

MARKETING APPLICATIONS OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Puiu Carmen

University of Craiova, Faculty of Economy and Business Administration, Dr.Tr.Severin, str.Oituz nr.35, bl.2, sc.2, ap.3, email: cvpuiu@yahoo.com, tel.0745087609

Abstract: Understanding consumer behaviour is an important task for marketers in their attempt to offer consumers greater satisfaction. Each individual consumer is influenced by his or her perceptions, motivations, learning, attitudes and personality. Learning refers to changes in a person's behaviour caused by information and experience. Learning can occur through simple associations between a stimulus and a response, or as a result to a complex series of cognitive activities. There are two basic types of learning – conditioning (classical conditioning and instrumental conditioning) and cognitive learning

Key words: classical conditioning, operant conditioning, cognitive learning, incidental learning, marketing wareout

The learning process

For an even more complete understanding of the mechanism behind the consumer's behaviour, the variable known as the learning is of great importance. It is considered that learning is the base of the perception mechanism and of the consumer's motivation to buy or not buy a certain product or service. The learning is essential for the process of consuming if we take into account the fact that the buying behaviour is a learnt behaviour. Learning may occur in situation of high involvement (when the consumer has reason to learn) or of low involvement (when the consumer is very poorly or not at all motivated to learn).

Learning can represent a noticeable or unnoticeable change in a consumer's behaviour due to the consequences of experience and it leads to the increase of the probability that a behavioural act to be repeated. Learning is a constant life time process for the consumer by the mean of many categories of activities: responding the communications received from the environment, following the example of another consumer, making repeated attempts or using logical reasoning. A person's knowledge is improving and changing permanently as the individual is influenced by new environmental stimuli, as he learns from past experiences so, in time, the consumer might change his behaviour related to a product or a situation of buying or consumption.

The process of learning sometimes happens without any intention of the individuals; we can recognize many trademarks, we can reproduce slogans or even hum jingles learnt unconsciously for products we do not use and have no interest in. This process of casual, unintentional learning is called *incidental learning*.

Summary of learning theories

The learning theories explain the manners by which the consumers learn confronted with a large variety of situations. The following learning theories are studied in this paper: *the classic learning theory, the instrumental learning theory and the cognitive learning theory*.

The classical learning theory (classical conditioning) is based on the Pavlov repeating principle according to which the automatic responses can be learnt. This principle is used especially in the promotional activities based on the idea that learning is achieved not only by the repeating of the behavioural act (buying and using a product) but also by the repeating of the promotional messages about it.

In order to make this procedure efficient it is necessary to repeat the stimulus for a certain number of times so the response to it to stabilize. The number is determined by the stimulus capacity and the subject's receptiveness and motivation. H. Krugman sustains, for example, that "*more than three exposures to a marketing communication are wasted. The first exposure creates the awareness of the product, the second demonstrates its relevance to the consumer, and the third serves as a reminder of the product's benefits*". [H.Krugman, Journal of Advertising Research, 1986] Research proved that, even if there is only one conditioned event, at least 30 exposures to the stimulus are necessary in order to maximize the effect.[Blythe, J., Comportamentul consumatorului, Editura Teora, București, 1999] On the other hand, an over exposure to the same message can be harmful for the marketing efforts, meaning that consumers complain

quite often about the annoying frequency of an advertising that becomes disturbing and even determines aversion against a certain trademark or ceases to be perceived by the consumer. This situation, also known as *marketing wearout* can be avoided by presenting the basic message in a variety of forms. [Solomon, M., Consumer Behavior, Prentice Hall, 2002, p.75]

Another efficacy factor of the classic conditioning is the order in which the conditioned(the product) and the unconditioned(the sonorous background of the message) stimuli are presented:

- In the *anticipated conditioning*, the conditioned stimulus is presented before the unconditioned one;
- In the *delayed conditioning*, the unconditioned stimulus is presented before the conditioned one;
- In the *simultaneous conditioning*, the two stimuli are presented at the same time.

The method of anticipated and simultaneous conditioning give the best results in the case of promotional activities, especially when the used media is represented by radio and television, since the sponsor can not control the order in which the subject reads the information in the case of written messages. Even if the two stimuli, conditioned and unconditioned, are presented simultaneously in the same promotional message and on the same page, there is a possibility of perceiving them in the wrong order, for a newspaper page is not read necessarily in the normal layout, from front to bottom of the page.

