Information as an Element of Consumer Relations

Introduction

Information is an indispensable element accompanying consumers’ behaviour on the market. It is not only essential for shaping opinions about particular alternatives, but it also has the potential to initiate the whole decision process, enables judgement about the way of satisfying needs, influences the building of consumers’ attitudes and opinions concerning products and companies. Eventually, its reliability has a considerable influence on the opinion about a product and the very purchase process, as well as the emergence of the purchase dissonance, and consequently – the feeling of dissatisfaction with the product or service.

According to the observations made, the awareness of how important information is does not seem widespread among market institutions, even in the case of branches where the product is complex and advanced. Managing strategies very often treat widely understood information as a way of persuading consumers to act according to the company’s expectations, without the knowledge of the long-term effects of providing unreliable information. This fact results in the deterioration of the company’s image, trust put in it by customers, and consequently, losing clients.

The aim of this article is to present the importance of information for the purchase process, point to the possible consequences of lack of information, its unreliability and qualitative or quantitative maladjustment to consumers’ needs and expectations, as well as formulate a set of recommendations which will enable companies to shape and manage their information policy appropriately. A review of both Polish and foreign literature on consumer behaviour will constitute the basis for the analysis.

1. Information as part of the purchase process

Any information on brands, products or manufacturers available to the consumer is one of the key factors that determine the course of the purchase process. Cognitive and holistic models of consumer behaviour alike, emphasize the vital role of knowledge, be it obtained prior to, or during the specific stages of the buyer’s interaction with the market. What the consumer originally knows, combined with any new information they receive, will not only initiate the decision-making process as such, but also influence the buyer’s consecutive choices, evaluation of the available alternatives and the purchase process at hand, and ultimately determine their post-purchase satisfaction or dissonance.

The demand for information is activated when the consumer recognises a particular need or is faced with a problem that requires a solution. Subsequently, the consumer first turns to their own, inner sources of knowledge and experience gained in the course of any prior decision-making cycles. It should be noted at this point that the data available from by such sources may not necessarily be either comprehensive or adequate. Decisions are often based on simplified solutions, sufficient to satisfy the need at hand and deeply rooted in the decision-maker’s memory, yet frequently far from optimum, supported mainly by a habitual preference or a sense of loyalty towards a given brand.

However, when the consumer’s own knowledge proves insufficient, one has to search for the required information externally. It is noteworthy, that such a search need not necessarily be an active process. In some cases it merely involves a more intensive, more attentive, yet still passive form of processing the various information imparted to the decision-

---

2 Ibidem, p. 264.
maker\(^3\). In particular, such passive reception may often take on an entirely involuntary form, quite unrelated to the specific decision-making processes, when the consumer acquires information somewhat “inadvertently” rather than being motivated by any actual needs\(^4\).

As defined in literature, there are four main groups of sources from which a consumer may potentially obtain required information. These include personal sources (such as family members, friends, acquaintances), commercial sources (advertisements, manufacturer or vendor run websites, shop-assistants, labels), public sources (mass media, consumer organisations providing information on products and their quality), as well as practical sources mostly related to direct contacts with particular products, physical examination, testing or exploitation.

Pertaining to the above, the particular significance of personal sources of information ought to be noted\(^5\). Their value for the consumer stems from, among other factors, our innate inclination towards exchange of information and establishing interpersonal relations, as well as our belief that the act of having a conversation can offset and minimise the risks and uncertainties experienced during a purchase process, just as it can abate our general anxiety or unease\(^6\).

On the one hand, such sources are undoubtedly the most effective\(^8\), on the other, from the consumer’s standpoint, they also guarantee a high level of credibility due to, among other factors\(^9\):

- the interlocutor’s lack of vested interest in providing information on the given product – which encourages the sense of impartiality, as the opinions voiced are not aimed at encouraging or discouraging the consumer from making a particular choice; the same has been confirmed by research showing that when selecting the most reliable source, we tend to opt for one expressing a mixture of positive and negative comments\(^10\);
- the possibility of interaction between the consumer and the person providing information – the consumer may ask additional questions or voice a doubt; notably, such interaction may also take place in the case of some commercial sources, for instance while enquiring for additional information from a member of sales staff, although in this case the thus obtained knowledge does not meet the criterion of impartiality referred to above;
- a possibly close personal relationship between the consumer and the interlocutor, usually a close acquaintance or a loved one, in either case someone trusted and relied upon.

Given the above circumstance, the methods by which the consumer utilises these personal sources of information constantly evolve into more elaborate forms. Elements such as the involvement of opinion leaders or experts, and the development of complex consumer information networks\(^11\), are gradually becoming a standard, which needs to be taken into account while creating any marketing strategy.

---


\(^4\) G. Antonides, W. Fred van Raaij, *Zachowanie…*, p. 266.


\(^6\) See also: *Psychologia ekonomiczna* [Economic Psychology], collective work ed. by T. Tyszka, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2004, p. 428.


