularly effective in helping researchers and managers understand consumer decision making about virtually anything, including purchase choices at the brand or product category levels. The means-end approach is capable of providing detailed understanding of very specific aspects of consumer decision making (as illustrated in several chapters of this volume). Managers then can use these insights to develop highly focused marketing and communication strategies that are intended to influence those decision processes (see chap. 9, this volume). The insights into consumer decision making provided by the means-end approach also are relevant for academic consumer researchers interested in developing deep understandings of the processes by which consumers actually make decisions.

The chapters in this book illustrate all the aspects of the means-end approach discussed here. We hope you enjoy reading them.

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II

USING LADDERING METHODS TO IDENTIFY MEANS-END CHAINS

SECTION OVERVIEW

The laddering interview is the preferred method for identifying consumers' means-end chains. Basically, *laddering* is a semistructured qualitative method in which respondents describe, freely in their own words, why something is important to them. The qualitative nature of laddering derives from the open-ended response format, the freedom of respondents to respond to questions in their own words, and of course, the necessity for researchers to interpret the meaning of those responses. Unlike some qualitative methods, however, the laddering interview has a definite structure that derives from the ordering of the questions and the use of standard probing questions to gain additional responses. Interviewers have a definite agenda to follow and the questioning flows similarly for each interview. In these senses, then, laddering is considered a structured qualitative method.

The basic laddering interview has two key steps or processes. First, the interviewer must identify the key choice criteria that consumers claim to use in making a purchase choice from among a considered set of alternatives (perhaps several different brands). Second, the interviewer seeks to learn why those choice criteria are important, salient, or relevant to the consumer. This is done by asking a series of simple "why" questions ("Why is it important to you that your bank is located on the way to work?").

The means-end approach assumes that consumers value certain product attributes because those attributes are seen as instrumental in producing (or leading to) important (self-relevant) outcomes or consequences. The laddering interviewer continues to probe for higher ordered, more abstract reasons for salience or importance by asking why each mentioned consequence is important to the consumer ("Why is it important to you that your bank be conveniently located?”). Nearly always, a consequence is important because it leads to another, more abstract consequence (“A convenient location gives me more time with my family”). Some laddering interviews reach the level of personal values—a type of very abstract consequence (“Spending more time with my family makes me feel like a good parent”). Most laddering interviews stop at the basic value level—the “end” of a means-end chain—because the value has no higher level consequences to which it is seen as leading.

As with most qualitative methods, the interviewer is the key instrument in laddering. Laddering data are as good as the interviewers who collect them. Although seemingly simple and easy, laddering interviews actually are rather complex. Good laddering interviews demand intelligent and experienced interviewers. Interviewers should understand the conceptual basis for the means-end approach. They should understand the logic of the laddering interview and know why certain things are to be probed and emphasized. Interviewers must be able to quickly determine which concepts are important and which are not, in order to determine which concepts and comments to follow up and which to ignore.

Conducting actual interviews under the supervision of a skilled interviewer is the ideal way to gain the requisite knowledge about laddering. To some extent, however, interviewers can learn useful information through reading about laddering techniques. This section contains reprints of two of the best published papers about doing laddering interviews. Each chapter describes several interviewing techniques to use in conducting a laddering interview. This section also includes two original papers, one of which is critical of aspects of laddering, and the other of which offers new ideas for improving laddering interviews. Together, these four chapters review the basic laddering approach, identify problem areas in laddering interviews, offer criticisms of laddering methods, and present a wealth of ideas for conducting laddering interviews.

- Chapter 2 by Reynolds and Gutman is the now-classic exposition of the methods used in a laddering interview. The authors describe a variety of techniques and various “tricks of the trade” for solving many of the problems that arise during laddering interviews. Their chapter is a must read for less-experienced laddering interviewers, but even laddering experts can benefit from a rereading of this important chapter.
- In chapter 3, Grunert, Beekman, and Sorensen take a critical look at laddering. The authors identify what they see as the critical conceptual underpinnings of laddering, and they use that perspective to discuss the problems and shortcomings of the traditional laddering interview. The authors make an interesting distinction between two types or levels of laddering rigor—they contrast the typical hard laddering approach (following a fairly rigid sequence of questioning) with a looser, soft approach. Chapter 3 helps explicate the usually implicit assumptions underlying the means-end approach. Perhaps it

will stimulate researchers to develop alternative laddering methods that are consistent with those theoretical assumptions.

