



Marketing to Boomer+ Customers Product Segmentation – Using the Consumer’s Mind

By James J. Gilmartin

Introduction

Most marketers are familiar with consumer segmentation – putting consumers into categories according to certain commonly shared attributes. However, there is another form of segmentation that can play a major role in achieving marketing success.

Product or service segmentation consists of categorizing a product’s satisfaction potential in terms of consumers’ experiential aspirations. Experiential aspirations are desires people have to experience certain feelings, such as feeling loved, socially accepted or pleasure in giving a gift. Experiential aspirations also include desires to avoid certain feelings, such as physical discomfort, social rejection, or guilt for violating some social standard. Experiential aspirations are not about what people want to do, but about how they want to feel.

There Is No Innate Connection Between A Product And A Consumer’s Experiential Desires

Any product or service has an infinite potential for contributing to or thwarting a person’s menu of experiential aspirations. However, unlike a product’s functional attributes, which are inseparable from the product, there is no innate connection between a product and a consumer’s experiential desires. The consumer’s mind – not product attributes – is the medium that connects the product to experiential aspirations, although product design and marketing messages can prompt consumers’ minds to make such connections.

It can be difficult to grasp the idea that there is no innate linkage between experiential aspirations and product attributes. Notions about objectivity that drive most consumer research in efforts to identify cause and effect patterns in consumers’ behavior stand in the way. However, consumers are not mere cause and effect-driven organic mechanisms. Were that so, free will – self-initiated action – would not exist. Instead, discontinuity – the absence of cause and effect – is common in consumer behavior because consumers make free will choices.

As long as researchers and marketers single-mindedly chase cause-and-effect explanations of consumer behavior, marketing will never be truly customer-driven no matter how much consumers are asked what they want. To be customer-driven requires connecting with customers' subjective selves, working from their worldviews, not those of researchers and marketers.

Noted author and expert in marketing communications, David B. Wolfe says, "The first step in product segmentation analysis is identifying generic experiential aspirations or needs. Generic experiential needs are common to virtually all consumers, or to all consumers within a defined category or segment. One example of a generic experiential need common to all consumers is the desire to project an idealized image of self to others. An example common to consumers within a segment is the powerful desire of youth to be seen as 'cool.'"

Of course, products must also respond to consumers' functional needs – needs to which the core design and purpose of the product or service nominally respond. Functional needs often stimulate initial interest in a product or service. For example, the functional need for transportation may lead to the purchase of a car; the functional need called thirst may lead to the purchase of a beer or soft drink."

Quantitative Methodologies Dominate Consumer Research

Because it is easier to gain consensus on something that has been measured and that "adds up," quantitative methodologies dominate consumer research. Attention in most consumer research centers on functional product attributes that are quantitative – they can be objectively observed and measured. Consumers' functional needs similarly are quantitative.

Experiential needs are qualitative. They cannot be precisely observed and easily measured, and the magnitude of their presence and potential for influencing behavior can only be estimated. Moreover, experiential needs are more fluid, more subject to unpredictable change than functional needs. Despite this, experiential needs are the decisive factor in buying decisions. Product success depends on consumers making connections between a product and their experiential needs. Recent brain research supports this.

Patients with injuries that have extinguished their ability to experience emotions, hence feelings, cannot psychologically connect an object or condition with their personal interests, even though they retain full powers of reasoning. Lacking a subjective sense of self-necessary to having experiential aspirations, they have no conscious desire to experience feelings.

Curiously, with their still intact powers of reasoning, these patients can intellectually draw connections between an object and the feelings it will generate in another person. Studies of these Mr. Spock-like patients makes a strong case that logical reasons for buying a product will not influence a consumer until the consumer has made an emotional connection between the product and his experiential aspirations.

The Idealized Self Drives Consumer Behavior

Generic experiential aspirations may appear to be somewhat the same among people – for example, every normal person has a need to feel social acceptance – but how a generic experiential aspiration is consciously experienced and fulfilled is unique to each person. In part, this is because we bring images of idealized solutions to our needs into our behavior. Everyone seeks ideal satisfaction of needs, generally with greater passion for satisfying experiential needs than for functional needs. David Ogilvy spoke to the role of idealized aspirations in consumer behavior in his famous dictum that “consumers buy products which project images of who they want to be, not who they are.”

Subjective Identity Is At The Root Of Willful Behavior

Experiential segmentation of a product does not ignore the functional attributes of the product. Consumers generally need ways to objectively ground their subjective feelings about a product that incline them to buy. However, the consumer must first experience subjective responses to product messages that become tangibly integral in the consumers’ perceptions with the product itself. One prominent example of this has been seen in beer taste tests in which blindfolded college students cannot distinguish between brews, even when their favorite is one of those tested. Marketers literally influence a beer’s taste when ads prompt consumers to connect their experiential aspirations with the beer’s functional attributes. The central link in this connection is a consumers’ identity, or more precisely, the consumers’ idealized identity.

As Ogilvy suggested, identity-based experiential aspirations have a seminal influence on consumers’ decisions. Product segmentation reveals how consumers might be prompted to see something of them in a product. A product message succeeds in doing this when it connects with a consumer’s subjective identity.

