

# CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

by Robert Perloff

*Consumer psychology is a branch of applied psychology concerned with questions about the optimal means for making goods and services available providing information about them, developing and testing methods for promoting interest in their acquisition, and investigating how they might be consumed with maximum satisfaction and benefit to the customer.*

From the broadest point of view, consumer psychology is concerned with the individual's **behavioral expressions of value** — that is, the ways in which he or she spends his time and money. These range from candy and toothpaste to savings for college education from spending a few hours viewing television or reading the newspaper to the **philatelist's absorption** with old or rare stamps. Therefore, whatever the individual consumes — however he uses his time or spends his money — is an object for study by the consumer psychologist.

The consumer psychologist is concerned with the psychological determinants of the individual's behavior as a consumer. An important distinction is made between high and low involvement consumer decisions. When decisions have high personal importance or relevance, like the purchase of a clothing outfit to be worn on a **special occasion**, consumers typically engage in an **extensive search** for information that incorporates not only input from advertising sources but **careful appraisals of anticipated reactions** from others in their reference group. While high involvement choices activate extensive problem-solving behavior, low involvement choices, such

as the purchase of an inexpensive ballpoint pen, are more impulsive, reflecting such factors as brand recognition. The shape and color of a package, or its position in a display case, will have a greater impact on low involvement decisions. Beyond marketing research, consumer psychologists have been called upon to study the consumer's attitudes toward and the means for influencing his acceptance of devices or behaviors that are generally considered to be in his best interest, particularly in the fields of health and safety. Among the many illustrations of this relatively new area of study are the individual's responses to seat belts in automobiles as well as his attitudes concerning air pollution, smoking, and other health hazards.

The consumer psychologist may also be consulted for studies aimed at understanding how attitudes may be changed.

**Applications.** Since the techniques and procedures for conducting consumer research are very similar to those used in opinion research or public opinion polling, psychologists engaged in consumer research are often engaged in public opinion studies as well. Opinion research is supported by foundations, government agencies, universities, the mass media, political organizations, and individuals and organizations hoping to shed light on social problems, propaganda, and group behavior.

Rarely does the consumer psychologist operate alone. Because consumer behavior is interdisciplinary, it is common to find him working in the same office with advertising copywriters or account executives, public relations experts, statisticians specializing in sampling and survey research, experts in marketing research, economists, and sociologists.

The heaviest use of consumer psychology occurs in business and industry, principally by advertising agencies,

the mass media, private consumer marketing and public opinion research firms, and manufacturers themselves. Of particular importance is market segmentation research, which seeks to identify the needs, preferences, and perceptions of significant subgroups — socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic identification groupings — that collectively account for larger heterogeneous social systems. The processes by which innovations, like new products, diffuse and succeed, or fail to attract consumer interest, are receiving increased attention.

On the more macroscopic level, the consumer psychologist may be invited to assay what has come to be known as the “image” that one public group or another may have of a business firm, an agency of the government, or even of an educational institution. Perhaps a nationally known manufacturer of appliances is interested in determining the effect a large strike had upon its “image”.

Consumer psychology is attracting students and developing its own literature. Consumer activities are becoming integrated into all phases of government. Manufacturers, advertising media, educational institutions, hospitals, and communities are all thinking in terms of their “public images”, seeking to improve the way they are being looked at.