- In chapter 4, Reynolds, Dethloff, and Westberg present a number of newer methods and techniques for conducting laddering interviews. Many of these ideas have not appeared previously in print. This chapter is an excellent instruction guide in “advanced laddering techniques.”
- In chapter 5, Gengler and Reynolds focus on the analysis of laddering data. They present a detailed example of how laddering data is analyzed to provide deep understanding of consumer decision making. The authors also show how the Consumer Decision Map (CDM) can be used to guide managers’ thinking about appropriate advertising strategy.

Taken together, these four chapters provide an excellent overview of laddering methods, conceptual foundations of laddering, and applications of laddering results. Novice interviewers will learn a great deal about how to collect means-end data using laddering interviews. Armed with this knowledge and sufficient practice, most people can become competent laddering interviewers. Even experienced laddering interviewers will find useful hints and techniques to incorporate in their toolbox of laddering methods. We hope these chapters encourage researchers to undertake research that will contribute to further developments of laddering methodology.

2

Laddering Theory, Method, Analysis, and Interpretation

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Personal values research in marketing has recently received a substantial amount of attention from both academics and practitioners. This more in-depth profiling of the consumer and his or her relationship to products offers potential not only for understanding the "cognitive" positionings of current products but also permits the development of positioning strategies for new products. Endorsing this more psychological view of the marketplace, Sheth (1983) suggested that to be competitive in marketing products in the 1980s, both researchers and management are going to have to, if they have not already, adopt this consumer-based orientation rather than one that merely focuses on product characteristics.

The application of the personal values perspective to the marketing of consumer products can be classified into two theoretically grounded perspectives, macro representing sociology and micro representing psychology (Reynolds, 1985). The *macro approach* refers to standard survey research methodology combined with a classification scheme to categorize respondents into predetermined clusters or groups (e.g., VALS methodology of the Stanford Research Institute). Products and their positioning strategies are then directed to appeal to these general target groups, such as the Merrill Lynch solitary bull appealing to the "achiever" orientation whose desire is to stand out and "get ahead of the pack" (Plummer, 1985).

Reynolds (1985) noted, although strong on face validity, these rather general classifications fail to provide an understanding, specifically, of how the concrete aspects of the product fit into the consumer's life. As such, the macro survey approach only gives part of the answer, namely, the overall value orientation of target segments within the marketplace. Missing are the key defining components of a positioning strategy—the linkages between the product and the personally relevant role it has in the life of the consumer.

The more psychological perspective offered by the micro approach, based on means-end theory (Gutman, 1982), specifically focused on the linkages between the attributes that exist in products (the means), the consequences for the consumer provided by the attributes, and the personal values (the “ends”) the consequences reinforce. The means-end perspective closely parallels the origin of attitude research represented by Expectancy-Value Theory (Rosenberg, 1956), which posited that consumer actions produce consequences and that consumers learn to associate particular consequences with particular product attributes they have reinforced through their buying behavior. The common premise, then, is that consumers learn to choose products containing attributes that are instrumental to achieving their desired consequences. Means-End Theory simply specifies the rationale underlying why consequences are important, namely, personal values.

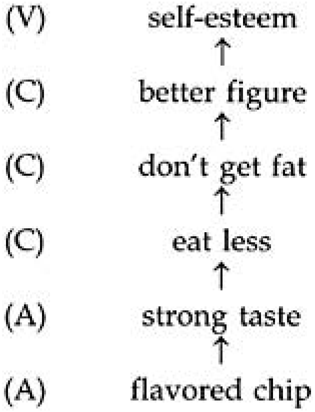
The focus of this chapter is on detailing the specifics of the in-depth interviewing and analysis methodology, termed “laddering” (Gutman & Reynolds, 1979; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984a), for uncovering means-end hierarchies defined by these key elements and their linkages or connections. The combination of connected elements, or ladder, represents the linkage between the product and the perceptual process of consumers, which as pointed out previously, yields a more direct and thus more useful understanding of the consumer.

LADDERING

Laddering refers to an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique used to develop an understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self, following Means-End Theory (Gutman, 1982). Laddering involves a tailored interviewing format using primarily a series of directed probes, typified by the “Why is that important to you?” question, with the express goal of determining sets of linkages between the key perceptual elements across the range of attributes (A), consequences (C), and values (V). These association networks, or ladders, referred to as perceptual orientations, represent combinations of elements that serve as the basis for distinguishing between and among products in a given product class.

It is these higher order knowledge structures that we use to process information relative to solving problems (Abelson, 1981), which, in the consumer context, is represented by choice. Basically, distinctions at the different levels of abstraction, represented by the A-C-Vs, provide the consumer with more personally relevant ways in which products are grouped and categorized. Thus, the detailing and subsequent understanding of these higher level distinctions provides a perspective on how the product information is processed from what could be called a motivational perspective, in that the underlying reasons why an attribute or a consequence is important can be uncovered.

