The Effect of Mindsets on Consumer Decision Strategies

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When consumers consider their preference for one of a set of products without having decided whether they want to buy something, they develop a “which to buy” mindset that increases their likelihood of ultimately making a purchase. This tendency occurs regardless of the commonality of the alternatives' features and regardless of whether or not the purchase decision is revocable. The mindset that is induced in one situation influences purchase decisions in other, unrelated situations, and is reflected in the thoughts that people generate in response to descriptions of quite different choice situations of the sort they encounter in daily life.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12656/volumes/v34/NA-34

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Purchase decisions often involve two steps. First, consumers tentatively decide whether or not they want to make a purchase, based on the options available and their immediate need for the type of product being considered. Then, if this process results in a positive decision, consumers decide which of the potential alternatives they prefer. This sequence of mental actions is represented as a purchasing procedure in memory. Generally, a procedure is composed of subgoals that are causally or temporarily related. Thus the attainment of each subgoal is a precondition for pursuing the one that follows it. Consequently, the consideration of any subgoal presupposes that the previous goal has been attained successfully.

We propose that consumers whose attention is called to the first subgoal of deciding whether to buy are likely to engage in the operations required to attain it and, if the decision is affirmative, they may proceed to the next subgoal in the sequence. However, if consumers are induced to consider a subgoal at a later stage (e.g., deciding which to buy), they will presumably employ routines to identify the most preferred alternative. However, they are unlikely to reconsider whether they want to make a purchase at all. Instead, they will assume that they have already decided to buy something. As a consequence, consumers are ultimately more likely to make a purchase in the second case than in the first one.

Further, we propose that in the second case, consumers may develop a “which to buy” mindset that will guide them to make a selection among the alternatives. In the mean time, however, this mindset may also prevent them from considering the preceding segment of the purchasing procedure (i.e., whether to buy). If consumers are asked to consider whether to make a purchase at all at the outset, they are likely to develop a “whether to buy” mindset. Once a mindset is activated, it will also persist to influence one’s reactions to subsequent activities. Specifically, we propose that consumers who develop a “which to buy” mindset in one situation will be more likely to consider which alternative activity is better in subsequent scenarios instead of considering whether or not they want to engage in the type of activities. If consumers develop a “whether to buy” mindset, however, they are more likely to consider whether they want to engage in the type of activities at all in response to the same subsequent scenarios. In addition, the same reasoning suggests that people who develop a mindset in one situation will exhibit a similar mindset in a later purchase situation. Therefore, consumers who have a “which to buy” mindset are more likely to make a purchase again in an unrelated situation.

Three studies examined these possibilities. The first study showed that participants who were primed to consider which computer they prefer at the outset (preference-first condition) were more likely to make a purchase than those who were primed to consider whether or not they would like to purchase one of the computers at the outset (whether-first condition). And this is true regardless of whether the two computers had all unique features, unique positive features and common negative features, or have unique negative features and common positive features. The assumption that participants in the first two conditions developed a “which to buy” mindset was further evident in the thoughts they generated in response to eight unrelated scenarios describing decision situations in daily life. That is, their thoughts pertained more often to which of two activities they prefer or dislike to engage in rather than whether to engage in either.

The third study showed that participants who were induced to consider which computer they prefer in the first situation were more likely to choose one of two vacation spots in a subsequent situation (rather than deferring decision). Both the two computers and the two vacation spots had unique positive attributes and unique negative attributes. Thus the different purchase rates we observed in this study are consistent with our hypotheses but cannot easily be addressed by earlier theories of choice deferral (e.g., Dhar and Nowlis 2004; Dhar, Huber and Khan forthcoming).

REFERENCES