Consumer Responses to Discontinuance of Favorite Products: an Exploratory Study

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - How many varieties of laundry detergent do we really need? This question and others like it have become the center of recent debate among manufacturers, retailers, and marketing scholars. Trends in the marketing environment have led to product proliferation, followed by pruning of brands, creating a highly unstable Aproduct churning@ situation. Consumers are presented with a confusing, crowded, and constantly shifting landscape of products from which to make selections.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

How many varieties of laundry detergent do we really need? This question and others like it have become the center of recent debate among manufacturers, retailers, and marketing scholars. Trends in the marketing environment have led to product proliferation, followed by pruning of brands, creating a highly unstable “product churning” situation. Consumers are presented with a confusing, crowded, and constantly shifting landscape of products from which to make selections.

This unstable marketing environment makes it increasingly likely that consumers will encounter the discontinuance of preferred product alternatives. Although brand and line extensions have been studied extensively by researchers, the withdrawal of products from the market has received little attention, despite its growing frequency. Existing research on the topic has focused primarily on the impact of attributes of phantom alternatives (Farquhar & Pratkanis, 1993) and on the role of psychological reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The impact of affect, and of the customer’s prior relationship with the brand, has received little attention, despite the fact that consumers’ descriptions of product discontinuance events are often extremely emotion-laden.

This research increases our understanding of consumer responses to product discontinuance events, with particular attention given to emotional and behavioral responses and judgments of responsibility. As a first step in this process, consumers’ stories of product discontinuance experiences were collected using the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). 145 subjects responded to a series of open-ended questions about a memorable discontinuance experience. Their recollections were analyzed for common trends and themes. The products mentioned by subjects encompassed a wide variety of product categories, with notable differences in the categories mentioned most frequently by males (fast food and non-alcoholic beverages) and females (toiletries, perfume, and cosmetics).

Product unavailability situations reported included geographic unavailability (in which the subject moved to another region or country and could no longer obtain the product), cyclic unavailability (in which the product is regularly withdrawn and re-introduced, as with the McDonald’s McRib sandwich), elimination of an entire brand, elimination of an entire category (for example, eight track tapes), and product line contraction, in which the discontinued product alternative belongs to a branded product line. This last category was the most often reported, representing 68% of the incidents. In product line contraction situations, consumers’ reactions to the withdrawal of the discontinued alternative may influence future evaluation of, and loyalty towards, the brand, making these incidents particularly relevant for further study.

Subjects reported a wide variety of emotional responses to the discontinuance incident, with anger and sadness being the most common affective responses mentioned. The tendency to respond with anger appeared to increase with duration of product use before its discontinuance. Different types of losses incurred were also mentioned. The most often-mentioned losses were of ease of choice (due to the need to incur additional search costs in the category) and utility (if the discontinued alternative had unique features unavailable in any other available product). Mentions were also made of loss of self-concept (typically associated with perfumes and scented products), diminished ability to perform (typically associated with sports equipment), and losses of connections to others or to the past.

Subjects were also asked why they believed the product had been withdrawn. A variety of reasons were offered, low sales volume being the most frequently mentioned explanation. Several other explanations were proposed, including replacement of the product by a new version which did not possess the attributes valued in the original, failure on management’s part to promote the product correctly, lack of retailer support, and shifting consumer tastes. The data offered some preliminary evidence to suggest that explanations attributing either willful behavior (“change for its own sake”) or incompetence (failure to promote the product) to the manufacturer were more likely to be associated with angry emotional responses. This finding, if supported by future research, would be consistent with Weiner’s (1995) work on judgments of responsibility, blame, and the incidence of anger.

Subjects were asked to report purchase behavior before the preferred alternative became available (if they were able to remember such a time), and also their purchase choices after the preferred alternative was discontinued. The patterns of subjects who reported product line contraction events were analyzed, and the following patterns emerged:

(1) After discontinuance of a preferred product alternative, subjects in this study selected an alternative from a different brand more often than they selected another alternative within the same brand (43% to 34%, with the remainder exiting the category or switching between brands with no reported preference).

(2) Subjects who had switched to the discontinued product from another product in the same brand (i.e., from one type of Pantene shampoo to another that became their favorite) were more likely to select an alternative within the brand after discontinuance than to switch. Even among these subjects, though, 42% either switched to another brand or cycled between brands frequently with no reported preference.

It is difficult from these data to identify the reason for the brand switching behavior observed. The search for preferred product attributes may offer a satisfactory explanation; however, it is also possible that discontinuance experiences may damage the consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998), making a previously loyal consumer more prone to defect to another brand.

While statistical inferences should not be drawn from these data, which among other things may suffer from retrospective bias, the patterns identified in these incident reports suggest that discontinued product alternatives have affective consequences for consumers which may lead to behavioral consequences relevant to marketers. Further research should study these patterns in more detail. In particular, it would be helpful to marketers to understand the impact of marketing communications when discontinuing a product on consumers’ judgments of motives and intent, and on subsequent brand loyalty. While this research by no means intends to suggest that product should never be discontinued, it may be possible to identify strategies to minimize negative consequences for manufacturers and their brands, while still pruning unprofitable offerings from their product lines.

References:


