Myth: Build a better mousetrap (or other product) and the world will beat a path to your door

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ABSTRACT

Build a better mousetrap (or other product) and the world will beat a path to your door: a common and logical assumption, but sadly, not true. Every year hundreds of thousands of products fail – even well designed products, which to their manufacturers, seemed headed for slam-dunk success.

One of the biggest mistakes that companies make in promoting their products and services is to emphasize the features (qualities or characteristics that make up the product) before they state the benefits (consumers’ perceptions on what they’ll gain by using the product.)

Consumers are initially attracted to a product because of a benefit – “What’s in it for me.” The fact that an SUV has removable seats in the back, is of little importance unless the consumer sees some benefit to that: e.g., they can fit all of their kid’s belongings in one trip down to college, without the hassle of having to rent a trailer.

Benefits are tied to emotions, and improve the consumer’s life in some way. In the SUV example, parents feel better able to provide for their child in this important transitional period, feel more self-sufficient, and won’t be inconvenienced in either time or money by having to rent a trailer.

While benefits create a positive inclination to purchase or use a product, consumers eventually look to the features to justify their purchase. For example, let’s say you have an older car that gets you from Point A to Point B. You may really want a new car to boost your social status, but what about the expense?

Once you’ve decided to get that car, you find logical reasons to buy it, such as a hefty rebate, or free upgraded stereo and leather seats.

People buy on benefits, and justify on features.

… And more features don’t necessarily equate to more benefits. For example, a cell phone that allows Internet surfing may seem desirable to some. But to people who want cell phones only for emergency communication, the Internet feature is not a benefit to them. In fact, that may be a drawback because it makes the phone more complicated.

What differentiates a successful product from its competitors, is that it appeals to a specific group of consumers, with the right balance of benefits and features for that group. It must appeal to consumers’ emotions – how the product will benefit them, how it will make them feel, how it will make them look to others. In addition, the product must include the features that are most important to those consumers.

In sum, “better” is relative – better for whom? Better for what? And why should the consumer care?

There’s the old story about the wealthy man who had three girlfriends. When it was time to settle down and get married, he could not decide which one to propose to. So he put them to a test: He gave each woman $10,000.
The first woman spent $8,000 and put $2,000 into savings.
The second woman spent $2,000 and put $8,000 into savings.
The third woman put the whole $10,000 into savings.
Which one did he marry?
The one with the biggest bra size.

How do people decide to buy your product over your competitor’s? The process is more complex than meets the eye – and it can all happen within a couple of seconds!
You’ve probably experienced it yourself, whether it’s choosing which vendor to buy your lunch from in a food court, what kind of car you end up buying, and hundreds of purchase decisions in between.

You may think that your buying decisions are guided primarily by logic. But the truth is that your emotions play a major role, especially when it comes to discretionary purchases.

Thus, in the food court you may really want that double bacon cheeseburger, but another part of you says “Salad.” How do you decide? You justify that the cheeseburger is OK, because you didn’t eat breakfast this morning, and you’ll try to hit the gym tonight. If you hadn’t craved that cheeseburger in the first place, you wouldn’t need to have that conversation with yourself.

It’s the same process when buying a car. You can do all the research you want. But most likely you’ll end up with a vehicle that fits with your self-image – an emotional decision justified with logic. For example, “It’s more than I wanted to spend, but it will probably last longer.”

When marketing products or services to your customers, it’s very important to keep in mind that they, too, are motivated first by emotion.

The old saying, “Build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door” may have been true a hundred years ago, but in today’s world, with billions of items vying for our attention, it’s not enough to have a well-designed product.

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Features Versus Benefits

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Buying on Benefits

Improving one’s quality of life is how we justify our discretionary spending, according to Pam Danziger, an expert in consumer buying behavior. In her book Why People Buy Things They Don’t Need, Danziger relates how people’s purchases are motivated by emotion and desire, specifically for a more satisfying and fulfilling life. We buy things to obtain what we perceive as a better quality of life.

What gives us a better quality of life? The answer is different for each individual. But one thing is certain – this emotional attraction is tied to perceived benefits, not the actual features of a product.

