

**THE TRUTH
ABOUT**

WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT

“...and why
they buy...”

Michael Solomon

Bestselling marketing author with more than 500,000 books sold

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Introduction

The truth is, this book is about people like you. It concerns the products and services you buy and use and the ways these fit into your life. First, a bit of jargon: The field of *consumer behavior* is the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires. Consumers take many forms, from an eight-year-old child begging her mother for a Webkinz stuffed animal to an executive in a large corporation deciding on a multimillion-dollar computer system. The items we “consume” can include anything from canned peas to a massage, democracy, Reggaeton music, or a celebrity like Lindsay Lohan.

In its early stages of development, researchers called the field *buyer behavior*, reflecting an emphasis on the interaction between consumers and producers at the time of purchase. Most marketers now recognize that consumer behavior is, in fact, an ongoing process; not merely what happens at the moment a consumer hands over money or a credit card and, in turn, receives some good or service. To build bonds with customers, you also need to have them in mind before they ever contemplate buying your product or service and after they’ve purchased from you. After all, there are lots of good salesmen who can, as the saying goes, sell ice to Eskimos—but probably not more than once.

Why should managers, advertisers, and other marketing professionals bother to learn about consumer behavior? Very simply, understanding consumer behavior is good business. The basic *marketing concept* states that firms exist to satisfy needs. These needs can only be satisfied to the extent that marketers understand the people or organizations who will use the products and services they are trying to sell so that they can meet these needs better than their competitors.

Understanding
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Consumer response is the ultimate test of whether a marketing strategy will succeed. Thus, knowledge about consumers should be incorporated into every facet of a successful marketing plan. Data about consumers helps organizations to define the market and identify threats and opportunities to a brand. And in the wild and wacky world of marketing, nothing is forever. This knowledge also helps to ensure that the product continues to appeal to its core market.

So, how do we figure out what customers want? There must be 50 ways....



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They think your
product sucks—
but that's not a bad thing

 Have you checked out one of those crazy Mentos/Diet Coke videos yet? At least 800 of them flooded the Internet after people discovered that when you drop the quarter-size candies into bottles of Diet Coke, you get a geyser that shoots 20 feet into the air. Needless to say, Mentos got a gusher of free publicity out of the deal, too.

Consumer-generated content—where everyday people voice their opinions about products, brands, and companies on blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, and even film their own commercials that thousands view on sites like YouTube—probably is the biggest marketing phenomenon of the past few years (even bigger than the iPhone or Paris Hilton’s jail stay!). This important trend helps to define the era of so-called *Web 2.0*—the rebirth of the Internet as a social, interactive medium from its original roots as a form of one-way transmission from producers to consumers.

Although many marketers find this change threatening because they are now forced to “share” ownership of their brands with users, this new form of user participation is here to stay. The reality is that companies no longer can rely solely upon a “push method” to inform their customers about their products; there is now a vibrant two-way dialogue that allows consumers to contribute their evaluations of products within their respective Web communities.

Consumers are embracing this trend for several reasons: The technology is readily available and inexpensive to use; Internet access allows any surfer to become (somewhat of) an expert on anything in a matter of hours; and people trust their peers’ opinions more than they do those of big companies. So, marketers need to accept this new reality—even when they don’t necessarily like what customers have to say about their brands. When it comes to consumer-generated content, they’re either on the train or under it! Here are a few of the many consumer-generated campaigns we’ve seen recently:

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- At MasterCard's priceless.com Web site, consumers can write advertising copy for two filmed commercials by contributing four lines of dialogue, ending with the kicker, "Priceless."
- A Converse campaign that allowed customers to send in homemade commercials to Conversegallery.com attracted about 1,500 submissions. Converse ran several of them on television.
- Kao Corp., which makes Ban deodorant, asked young women to create ads that talk to fellow teens who worry about underarm odor. Readers of teen magazines submitted an image and filled in the blanks in the company's "Ban It" slogan. One typical submission shows four girls in similar jeans and tank tops, with their backs to the camera and the headline: "Ban Uniformity."
- PepsiCo sponsored a Creative Challenge in China that invited consumers to develop the next Pepsi TV commercial starring Asian pop-music superstar Jay Chou. Pepsi got almost 27,000 scripts in six weeks. To help promote the contest, China's Back Dorm Boys, a pair of lip-syncing "net celebrities" that Pepsi sponsored, acted out scripts in their dorm room. In the United States, Pepsi offered consumers a chance to design a new can for the beverage, with the winning design appearing on 500 million Pepsi cans.
- Lucasfilm made clips of Star Wars available to fans on the Internet to mash up (remix) at will to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the epic's release. Working with an easy-to-use editing program, fans can cut, add to, and retool the clips. Then they can post their creations to blogs or social networking sites like MySpace.
- Now that TV spin-offs from the Star Trek series have ended, bereft fans are filling the void by banding together to make their own episodes. Up to two dozen of these fan-made "Star Trek" projects are in various stages of completion, depending on what you count as a full-fledged production. You can view a Scottish production at www.ussintrepid.org.uk. A Los Angeles group has filmed more than 40 episodes, some of which explore gay themes that the original didn't get near. (Check out www.hiddenfrontier.com.)

- The Nokia Concept Lounge invited designers in Europe to share ideas for the next new, cool phone, while Nespresso's contest yielded coffee-drinking ideas like the Nespresso InCar coffee machine and the Nespresso Chipcard that, upon being inserted into a vending machine, communicates with a central database to brew a personalized cup of coffee.

Chevrolet learned the hard way about the downside of giving control over its brands to consumers. The carmaker introduced a Web site allowing visitors to take existing video clips and music, insert their own words, and create a customized 30-second commercial for the 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe. The idea was to generate interest for the Tahoe by encouraging satisfied drivers to circulate videos of themselves around the Web. Sure enough, plenty of videos circulated—but many of the messages for the gas-hungry SUV weren't exactly flattering. One ad used a sweeping view of the Tahoe being driven through a desert. "Our planet's oil is almost gone," it said. "You don't need G.P.S. to see where this road leads." Another commercial asked: "Like this snowy wilderness? Better get your fill of it now. Then say hello to global warming." A spokeswoman for Chevrolet commented, "We anticipated that there would be critical submissions. You do turn over your brand to the public, and we knew that we were going to get some bad with the good. But it's part of playing in this space."⁴⁶

If you're worried about what some of your customers might say about your brand, get over it.

Indeed. If you're worried about what some of your customers might say about your brand, get over it. Listen to their complaints and improve your product rather than shutting the comments down.