Others establish a person’s objective identity – determined by how the world sees and experiences that person. Subjective identity is how a person sees and experiences himself. There is never complete congruence between objective identity and subjective identity. Indeed, at times major conflict between how a person sees himself and how others see him. This often happens in marketing when consumers see themselves differently than marketers see them. Most marketing centers on consumers’ objective identities. However, the main reason most products fail in the marketplace is failure to connect with consumers’ subjective identities.

Subjective identity is at the root of willful behavior. The brain patients mentioned earlier are incapable of willful behavior because while the foundation of objectivity – reason – remains intact, the foundation of subjectivity – emotionality – no longer exists.

Identity represents the most compelling forces in life. It is the source of the will to live, reproduce and leave something behind to keep memories of us alive after we die. Identity is the wellspring of all survival motivations, with a reach far beyond the requirements of mere physical survival. The products we buy that carry fingerprints of our identities, the friends we maintain who share our values, the clubs we join, the beliefs we have – these all are part of our survival

schemes because they are part of who we are, and they form the foundations of who we want to be.

Beliefs are particularly critical identity markers, so important, that people sometimes commit horrific crimes in efforts to impress their beliefs on others. We are attracted to other people, institutions, companies and products that mirror our beliefs. People, creeds, organizations and others who challenge our beliefs repel us. When companies conduct cause marketing, they are acknowledging the important beliefs in consumers' buying decisions.

Self-preservation imperatives are time sensitive. Everyone has present- moment objectives related to preservation of self. Volvo's focus on safety in its brand positioning is present-moment oriented. The same is true of Michelin, as evident in its metaphoric testimony to safety in its infant-in-a-tire ads. When we plan, self-preservation is always involved. Insurance and other financial service companies reflect this in their marketing. They also address self-preservation after life. Many clients want to "leave their mark; leave a good name behind." Therefore, they put churches, colleges, and other causes in their wills. Wanting to contribute to the well being of family members who survive them, financial service clients give much thought on how to distribute their estates to those ends.

As people grow older, thoughts of an afterlife for tend to grow stronger. Many former atheists and agnostics become believers. Along with belief in a Grand Plan usually comes a richer sense of right and wrong that can influence a consumer's decisions concerning who he wants to do business with and which products he will buy. One's moral profile is clearly a part of one's identity, and it can be persuasively argued that in the second half of life people become more concerned about achieving congruency between what they believe and what they do. As Abraham Maslow and others have observed, with maturity comes increased desire for authenticity. In the midst of an aging U.S. population, a recent Yankelovich study called "authenticity" one of the most important watchwords in the marketplace during the 1990s.

Marketing To Three Consumers In One

A person's subjective identity is comprised of a constellation of self-images that include images of "Who I am (reality)," "Who I want to be (dreams)" and "Who I would like to be, but likely can't be (fantasies)." A consumer's choice in cars may involve all three classes of self-images. A mother may want a minivan to service the realities of having children who need to be taken to soccer games, piano lessons and other destinations. Her selection of model, color and appointments may serve experiential aspirations to project an aura of success that she and her family have yet to fully attain. And she might choose a vehicle shown in ads ascending the challenging heights of mountains in back country – a reflection of occasional fantasies of escaping from her demanding schedule as Mom, wife and professional.

In product segmentation analysis, not only is the product scrutinized for its potential to be a medium of satisfaction of experiential aspirations, message possibilities are also evaluated. Message potential for connecting with consumers' experiential aspirations originates in consumers' behavioral makeup, not on an agency drawing board or in product design. No matter

how brilliant a message, if it fails to connect with the subjective content of consumers' minds, it will have no productive effect.

The importance of experiential aspirations in consumers' decision processes cannot be overstated. Little so vividly illustrates how experiential aspirations take precedence over functional attributes as the behavior of teenage consumers. "I'd rather be dead than be caught in that outfit!" Regardless of a product's practical attributes, a teenager is driven more by experiential aspirations for social acceptance than by product functionality. Adults may not be as dramatic as teenagers in embracing or rejecting a product, but they are equally bound by human nature to put experiential aspirations at the top of their list of criteria for indexing a product's worthiness to them.

A product's functional attributes might be called "left brain attributes" because objective qualities are quantitatively processed by the analytic mills of reason that are strongly associated with the brain's left hemisphere.

On the other hand, experiential aspirations can be called "right brain attributes" because they depend on feelings, a mental activity closely associated with the brain's right hemisphere. The right hemisphere also appears to be where contextual meanings of new information are primarily determined and relevance of information to a person's needs is established.

In case some are inclined to consider knowledge of the brain as interesting, but not very important in marketing, it is worth observing that the right hemisphere is where relationships are made. They do not derive from reasoning, but from feelings. This is critical knowledge for marketers who want to take the relationship-marketing path to consumers' minds.

There is arguably a connection between the right hemisphere's relational abilities and the increased focus on relationship marketing in a consumer population whose media age is rising. As we grow older, mental activity decreases in the left hemisphere while increasing in the right. As this happens, relationships take on deeper and more stable meanings. Often, the more mature consumer places a marginally higher value on the quality of a relationship than on a product it involves. This makes many older consumers – contrary to common belief – less price sensitive.

The main purpose of this discussion has been to describe the concept of product segmentation and the role of identity-based experiential aspirations in consumer behavior. However, there are other categories of experiential aspirations that play highly critical roles in consumers' buying decisions that savvy marketers would do well to study and use as a guide.

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