Emotional benefits, such as getting something for free, can have a strong pull, even for small differences. In his book Predictably Irrational, Dan Ariely described a study in which college students,

In an experiment conducted by Ariely, Shampanier, and Mazar (Date/Citation), they offered people Lindt truffles and Hershey's Kisses at various price points. In the first scenario, they offered truffles for $0.15 each and Kisses for $0.01 each. 73% of subjects chose the truffle and 27% the Kiss. In the second scenario, they took the price point of both items down by one cent, to $0.14 and $0.00.

Based on standard economic theory, the price reduction should not have led to any behavior change, since the relative price and expected pleasure should be equal.
between the two experiments. However, this did not hold in the second scenario. When a truffle was $0.14 and a Kiss was free, 69% chose the kiss and 31% the truffle. The feature of price difference did not change, but the emotional benefit of "free" was suddenly introduced.

Ariely's theory is that for normal transactions, we consider both the upside and the downside. But when something is free, we forget about the downside. "Free" is more than just a cent cheaper – it is a benefit tied to emotion. "Free" makes us perceive what is being offered as greatly more valuable than it really is. Getting a better value makes us feel good about ourselves, and in a small way enhances our quality of life.

The same “zero price effect” has been demonstrated elsewhere in real world situations, such as when Amazon.com decided to offer free shipping. Free shipping was offered globally, and sales increased everywhere except for France. Upon investigation of the inconsistency, they found that Amazon’s French division offered shipping for 1 franc (about $0.20), rather than for free. When France’s shipping was also changed to free, the same sales increase appeared in France as with the rest of the globe.

While price is an important consideration when weighing a product’s pros and cons, there are many other features that contribute to a product’s appeal. If a product has all the best features, why wouldn’t consumers immediately recognize the benefits? One reason is that the market is continually saturated with new entrants, so products fail to break through the clutter. While having many options to choose from is appealing in theory, more options can actually hinder one’s ability to choose. In other words, when we have too many options, we choose not to choose.

In her book, *The Art of Choosing*, Sheena Iyengar illustrates how too many choices can lead to choosing nothing at all. She demonstrated this theory with 2 separate displays of jam in a luxury food store: one display with 6 jams, and one display with 24 jams. She found that more people were initially attracted to the larger choice set, with 60% of people stopping at the display with 24 jams, versus only 40% stopping at the display with 6 jams. However, when it came to purchasing behavior, only 3% of people who stopped by the 24-jar display bought a jar of jam, versus 30% of people who stopped by the 6-jar display. This experiment showed that people are 10 times more likely to purchase the jam when presented with fewer options.

People purchase a product when they are satisfied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Display</th>
<th>% of people that stopped at display</th>
<th>% of stoppers that purchased</th>
<th>Out of every 100 people passing by, # to purchase jam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24 Jams</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1.8 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Jams</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with what the product offers them – when they see a benefit to buying it. Fewer purchases can indicate less satisfaction, or fewer perceived benefits.

Iyengar’s jam experiment supports the idea that more choice leads to less satisfaction, and potentially fewer perceived benefits. In our cluttered retail environment where we are often overwhelmed with choice, more features may not differentiate your product. Rather, your product can get lost in the clutter, leading the consumer to purchase a competitive product, or perhaps nothing at all.

**Justifying on Features**

Whether your product’s benefits communicate increased satisfaction, the value of free, or a better quality of life, you can’t rely on emotional appeal alone. Emotional appeal will help to open the door and predispose a consumer to your product, but it does not make that person totally committed to purchasing your product.

At some point, the consumer will have to understand the product’s features. Features allow consumers to justify their purchases, and give them a reason to
convince themselves that this is the right product for them.

Two researchers at the University of Texas are studying how features are important for justifying a purchase decision based on an emotional response. Raj Raghunathan and Szu-Chi Huang of the McCombs School of Business demonstrate this dynamic with chickens.

The chicken study featured two pictures: one of a plump, attractive looking chicken; and another of a thin and sickly looking chicken. When shown the pictures, researchers told all participants that the attractive chicken was all natural, and the thin chicken was genetically engineered. Participants were then split into two groups. The first group was told that the attractive/natural chicken was healthy but did not taste as good, while the thin/genetically engineered chicken tasted good but was less healthy. The second group was told the opposite.