For example, the following ladder, starting with a basic distinction between types of snack chips, represents part of the data collection from a single subject in a salty-snack study:



These elements were sequentially elicited from the respondent as a function of the laddering technique's ability to cause the respondent to think critically about the connections between the product's attributes and, in this case, her personal motivations.

The analysis of laddering data such as this across respondents first involves summarizing the key elements by standard content-analysis procedures (Kassarjian, 1977), although bearing in mind the levels of abstraction, A-C-V, conceptualization. Then a summary table can be constructed representing the number of connections between the elements. From this summary table dominant connections can then be graphically represented in a tree diagram, termed a hierarchical value map (HVM). (This type of cognitive map, unlike those output from traditional factor analysis or multidimensional scaling methods, is structural in nature and represents the linkages or associations across levels of abstraction [attributes-consequences-values] without reference to specific brands.) Unfortunately, although basically accurate, this general description of the analysis process has not been specific enough to permit first-time analysts (or their superiors) to feel comfortable with dealing with all the vagaries of qualitative data of this type. Thus, a step-by-step procedure, including both the analysis and the assessment of the resulting map, will be detailed by way of example later.

Interpretation of this type of qualitative, in-depth information permits an understanding of consumers' underlying personal motivations with respect to a given product class. Each unique pathway from an attribute to a value represents a possible perceptual orientation with respect to viewing the product category. Herein lies the opportunity to differentiate a specific brand, not by focusing on a product attribute, but rather by communicating how it delivers higher level consequences and ultimately how it is personally relevant, essentially creating an "image positioning." This understanding typically serves as the basis for the development of advertising strategies, each representing a distinct "cognitive" positioning, which reinforces the various levels of abstraction for a given perceptual orientation (Olson & Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984b).

In sum, the express purpose of the interviewing process is to elicit attribute-consequence-value associations consumers have with respect to a product or service class. The general notion is to get the respondent to respond and then to react to that response. Thus, laddering consists of a series of directed probes based on mentioned distinctions initially obtained from perceived differences between and among specific brands of products or services. Again, after the initial distinction obtained by contrasting brands is elicited, all subsequent higher level elements are not brand specific. The laddering results can be used to create an HVM summarizing all interviews across consumers, which is interpreted as representing dominant perceptual orientations, or "ways of thinking," with respect to the product or service category.

OBJECTIVES

Since the introduction of the laddering methodology into the consumer research domain, numerous applications, both applied and academic, have been executed (Gutman, 1984; Gutman & Alden, 1984; Gutman, Reynolds, & Fiedler, 1984; Olson & Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds & Gutman, 1984a, 1984b; Reynolds & Jamieson, 1984). Again, the primary application has been to develop a cognitive hierarchical value map indicating the interrelation of the attributes, consequences, and personal values for a given product or service category.

Unfortunately, the term laddering in the marketing community has become a somewhat generic term representing merely a qualitative, in-depth interviewing process (Morgan, 1984), without reference to either its theoretical underpinnings (Gutman, 1982) or the rather critical distinction between the interviewing process and analytical methods used to derive meaning from the resulting data (Durgee, 1985). Not only have these critical distinctions been overlooked, but even the standard definition of laddering as an interviewing methodology, to date, has not been addressed in the academic literature. Given the value of this type of in-depth understanding of the consumer, in particular, the potential with respect to the specification of more accurate and appropriate positioning strategies, a comprehensive documentation of this research approach is needed.

Thus, it is the primary objective of this article to detail the interviewing techniques that pertain to laddering in order to provide a foundation for both its application as well as subsequent method evaluation. A secondary objective is to provide a detailed description of how the analysis of this specific type of qualitative data is performed. The third and final objective is to demonstrate how the laddering results are interpreted with respect to developing and understanding perceptual orientations and product positionings.

INTERVIEW ENVIRONMENT

General Considerations

An interviewing environment must be created such that the respondents are not threatened and are thus willing to be introspective and look inside themselves for the underlying motivations behind their perceptions of a given product class. This process can be enhanced by suggesting in the introductory comments that there are no right or wrong answers, thus relaxing the respondent, and further reinforcing the notion that the entire purpose of the interview is simply to understand the ways in which the respondent sees this particular set of consumer products. Put simply, the respondent is positioned as the expert. The goal of the questioning is to understand the way in which the respondent sees the world, where the world is the product domain comprised of relevant actors, behaviors, and contexts. The approaches and techniques discussed in this article are designed to assist the respondent in critically examining the assumptions underlying their everyday commonplace behaviors. Wicker (1985) discussed how researchers might use some of these same devices in breaking out of their traditional modes of thinking.

Importantly, interviewers must position themselves as merely trained facilitators of this discovery process. In addition, due to the rather personal nature of the later probing process, it is advisable to create a slight sense of vulnerability on the part of the interviewer. This can be accomplished by initially stating that many of the questions may seem some-what obvious and possibly even stupid, associating this predicament with the interviewing process, which requires the interviewer to follow certain specific guidelines.

Obviously, as with all qualitative research, the interviewer must maintain control of the interview, which is somewhat more difficult in this context due to the more abstract concepts that are the focus of the discussion. This can be best accomplished by minimizing the response options, in essence being as direct as possible with the questioning, while still following what appears to be an unstructured format. By continually asking the “Why is that important to you?” question, the interviewer reinforces the perception of being genuinely interested and thus tends to command the respect and control of the dialogue.

By creating a sense of involvement and caring in the interview, the interviewer is able to get below the respondent’s surface reasons and rationalizations to discover the more fundamental reasons underlying the respondent’s perceptions and behavior. Understanding the respondent involves putting aside all internal references and biases and putting oneself in the respondent’s place. It is critical that rapport be established before the actual in-depth probing is initiated as well as maintained during the course of the interview. Basically, the interviewer must instill confidence in the respondent so the opinions expressed are perceived as simply being recorded rather than judged.

Also critical to the interviewing process is the ability of the interviewer to identify the elements brought forth by the respondent in terms of the level of abstraction framework. Thus, a thorough familiarity with the means-end theory is essential.

Sensitive areas will frequently produce superficial responses created by the respondent to avoid introspection about the real reasons underlying the respondent’s behavior. A clinical sensitivity is further required of the interviewer to both identify and deal with these frequent and potentially most informative types of dialogue.

As in all interview situations, because the respondents will react directly in accordance with the interviewer’s reactions—both verbal and nonverbal—it is vital to make the respondent feel at ease. One should carefully avoid potentially antagonistic or aggressive actions. Moreover, to avoid any interview-demand characteristics, nonverbal cues such as approval, disapproval, surprise or hostility, or implying rejection should be avoided. Put simply, the interviewer should be perceived as a very interested yet neutral recorder of information.

LADDERING METHODS

Eliciting Distinctions

Laddering probes begin with distinctions made by the individual respondent concerning perceived, meaningful differences between brands of products. Having made a distinction the interviewer first makes sure it is bipolar, requiring the respondent to specify each pole. The respondent is then asked which pole of the distinction is preferred. The preferred pole then serves as the basis for asking some version of the “Why is that important to you?” question. The following overviews three general methods of eliciting distinctions that have proven satisfactory. The interview outline generally includes at least two distinct methods of eliciting distinctions to make sure no key element is overlooked.

Triadic Sorting (Kelly, 1955)

Providing the respondent with sets of three products as in the Repertory Grid procedure is one way to elicit responses from a respondent. Following are instructions for a wine cooler study which used triads to elicit initial distinctions.

> Instructions for Triads
>
> You will be presented with five groups of three different wine coolers. For each group of three you will have the opportunity to tell me how you think about the differences among the coolers. For example, if you were given a group of three cars: Lincoln Continental, Mustang, and Cadillac you might say “car maker” as a way of thinking about them. Two are made by Ford and one is made by General Motors. Another way to think about them is size—big versus small. Of course, there are many different ways that you could think about the cars, for example:
>
> - high styling versus ordinary styling
> - economy versus luxury
> - sporty versus traditional
>
> There are no right or wrong answers. As I present you with each group, take a moment to think about the three wine coolers.
>
> Specifically, I want you to tell me some important way in which two of the three wine coolers mentioned are the same and thereby different from the third. Again, when I show you the names of the three wine coolers, think of some overall way in which two of the coolers are the same and yet different from the third. If your response for one group of wine coolers is the same as for a previous group, try to think of another way in which they differ.

Preference-Consumption Differences

Preference differences can also be a useful device for eliciting distinctions. Respondents, after providing a preference order for, say, brands of coolers, might be asked to tell why they prefer their most preferred brand to their second most preferred brand, or more simply to say why one particular brand is their most preferred (or second most preferred, least preferred, etc.) brand.

To illustrate:

> You said your most preferred brand is California Cooler and your second most was Bartles and Jaymes. What is it, specifically, that makes California Cooler more desirable?

Along these same lines, one might ask about preference and usage and query instances where liked brands are used infrequently or less well-liked brands are used more frequently. This device worked well in a proprietary study of snack chips. Differences between what people like and what they actually used opened