It is also impossible to neglect the importance of the internet in the distribution of information among consumers. It has become a means which allows for free and wide-ranging exchange of comments, opinions and sentiments\(^\text{12}\), with the additional incentive of its virtually unrestricted availability (can be used anytime and anywhere), anonymity and freedom of any geographical or quantitative barriers that would in any way limit the number of people partaking in the discussions. As shown by research, the various motives for using the internet as a search and exchange tool for opinions and comments on various products, are not limited to direct involvement in a decision-making process at hand (Information motives), but may also originate from a desire to become a member of a certain community of product users (Support and community motives), as well as the actual entertainment factor of participating in the information exchange process (Entertainment motives)\(^\text{13}\).

Any information acquired from external sources is subsequently processed, thus allowing the consumer to\(^\text{14,15}\):
- potentially identify certain, previously unrealised needs,
- reach a better-grounded decision based on the acquired and processed information on the available alternatives; potentially make a decision to postpone the actual purchase;
- reduce the sense of uncertainty and taking a risk\(^\text{16}\),
- postpone a potentially difficult decision until sufficient information has been gathered and analysed,
- validate an earlier decision or choice, strengthen one’s confidence in the decisions already made (rationalisation),
- acquire information that may prove useful during the next purchase process, or gather information for purely cognitive reasons – thus far unrelated to any actual purchase process.

It should be noted, however, that while every consumer requires a certain amount of information before making a relatively rational decision, the actual volume of the information needed depends on the particular qualities of each decision-maker, as well as the context of the purchase-related situation they are faced with.

## 2. Diversity of informational needs

The demand for information necessary to make a choice and to carry on with the particular purchase, results, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, from a number of factors. However, before they are discussed and analysed, it may prove useful to refer to the concept of the economics of information acquisition\(^\text{17}\). It stipulates that regardless of the particular circumstances, the demand for information and the level of a consumer’s involvement in the process of its acquisition, will always reflect the relation between the potential cost of obtaining said knowledge and the potential benefits that may result from acquiring additional data.

By way of elaborating on the above, we may describe the process of information acquisition as a function of the following factors\(^\text{18}\):

---
\(^{12}\) C.P. Haughtvedt, K.A. Machleit, R. F. Yalch (ed.), *Online ...,* p. 35.
\(^{13}\) Ibidem, p. 44.
\(^{15}\) S. Smyczek, I. Sowa, *Konsument na rynku...,* p. 178.
1. the perceived aptitude for conducting such a search, determined by one’s educational background as well as the objective (how much information do I have?) and subjective (how do I evaluate what I have?) knowledge at one’s disposal;
2. the motivation to conduct such a search, strengthened by:
   a. perceived benefits of conducting a search;
   b. enduring involvement;
   c. need for cognition;
   d. shopping enthusiasm;
   and weakened by the perceived cost of performing the search.

According to the quoted model, the perceived benefits resulting from becoming involved in a search can additionally be strengthened by:
- perceived risks,
- financial involvement,
- involvement in the given purchase process,
- perceived differences between the particular products,
- the information necessary for the application of a given decision-making principle,
- the number of brands that need to be taken into account\(^{19}\),
- the desire to make the best decision possible,

Simultaneously, it is weakened by the sense of satisfaction with the results of previous purchase cycles – a consumer with a positive experience of the given brand will be less likely to pursue new solutions\(^{20}\) - as well as by the subjective knowledge of the product.

The perceived cost of information acquisition is determined by:
- complexity of the product, the more elaborate the product the higher the perceived cost of information acquisition;
- availability of information, whose increase reduces the perceived cost of acquisition,
- number of alternatives that need to be analysed,
- time pressure,
- prior knowledge, perceived subjectively – consumers who already have certain knowledge on the subject find it easier to acquire new information.

The above analysis, in-depth as it may be, does not exhaust all the possible factors that may determine the intensity and level of involvement in a search for information. The following elements have also been discussed in literature:
- limitations of a consumer’s informational capacity\(^{21}\) – the consumer may demand and expect vast amounts of information, but may be unable to process and utilise it productively;
- time horizon of the previous purchase – the longer the period since the consumer’s last purchase of a given product, the greater his informational demands\(^{22}\);
- consumer’s assumed role in the purchase process;
- reliability of the available sources of information and the possibility to judge their quality objectively;

---

\(^{19}\) See also: K. Mazurek-Łopacińska, Zachowania nabywców i ich konsekwencje marketingowe [Consumer Behaviour and its Consequences for Marketing], PWE, Warszawa 2003, p. 64.

\(^{20}\) See also: S. Śmyczek, I. Sowa, Konsument na rynku..., pp. 178-179.

\(^{21}\) See also: Psychologia ekonomiczna [Economic Psychology], collective work ed. by T. Tyszka, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2004, p. 429.

\(^{22}\) See also: S. Śmyczek, I. Sowa, Konsument na rynku..., p. 178.
• influence of experts and opinion leaders, as sources of information in the decision-making process.

Lastly, it should be noted that the above conditions refer to a situation, when consumers require and expect (albeit to a varying extent) to be provided with information before attempting any decision making. It has been observed, however, that in certain cases consumers tend to avoid the complex process of weighing out the advantages and disadvantages of particular brands or products, and rely on much simpler decision-making principles, whose underlying purpose is to allow making a choice with minimal informational involvement.  

