

Consumer Behavior Illustrations in the Book of Proverbs

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Abstract

Marketing students and practitioners frequently face ethical questions about their discipline. Thus, professors often promote normative discussions in class as they integrate business and the Bible. However, descriptive discussions are also important (Chewning, 2001) as we try to bring the Bible into our lectures and discussions. For this reason, the authors use several passages from Proverbs and other relevant scriptures to illustrate ways of engaging students with consumer behavior concepts. Although the emphasis of the paper is on descriptive analysis, the authors conclude with some normative suggestions.

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Marketers frequently ponder important ethical questions such as: Is the marketing concept appropriate for Christians (Austin & Smith, 2005)? Is it acceptable to use psychological pricing methods (Porter, 1998)? Is it wrong to employ celebrities or other paid endorsers to speak to the merits of the marketer's product (Porter, 1998)? These normative questions are very important, of course, because they help us to make wise decisions. For example, in consumer behavior, these questions help us to understand under which conditions certain influence techniques should be off limits for the Christian. However, before students can answer the "should we be doing this" question they need to understand the underlying consumer behavior processes and the influence techniques associated with them. In our experience, many professors teach the consumer behavior or organizational behavior principles the same way that it would be taught at a secular university and wait to use biblical integration for the ethical dilemmas. Using the Bible at the earlier, descriptive stage should also prove to be valuable, however as it causes both the student and the professor to delve deeper into the Word. For this reason, we primarily use the book of Proverbs, referred to as wisdom literature, to illustrate several consumer behavior principles.

Reference Groups

Reference groups often influence a consumer's purchase of publicly consumed goods. The reference group's pressure influences the individual's beliefs, attitudes, values, and norms (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Biblically, reference groups have helped or hindered kings' (2 Kings 12:2, 1 Kings 11:1-8, 1 Kings 12:10) decision making. Solomon warns the reader of the negative influence of some reference groups when he writes, "My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, 'Come along with us; let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul; let's swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse'— my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths (Proverbs 1:10-15)." The Proverbial warning is still used today in many de-marketing campaigns. Many anti-drug campaigns employ disassociative reference groups when they show "losers" using drugs, for instance. Anti-drug campaigns use aspirational reference groups when they show "cool" people disapproving of drug use. Solomon urges his student to consider him as an aspirational reference group throughout the proverbs (Proverbs 3 for example). If we pursue wisdom as Solomon pursued wisdom then we will have length of days and years of life (Proverbs 3:2), peace (Proverbs 3:2), favor and good repute (Proverbs 3:4), healing for our body (Proverbs 3:8) and many other blessings. Who wouldn't want to be like Solomon after that testimonial?

The Liking Principle

Reference groups have power because we want to be liked. Joe Girard won the Number One Car Salesman title from Chevrolet for twelve consecutive years. Several factors probably played in role in Joe's success, but it's interesting to note that Joe sent a monthly greeting card to each of his customers with a single message: "I like you" (Cialdini, 1993). Thus, it is important to understand the factors that influence liking.

Salespeople frequently use impression management techniques to cause people to like them. Flattery, a common impression management technique, is viewed as deceptive in the Bible (Psalm 78:36, Romans 16:18, 1 Thessalonians 2:5). Unfortunately for the consumer or the unaware manager, the technique is effective nevertheless (Jude 1:16). Flattery may be unethical because of its falseness. But other, more honest impression management techniques such as positively presenting a situation or bearing good news (Cialdini, 1993; Howard, 1990; Kardes & Kimble, 1984) can also improve liking. Proverbs 16:21 points out that “sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness” (NAS), and Proverbs 25:25 demonstrates the powerful effect of good news. Thus, modern research confirms what Solomon had to say thousands of years ago. Of course, gift giving also promotes liking. Salespeople often give small gifts to help ingratiate themselves with a client. Proverbs 17:8 admits that “a bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds.” Proverbs 18:16 also attests that “a gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great.” Thus, the Bible student knows that a gift is a powerful way to motivate liking. However, the Bible student is also aware of the danger of gift giving when it is provided for that reason (Proverbs 17:23).

Finally, both college students and researchers know that attractiveness affects liking in a positive manner. Attractiveness affects liking but it can also cause biases in our decision making. Attractiveness can cause halo effects. For example, it has been demonstrated that many times we believe attractive people are also kind, honest, intelligent, persuasive, sociable, and likable (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1990). This occurs because we believe that attractiveness is correlated with these other attributes, but of course, that is not always the case. James the Apostle may have been warning the church against this particular bias (James 2:1-5) when he cautioned his readers against showing favoritism to the rich, well-dressed, members. Many other decision biases are also found in the Bible and specifically in Proverbs.

Anchoring and Adjustment

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have documented numerous biases in decision making over the years. One of their famous studies deals with anchoring and adjustment (Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1982; Tversky & Kahneman 1974). In anchoring and adjustment, the individual forms an initial judgment (i.e. an anchor). The judgment is adjusted either up or down from the anchor when the individual realizes that the initial judgment is imperfect. For example, customers rarely agree to pay the sticker price (i.e. the anchor) for a new car. In fact, both the consumer and the salesperson know that the customer needs to adjust the sticker price downward. Unfortunately for the customer, the adjustment is usually insufficient. Therefore, the salesperson, who often helps the consumer set the anchor (e.g. through a sticker price), has an advantage over the customer who needs to adjust. In some cases, the consumer can over adjust and perhaps gain a negotiation advantage. Solomon may have been suggesting such a strategy when he wrote, “‘It’s no good, it’s no good!’ says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase” (Proverbs 20:14). In this case, the buyer was either able to set the anchor before the seller could suggest a price or the buyer was able to over adjust for the purpose of the negotiation. If the buyer was able to suggest an initial anchor, then the seller failed to adjust sufficiently and the buyer was able to boast about his purchase at the end of the

negotiation. Proverbs 18:17 may provide another example of this heuristic, but it is also suggestive of some other biases.

