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Advertising Made Simple

How Cognitive Dissonance Skews Marketing Surveys

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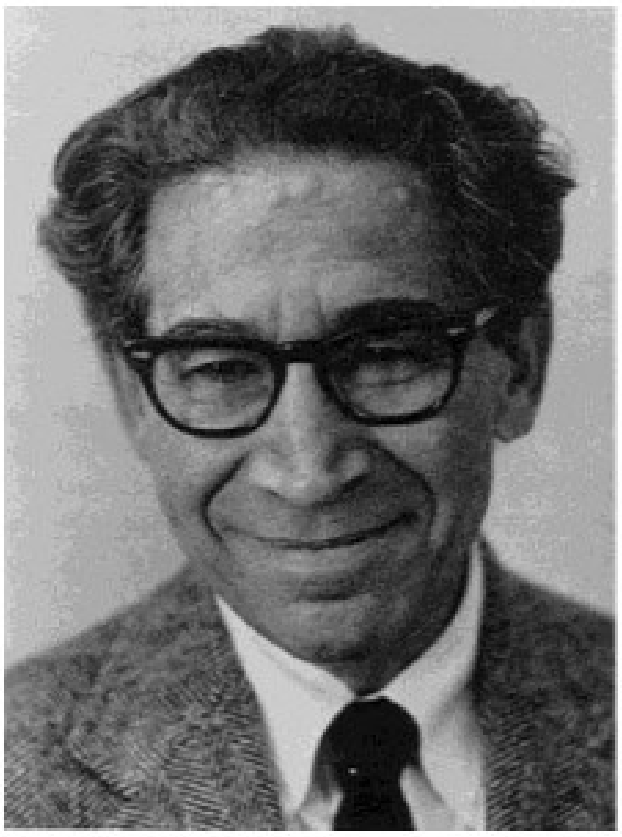
Cognitive dissonance. It's the discomfort caused by two conflicting thoughts.
It's the pain of learning something new that contradicts what's already accepted as true.
And it's often strongest when a person believes something about himself, but acts in a contradictory fashion.

Dr. Leon Festinger, then of the University of Minnesota, first proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance after studying a doomsday cult lead by a suburban Minneapolis housewife. Marion Keech was convinced that aliens would rescue her and her followers before a massive flood occurred at midnight, December 20, 1954. Many of the cult members waiting for the end of the world quit their jobs, sold their homes, and gave away their belongings and savings.

Rationalization helps.
What does a cult follower do when faced with incontrovertible evidence that his beliefs are wrong? He rationalizes. And interestingly, his belief becomes even stronger.
Rather than admit they had changed their lives on an invalid premise (and rather than risk being laughed at), Keech's followers chose to believe their faith had persuaded the aliens to save the world.
Dr. Festinger explained that the more important conflicting ideas are to a person the greater the cognitive dissonance they cause. The discomfort also increases when accepting the validity of one idea requires the complete denunciation of the other. If a person can't rationalize, or explain away the discrepancy, he suffers.
And according to Festinger, when learning the new information forces people to compromise their self-image, they will not learn from their mistakes. Instead of admitting their own fallibility, they'll continue making the same bad choices. (This denial of the evidence also contributes to confirmation bias, in which an individual picks and chooses among the "facts" he'll accept as true.)

How does cognitive dissonance affect marketing surveys? One of the least reliable methods of predicting consumer behavior is to ask consumers what they intend to do. And yet, companies keep using "intent to purchase" surveys to determine the course of their business.
"Do you intend to purchase a hard drive? A dishwasher? A case of Cabernet Sauvignon? A new home?"
Do people really know what they're going to buy?



Dr. Leon Feistinger

"In the next year will you buy a digital camera? Shares of stock? An iPhone? A timeshare? A second vehicle?"
Does anyone know?
Some do. Most don't.

Why don't people know what they will do?
When the ideal of "what I want" collides with the reality of "what I can afford," cognitive dissonance is the likely outcome. We're a nation of optimists. We all want to believe that next year will be better than this one. It's painful to admit that we don't have the power to create the lives we want, even when we only have to admit it to ourselves.
So we deny. We rationalize. We hope. And we don't tell the researchers what we suspect to be true. We don't even tell them what we think they want to hear.
We tell them how we see ourselves.

What can you expect when you ask what people want?
You can expect them not to care that you want to know.
You can expect them not to want to do any mental work to help you get to your answers.
You can expect the vast majority to refuse to answer. They don't have time.
And expect that most don't truly know what they want. By definition, any of these folks who take your survey are giving an inaccurate description of their preferences.
Those who know what they want, and complete your survey, often provide incomplete answers.
And in those very few cases where your survey does compile a complete and accurate description of your customer's preferences, what you have is a static picture of a constantly moving target. Over time, those preferences will become stale and less accurate.
And there's still the question of what you're measuring. When you ask about intent to purchase, are you measuring stated preferences? Behavioral preferences? Predictive behavior? Are they the same? If not, how do they differ?

The lesson: Be very careful with intentions.
Frankly, the only reliable data tracks behaviors. Actual purchases. Not what people want, but what they've actually paid for.
A recent study of automobile shoppers indicates that 58 percent of those who bought, drove off in a car other than the one they came looking for. And when questioned, a full 42 percent arrived at the lot without having made a clear choice between a new vehicle and a used one. Maybe what they were "just looking" for was a good salesperson.
Regardless, you can easily see that surveying intention to purchase provides pretty much useless data.
Information is moving faster than ever. The rate of change keeps accelerating. And it's unfortunate that in some industries, by the time changes in customer behavior have become obvious, its too late to adjust and stay competitive.

How can you predict what people will buy?
Even people who don't know what they want can usually rank their preferences.
Ask them to choose between options.
Ask them for trade offs.
Help them to the decision point. Help them to choose which products, or even features and benefits are worth more to them.
Would they like a cell phone that can give them directions to the nearest Italian restaurant? Sure. Who wouldn't?
Would they pay an extra $100 for it? Ehhhhhh, maybe not.
If there was only one extra feature beyond basic telephone service, would they give up the ability to play MP3s in order to have those restaurant directions? Absolutely not.
Would they give up the four function calculator? OK, perhaps they would, but they still won't pay extra for the directions.
Ah, now you have a way to uncover some truly meaningful information about market demand.
In the absence of actual sales data, identifying the trade offs important to your customers will give you a much better understanding of what they'll pay for.

Chuck McKay writes the Advertising Made Simple column for AllBusiness.com, a Dunn and Bradstreet company.