Toward a Better Understanding of the Effects of Customer Education on Usage Behavior and Satisfaction

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This research aims to better understand the effects of post-purchase customer education on the skills, usage behavior and satisfaction of consumers. To this effect, a structural model was designed. It highlights the important role played by the improvement of consumers’ skills on satisfaction. It also shows that the variety and frequency of product usage are positively influenced by customers’ skills, but that usage intensity does not necessarily affect customer satisfaction. Finally, the effects of customer education on satisfaction are moderated by customer product category expertise.

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Despite the growing interest of consumer goods manufacturers for customer education and the recent awareness in marketing literature of this concept (Mittal and Sawhney 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2005), research on customer education remains scarce. This work aims to understand the effects of customer education on the skills level, usage behavior and satisfaction of consumers.

Conceptual background
Defining customer education: Customer education is defined as the companies’ investments in improving customer expertise in relation to the goods and services they market (Honebein and Cammarano 2005). It relies on instructional activities, such as face-to-face seminars, implemented to leverage product usage related skills of a company’s potential or actual customers.

While early investigations showed that customer education had its place in all phases of the decision-making process (Honebein 1997), attention has recently been given to post-purchase customer education (Hennig-Thurau 2000). The main reasons are: the importance given to consumption in value creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004), the increasing complexity of products (Thompson et al. 2005), and the increasing complexity of products (Thompson et al. 2005), and the expertise that customers must develop to unlock product value (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2005).

The post-purchase outcomes of customer education: At the post-purchase stage, three outcomes of customer education are considered. First, consumers may increase their level of product usage related skills (Hennig-Thurau 2000; Shih and Venkatesh 2004). Second, customer education may positively affect the way customers use their product, either by ensuring compliant behavior (Bowman et al. 2004) or by unlocking the product’s value (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2005). Finally, an increased ability to use a product can lead customers to express a higher degree of satisfaction (Shih and Venkatesh 2004).

Hypotheses
No quantitative evidence of customer education outcomes was found in marketing literature. Our main research hypotheses analyze the impact on skills, usage and satisfaction. They also investigate the moderating role of product category expertise.

H1: The more the consumer perceives he has been educated about a product’s usage by the product manufacturer, the more he thinks he has increased his skills on this product
H2: The higher the product-category expertise of a consumer, the higher the impact of customer education on the consumer’s skills improvement
H3: The more the consumer perceives he has increased his skills, the higher the usage intensity (frequency and variety) of a product
H4: The more the consumer perceives he has increased his skills, the higher the product satisfaction
H5: The higher the product’s usage intensity (frequency and variety), the higher the product satisfaction
H6a: The lower the degree of customer expertise, the higher the impact of usage variety on product satisfaction
H6b: The higher the degree of customer expertise, the higher the impact of usage frequency on product satisfaction

Method
A study was carried out on a sample of 321 consumers who owned a digital camera for about 8 months. Digital cameras are multiple-featured products which induce important learning costs for consumers and require important educational support from companies.

We used the Churchill paradigm (Churchill 1979) to develop an original scale which measures customer education efforts as perceived by the customers. We used self-report measures of skills improvement, usage intensity-frequency and variety according to Ram and Jung’s (1990) recommendations - , product category expertise and product satisfaction.

Findings and discussion
Structural equation modeling was used to validate the model (GFI=.968, AGFI=.945, CFI=.968, NNFI=.954, RMSEA=.0456). All hypotheses but H5 were supported.
The importance of skills improvement on customer satisfaction: Customer education has a significant impact on consumers' skills improvement (H1; \( \gamma = 0.201, p<.005 \)). Skills improvement positively impacts customer satisfaction (H4; \( \beta = 0.284, p<.001 \)). It confirms the suggestion made by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2005) whereby simply being aware of gaining skills reinforces customer satisfaction. Such a result should incite industrials to communicate skills to consumers.

The moderating role of product category expertise on the “customer education–customers skills” equation was also analyzed. Experts differ from novices in the degree, content and organization of their knowledge (Mitchell and Dacin 1996). Thus, we hypothesized (H2) that experts may be more aware of their skills improvement than novices. A multi-group analysis confirmed this moderation effect (novices: \( \gamma = 0.078, p>.005 \); experts: \( \gamma = 0.282, p<.001 \)).

This finding should incite industrials to segment their customer education initiatives according to the degree of product category expertise.

The importance of skills improvement on usage intensity: Skills improvement has a significant effect on product usage intensity (H3; Frequency: \( \beta = 0.284, p<.005 \); Variety: \( \beta = 0.247, p<.001 \)). Specifically, the more customers are skilled with a product, the more they develop variety-seeking behavior and multiply the number of features they use. As such, customer education represents a consistent way of avoiding the risk of multiple-featured products disadoption (Thompson et al. 2005).

The absence of direct relationships between product usage intensity and satisfaction: There is no significant impact of usage intensity on customer satisfaction (H5).

The few studies that exist in marketing literature conclude that results are contingent (Ram and Jung 1990; Shih and Venkatesh 2004). We hypothesized that product category expertise may moderate the relationship between usage intensity and satisfaction. Thompson et al. (2005) show that novices encounter difficulties in adopting the multiple features of a product. Thus, the ability to vary usages could be more of a satisfaction driver for novices (H6a) than for experts. In parallel, the time spent using a product is probably a stronger driver of satisfaction for experts than for novices (H6b). Both H6a (novices: \( \beta = 0.169, p<.005 \); experts: \( \beta = 0.023, p>.005 \)) and H6b (novices: \( \beta = -0.027, p>.005 \); experts: \( \beta = 0.145, p<.005 \)) are verified in our study.

Such findings should also lead industrials to define their customer education strategy in relation to product category expertise and usage ability objectives.

Further research

We are carrying out complementary studies to consolidate the model of customer education outcomes. The ambition is to define new mediating/moderating personal variables and to show that results are not dependent on a particular product.

References