Primacy and Recency Effects

Proverbs 18:17 states, “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.” This verse can be used to support the anchoring and adjustment heuristic, but it is probably a better fit to illustrate the primacy and recency effects. Primacy effects occur when information presented early has a persuasion advantage over information presented at the end (Kruglanski & Freund, 1983). Primacy effects are likely to occur when early information receives more attention than later information due to fatigue, distraction, or boredom. It is also likely to occur when the decision maker forms a judgment (vs. withholding judgment) early in the process. The primacy effect is also likely to occur because recent research suggests that we initially believe everything we hear and have to actively *unbelieve* a false statement later (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990; Gilbert, Tafarodi, & Malone, 1993). Thus, many times the first to present his case seems right. Sometimes the last one to present the argument has an advantage. This is known as the recency effect and it usually occurs for long or complicated messages. With the passage of time, it is easy to forget the early information and easier to remember the later information. So, in a trial situation, if the judge can withhold judgment formation until the evidence is heard, the last person to present evidence may have an advantage. Solomon clearly understood this principle and probably witnessed the effect in his own judgment and decision making.

The Associative Network Model of Memory

Primacy and recency effects occur, in part, because of memory limitations. The Associative Network Model of Memory has generated a lot of research in the memory literature (Anderson, 1983, 1993). In this model, each piece of information is stored in a node and each node is connected to other nodes (i.e. ideas). The links between nodes are called associations. The numerous nodes and associations form the associative network. Experts have larger, more complex networks than novices. Importantly, because an expert is able to group related concepts (i.e. chunking), the expert can remember more items within his field of expertise. This enables more efficient learning (Bower, Clark, Lesgold, and Winzenz (1969). In other words, as Proverbs 9:9 indicates, “Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.”

Because so much of our decision making relies on long term memory, many other implications exist. The stronger the association between two nodes, the more likely the pair will be retrieved from memory. Hence, marketers spend billions of dollars on advertising to encourage specific associations. The reverse is also true. The weaker the association, the less likely a pair of nodes will be retrieved. So, one strategy to combat a rumor is to quickly deny it and then stop talking about the negative association (i.e. the rumor) and start talking about positive associations (e.g. attributes and benefits) linked with the brand (Tybout, Calder, & Sternthal, 1981). Solomon, in his wisdom, suggested a similar strategy for ending a quarrel in Proverbs 26:20: “Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.” Just like in rumor control, it is important to weaken the negative associations and strengthen the positive associations to end a quarrel and improve a relationship.

The Reciprocity Principle

Certainly, solving an argument isn't always as simple as weakening negative memories and strengthening positive memories. Solomon indicated that, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). At one level, this strategy does create positive associations. But it is more likely, that Solomon is using a strategy based on the reciprocity principle.

The reciprocity principle suggests that when someone does something nice for us we feel the need to return the gesture. That is, we feel a need to reciprocate. The gift giving discussed earlier takes advantage of this principle. When a salesperson provides a small gift, the recipient feels the need to give back. Frequently this takes the form of giving the salesperson permission to make the sales presentation. Several other techniques take advantage of this effect as well.

The That's-Not-All approach (Burger 1986) uses the reciprocity principle. This approach is frequently used in infomercials. The announcer describes the main project and provides the price. Just when the viewer is about to change the channel, the announcer declares, "But wait, that's not all!" For the low price of \$59.99 you also receive an attractive carrying case for your knives, a "free" sharpening stone, and the powerful, plastic orange peeler! The viewer feels like the announcer is making many concessions for him, feels like reciprocating, and dials the toll free number to place his order. Similarly, the Door-in-the-Face approach uses the reciprocity principle. In this approach, the marketer makes a large request – one that he knows will probably be refused. Undaunted, the marketer then makes a smaller request. Because the customer is receiving something (i.e. a concession or a compromise), he feels like reciprocating. Thus, the likelihood of making a sale increases for the salesperson. This is likely the wisdom behind Solomon's proverb (Proverbs 15:1). The gentle answer is, in a sense, a concession. The recipient of the concession reciprocates by meeting the person half way and the wrath is turned away.

Need for Cognitive Closure

In addition to Solomon's advice to avert wrath, the Proverbs provide other insights into how we conduct our conversations. Proverbs 18:13 reports that he who answers before listening is likely to fall into folly and shame. Unfortunately, this charge is harder for some individuals than for others. Arie Kruglanski's theory of lay epistemology (1989, 1990) suggests need for cognitive closure (i.e. the need to make a decision) is a personality trait in which individuals have differing needs to reach closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Houghton & Grewal, 2000). Some individuals are comfortable leaving a decision open while others feel a strong need to make a decision and be "done with it." Individuals with a low need for closure are likely to make better decisions because they are open to considering new information. The proverbs attest to this as well. Solomon declares, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way (Proverbs 19:2)." He also states, "A patient man has great understanding." The decision making danger associated with a high need for closure is ancient, indeed.

Conclusion

Even in Solomon's time there was nothing new under the sun. Solomon meditated and expounded on the truths of God and the nature of man throughout the proverbs. Although most of the research cited in this paper comes to its conclusions through experimental designs and is silent about God's teachings, it is clear that the Bible speaks to many of the psychological principles found in consumer behavior. As Christian professors we can help our students to see that modern experimentation confirms the truths already found in the Bible. It is our hope that this paper will help our colleagues to make progress in that direction. It is also our hope that the session's brainstorming exercise and discussion will provide many other Biblical illustrations of consumer behavior and organizational behavior principles. In that way, we can "listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end [we can] be wise" (Proverbs 19:20).

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