3. Information in the process of shaping consumer relations

The aspects of information discussed above are vital for any business activity. With growing expectations towards information and the (already discussed) consumer involvement in the process of its acquisition, a deficiency or lack of such data may prove highly unsatisfactory and lead to a number of potentially harmful consequences for a company, including:

• declining confidence in the company and a growing mistrust towards commercial sources of information in general;
• dissemination of the decision-making process and increased importance of consumer information networks, opinion leaders and experts from the consumer’s milieu, whose opinions may not be favourable towards the given company;
• local or general uniformisation of the market, i.e. a tendency to sell a limited range of products, typically those with best documented characteristics;
• reduced awareness of differences between particular products;
• departure from the relatively rational decision-making processes towards processes based on intuition or hidden choice theories, in a situation when the consumer is provided with insufficient, relative to his expectations, information pertaining to the product or service that may satisfy his need;
• recurrent dissatisfaction with the product or service due to the incompatibility of the purchased product and the prior expectations stemming from (often intentionally) inaccurate information;

In the light of the above mentioned conditions, companies should pay close attention to the informational needs of their customers and adapt their market strategies accordingly, by:

• developing the process of marketing communication that will serve not only to induce, but also provide comprehensive information on the qualities of particular products or services;
• avoiding vagueness in any published information and steering clear of any ambiguities that may result from imprecise wording of the message, but also from the messages’ incompatibility with the receptive aptitude of the target customer;

23 Additional reading: A. Chaudhuri, Emotion and Reason ..., p. 73.
27 See also: R. Morgan, S. Hunt, The commitment trust ...
introducing interactive elements in commercial sources of information, thus allowing them to incorporate certain advantages of personal sources that seem to hold significant value for the customer;

further encouraging customers’ trust by integrating the pro-consumer approach into the company’s business model, thus providing objective and independent means of informing and educating the consumer;

at all costs avoiding publication of any erroneous, ambiguous or outdated information; avoiding manipulating information in order to encourage consumers to buy goods;

reducing the cost of information acquisition by providing clear descriptions of product characteristics, facilitating the access to information, or providing comparative descriptions of products;

marking a presence in non-commercial sources of information by e.g. contributing to consumer networks or interacting with opinion leaders and experts; this presence should go in the direction of objective information and interaction with consumers rather than typical promotion;

adapting the scope and character of the information provided to:
- the characteristics of the given product (its complexity, price) and market (the number of available alternatives),
- the target customer characteristics (their knowledge, educational background, perceived risks connected with a purchase),

Given the varying consumer expectations towards the actual volume of information, it would be advisable to consider a mechanism incorporating tiered informational bundles of increasingly detailed data to be offered on demand, which on the one hand would not overwhelm the consumers not willing to indulge in excessively complex information, while providing an opportunity to gain comprehensive knowledge to those buyers who expect it;

One should take into consideration the fact that in the light of the above mentioned conditions the use of the Internet as a platform of communication is especially important for building correct information policy. This results from the fact that the Internet significantly reduces the cost of obtaining information by ensuring convenient access to a big amount of it at the time convenient for the consumer. What is more, information published in the Internet is usually up-to-date, although not always reliable, verified and commented upon by the users. This encourages consumers to look for information by means of this source, as they do not have to verify it themselves and judge the quality of the knowledge offered.

Regardless of any above considerations, it should also be remembered that the quality of information depends on more than just integrity and reliability. Other contributing factors include its completeness, comprehensiveness, capacity for responding to the most frequently asked questions and doubts, the manner of differentiating the given product from its competitors, as well as the professional competence of its authors and providers.

One should also bear in mind that customers do not always look for the highest end products, but they do, in most cases, expect to be provided with objective knowledge that would allow them to make a rational choice from an array of alternatives within their financial reach. In the long run, incomplete, erroneous or intentionally misleading information eventually always leads to growing dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the company, which in turn results in the loss of further groups of potential customers.

One should also notice that an appropriate information policy, adjusted to the product and to consumers’ expectations, may become something more than only an element of the process of building a relationship between a company and its customers. In the case of the consumers displaying wider expectations concerning information on a given market, meeting such expectations will also be an element of building competitive advantage over other

---

28 See also: K. Mazurek-Łopacińska, *Zachowania nabywców…*, p. 344;
institutions, probably not oriented on the quality of information. The information about the product will become a value itself, only added to the product offered.

**Conclusion**

The intention of presenting the above set of recommendations has been to propose a basis for formulating information strategies or policies adjusted to the contemporary level of knowledge. Naturally, one should notice that these recommendations are not equally important for different markets, because of the diversity of their character, complexity of the product, typical consumer behaviour, knowledge of the product, the character of the decisions made, the feeling of risk, etc. In the light of such conditions, further detailed research concerning consumers’ expectations about information on particular markets in question is welcome.

**References**

3. *Psychologia ekonomiczna* [Economic Psychology], collective work ed. by T. Tyszka, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2004