Generalization appears when two related stimuli determines a similar response. The marketers rely on generalization in the management of the mix of products; strategies based on stimulus generalization include family branding, product line extensions, and licensing. Another frequently used tactic by the small enterprises is to capitalize the advantage offered by the generalization phenomenon by packing the product in similar shapes and packages with the ones of the better positioned competitor (*look-alike packaging*).

Discrimination is the process with the help of which the consumers learn to differentiate stimuli and response only to the right stimulus. The marketers provoke discrimination between products by making the opinion on a product more positive by the mean of an unconditioned stimulus and ignoring at the same time the competing product.

Annulment happens when a conditioned stimulus do not determine anymore the conditioned response due to some causes, such as:

- The conditioned stimulus is manifesting in the absence of the unconditioned stimulus (e.g. the product is presented without the sound background);
- The unconditioned stimulus is manifesting unexpectedly in the absence of the conditioned stimulus (e.g. the sound background is presented in the absence of the product).

The instrumental learning theory. According to this theory, if a product/service offers a high degree of satisfaction while consuming it, the consumer will have the tendency afterwards to choose again, when the same type of needs will emerge. This reaction is known as operant conditioning and means that the product had a positive sustain and the consumer has become conditioned to buy the product again. If he is satisfied by the result once, the consumer will desire to make his feeling permanent. This phenomenon can have for consequence the excessive consume of aliments and, generally, of any products that induce the affective reaction of pleasure. Even if his needs are not completely satisfied, the consumer will still be tempted by that product, for the mere pleasure it offers. An example of affective conditioning is the assuring of the clients' fidelity through the sales, special offers, coupons etc. as well as the extension of fidelity cards given by some stores.

The instrumental learning (the operant conditioning) can be the result of one of the following situations:

- *Positive reinforcement* – is the pleased or desired result of a situation (a woman receiving compliments after using a certain perfume trademark, learns that its use has a positive effect and it will still use it);
- *Negative reinforcement* – means the avoidance or elimination of a unpleasant consequence (a mother misses her daughter performance on a show due to a migraine; solving this problem with a help of a certain medicine will determine the subject to learn how to avoid unpleasant consequences);

- *Punishment* – when the active behaviour determines a negative result, the subject learns not to use that product again (the use of a certain product is unpleasant for a person or determines a negative reaction from relatives and friends).

The operant conditioning does not necessarily mean the acquisition of the product. The marketers often offer free samples or the possibility to try it, to test some products in the hope that the positive experience lived will determine the ulterior buying of that products. The active conditioning is useful in explaining the way in which consumers can be preconditioned and of the manner in which buying habits emerge; however it does not explain how the learning process evolves when the subject searches the information. For understanding this aspect, the comprehension of the cognitive learning process is necessary.

The cognitive learning theory. This theory is inspired by the idea that learning process can not always be reduced to the automatic response to a stimulus action. The people analyze the situations that happen during the buying process taking into account the previous experiences and make evaluations. The conclusion is that, even if the theories of classic conditioning and active conditioning are based on the fact that the learning process is automatic, the cognitive theory considers it is based on a conscious process.

The process of cognitive learning needs the following elements:

1. cognitive effort – represents the degree of effort the consumer is prepared to invest in the analysis of the products. This will depend on the complexity of the product, on the level of involvement and the subject's motivation;
2. cognitive structure – is the device with which the subject acknowledges the information received and integrates it in the already existent knowledge;
3. information's analysis – means selecting first the correct and relevant information from all the information received from the environment and, secondly, their correct interpretation so to develop a plan of action;
4. elaboration – refers to the structuring of the information by mental processes and the integration of those data in the memory;
5. memorization – is the mechanism by the mean of which the learnt information is stocked.

The cognitive learning may have the following variants:

- *Iconic rote learning* – means the learning by association of two or more concepts, in the absence of conditioning. A significant quantity of information is assimilated mechanically, unintentionally, and at the moment when a certain needs manifests itself these information gathered in time are used to select product or a trademark.
- *Vicarious learning (modelling)* – consumers learn not only from self experiences but also by deliberate observation of other consumers behaviour which they adapt depending on their own needs.
- *Reasoning* – is the most complex learning method, through which a person involves in creative thinking and reasoning processes of the information memorized and of the new ones received by the environment for creating new associations and concepts.

In conclusion, marketers are very interested to help consumers learn about their products and stimulate the consumption process. Knowledge of learning theories can be used to structure communications that will assist consumers in learning relevant facts, behaviors, and feelings about products or brands.

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