The Effects of Framing Products As Experiences on the Creation and Use of Consumer Reviews

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We examine the influence that framing products as experiences has on consumers’ use and creation of product information. Because consumers perceive experiences more personally than products, when a product is experientially framed, consumers rely more on information from close others and are more likely to review.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There are two recent developments in marketing and consumer behavior that may initially seem separate but are related and can influence one another. First, companies and brands are increasingly selling products as experiences, focusing not on specific functionalities of the good but on how it feels physically and emotionally to use (LaSalle and Britton 2003; Newman 2012; Schmitt 2011). Second, thanks to social media and internet-enabled personal devices, consumers are increasingly generating and relying on consumer-created product information (Buglin, Doogan, and Vetriv 2010; Cisco 2012). This research analyzes the interaction of these two developments in the marketplace. When a product is positioned as an experience, how does this influence the way consumers respond? We specifically study the use of product information from various sources including reviews and recommendations from other consumers and also the likelihood of providing product information in the form of a review.

Framing Products as Experiences

Experiential aspects of consumption draw consumer affect (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), are more seductive (Hoch 2002), and are better at advancing happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). The implication is that experiences, or products framed as such, are more desirable than products. Increasingly, marketers are trying to capture some of this seduction and affect by positioning products as experiences. We confirmed the existence of this trend by comparing the use of experiential positioning in recent print advertisements (June 2012) versus twenty years prior (June 1992). As expected, the ads in the 2012 sample were significantly more likely to employ experiential framing than those in the 1992 sample, even when controlling for the number of experiential products advertised (movies, restaurants, etc.).

Information Search and Closeness to Self

When examining a product, consumers can access information from a variety of sources, including the product description from the marketer (packaging, advertising), expert ratings, and recommendations from others. Nelson (1970) suggested that, because experiences are difficult to evaluate pre-consumption, when consumers consider an experience they will rely more on information coming from other consumers who have undergone the experience and less on information provided by the marketer. We hypothesize that this will also be the case for products framed as experiences. Additionally, we propose that the mechanism behind this effect is based on the increased connection that consumers see between experiences and the self, compared to between products and the self (Carter and Gilovich 2012). Indeed, experiences are perceived by consumers as more self-defining and more central to the self than products (Carter and Gilovich 2012). We suggest that this greater connection between experiences and the self helps explain the differential consumer behavior with respect to recommendations. Because experiences are perceived close to the self, consumers turn to others close to the self for recommendations. Also, because consumers talk about what they identify with (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Yeh and Choi 2011), consumers will be more likely to generate recommendations for experiences than for products.

Study 1

As an initial test of our theory we consider the relative use of recommendations from sources that vary on closeness to the self for products and experiences. Participants were presented with two products or two experiences which were either endorsed by a friend or an expert. Consistent with our hypothesis, there was a significant interaction of product type and endorsement source (see figure 1). Participants reported liking the experience (product) better when it was endorsed by a friend (expert) (∗F(1, 336) = 20.98, p < 0.001; F(1, 337) = 6.48, p < 0.05). Additionally, we replicate this pattern when comparing search versus experiential attributes within one product.

Figure 1: Study 1A, Preferences for Products and Experiences with Recommendations from Experts or Friends Across Experiences and Products

*Preference is defined as the average of ratings of appeal and likelihood of purchase both on 7-point scale (α = .85).

The interaction between type of product and type of endorsement (F(1, 676) = 23.91, p < .001). Participants liked experiences endorsed by a friend more than those endorsed by an expert (MExpFriend = 5.19, MExpFriend = 5.72, F(1, 336) = 20.98, p < 0.001) and liked products more when endorsed by an expert than when endorsed by a friend (MPFriend = 5.18, MPFriend = 4.84, F(1, 337) = 6.48, p < 0.05).

Interaction is significant: (F(1, 676 = 23.91, p < .001). There is a significant difference in type of source for experiences (MExpFriend = 5.19, MExpFriend = 5.72; F(1, 338) = 21.26, p < .001), while the opposite was true for products (MExpFriend = 5.18, MFriendFriend = 4.84; F(1, 338) = 6.36, p < .05).

Study 2

Going forward we consider the same search good framed as either a product or an experience. We study how such product framing influences reliance on product information from different sources and we also formally test for mediation. Participants saw one of two advertisements for a pair of running shoes where the information content of the two ads was held constant but the positioning varied between regular product framing or experiential framing (imagery language, added sound, and emphasis on how it feels to use). Participants who saw the experience-framed ad ranked recommendations from friends as more useful than did participants who saw the product-framed ad (F(1, 23) = 7.08, p < 0.05). Participants who saw the product-framed ad ranked the marketer-provided product description as (marginally) more useful than did participants who saw the experience-framed ad (F(1, 23) = 3.54, p < 0.10) (see figure 2). In support of our proposed mechanism, bootstrapping tests revealed that perceived closeness to self of the product mediated this interaction.
Interaction is significant interaction ($F(1, 50) = 10.62, p < 0.01$). Recommendations from friends was ranked higher for the experience-framed shoes than for the product-framed shoes ($M_{recommendations} = 2.00$ vs. $M_{product} = 1.00$, $F(1, 23) = 7.08, p < 0.05$). On the other hand, description of the product was ranked higher for the product-framed shoes than for the experience-framed shoes, although this effect was only marginally significant ($M_{product} = 2.82$ vs. $M_{experiences} = 0.79$, $F(1, 23) = 3.54, p < 0.10$). Those who were exposed to the experience-framed ad ranked recommendations from friends significantly higher than product description ($M_{description} = 0.79$ vs. $M_{recommendations} = 1.00$, $F(1, 26) = 0.37, NS$). While those who saw the product-framed ad were indifferent between the sources ($M_{description} = 0.27$ vs. $M_{recommendations} = 2.00$, $F(1, 22) = 40.11, p < 0.001$). None of the other sources of information presented any significant differences.

### Study 3

Study 3 considered how experiential product framing influences consumer creation of product information. Using the same stimuli as in study 2, participants who saw the experience-framed shoe ad reported a higher likelihood of writing a review than those who saw the product-framed shoes ($F(1, 121) = 4.43, p < 0.05$) (see figure 3). This result was mediated by perceived closeness to the self of the shoes.

### Study 4

Finally, to confirm the existence of an effect of experiential framing on likelihood to review with actual consumer behavior, we examined the relationship between product framing and the number of consumer reviews on Amazon.com. A coder rated the experiential nature of the product descriptions of the top ten products in each of 30 product categories on Amazon.com. Controlling for product category, average price, and average review rating, we find an effect of framing on number of consumer reviews. Products with more experiential product descriptions garnered more consumer reviews ($F(3, 279) = 13.59, p < .001$).

Our understanding of the differences between experiential and non-experiential consumption has focused on the consequences, rather than on the decision-making process. This research offers insight on an important influence on choice. In this experiential economy, these findings offer strong implications and cautions to those aiming to position their brand as an experience.

### REFERENCES


**FIGURES**