Regardless of which group they were in, the majority of all participants preferred the attractive/natural chicken. The differences lay in their justifications for why they preferred that chicken. For the first group who was told that the attractive chicken was healthy but not tasty, they stated their preference was because they valued health above taste. For the second group who was told that the attractive chicken was tasty but not healthy, they stated their preference was because they valued taste above health.

Neither group said that their preference was related to how they felt about the chicken’s looks, yet both groups found opposite ways to justify the same decision. Choice decisions were made by emotions, and then justified by features.

What are some more examples of deciding on emotion and justifying on benefits?

Our culture values rational thinking. We are reluctant to admit that we make decisions emotionally, but research shows over and over that we do. It is the post-decision rationalization that allows us to convince ourselves that we carefully weighed the options before buying.

Some of the best examples of buying on benefits and justifying on features can be seen in TV commercials. In just a few seconds they communicate powerful emotions via images and sound, then quickly follow up with a feature to justify the purchase:

- A light beer commercial starts with a scene of people having a good time, while holding the glass or bottle of beer. (Benefit: people who drink this beer seem to have a lot of friends.) Then you’re reminded that the beer is only 90 calories. (Feature: justification that this is a good beer to drink.)
- Airlines and resorts depict gorgeous, happy people in their ads, or maybe even happy families, depending on the target audience. The weather looks perfect; the beach is pristine; and no one has sore feet or an upset stomach (that's reserved for antacid commercials). How nice it would be to get away and be pampered (benefit). But how can you possibly afford this paradise? You're in luck! For a limited time only, two can fly for the price of one (feature). This is a deal you can't refuse...or at least that's what you tell yourself to justify the expenditure.
- Car commercials have background music that appeal to specific audiences – e.g. classic rock for baby boomers, country music for those who view themselves as rugged, etc. These commercials hook your emotions, and then add, “Zero percent financing!” … which convinces
you that it’s a good time to buy a car.

**What This All Means For Marketing Your Product**

The marketplace is flooded with products. People need a reason to purchase yours. You can have the best product out there, and know in your heart that it is perfect for your target audience. But they may not pay attention until your marketing message addresses these three questions from the perspective of the consumer:

- *What’s in it for me?*
- *Why should I care?*
- *Why should I buy it from you, rather than from someone else?*

The answers to these questions communicate the emotional benefit of your product. They bring people around to wanting your product. The features come next, and allow the consumer to justify the purchase.

Keep in mind that you have a very brief window to get your message across — a few seconds at most. Thus your “benefits” message must be strong, and the features must be those that the consumer values.

You can learn to use the benefits/features combination in your marketing. Whenever you feel yourself responding to a TV or radio commercial, or to an ad in a magazine, on a billboard or on a web page, notice the one-two punch of the emotional hook followed by promotion of features. The reason you see this pattern everywhere around you is because it works!

**Wallin, Pauline Ph.D.**

Dr. Pauline Wallin, based in Pennsylvania, is an internationally known psychologist with over 35 years of clinical and academic experience. She has taught at the University of Minnesota and Penn State University, and now consults and lectures extensively on marketing psychological services and products to the general public.

Dr. Wallin is the 2011 President of the Media Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association. She has served on Boards and Committees in the American Psychological Association, as well as a consultant on marketing within that organization. She is author of *Taming Your Inner Brat: A Guide for Transforming Self-defeating Behavior*, and has been quoted in major news media — including *New York Times, Wall St. Journal, Washington Post, USA Today, Time Magazine, Forbes, Redbook, MacLean’s, Consumer Reports on Health, CNN, CBS*, and others.

**Previti, Denise**

**TRIG**

**Vice President**

With her broad background in quantitative and qualitative research, Denise specializes in understanding the consumer experience: *What considerations go into choosing one brand over another? How can new products fit into established routines? What are the intangible benefits of a given product feature? What messages resonate most effectively with a given consumer target?* She helps her clients design the most efficient and actionable market research to answer their business questions. Her research expertise includes choice modeling, concept/product testing, pricing initiatives, consumer diary studies, attitude and usage studies, decision tree analyses, multi-domain segmentations, and brand equity research. Denise works as an extension of her clients’ teams. She has a strong track record of helping clients focus on the overall success of a product or brand, while paying close attention to the details that make each project generate clear insights and actionable recommendations. Denise holds a dual M.A. in sociology and demography from The Pennsylvania State University, and a B.A from Washington and Lee University.