

Assertive and Non-assertive Consumer Behavior Styles in Relation with Advertising Appeals

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Abstract

For some people, advertising and other marketing practices are just background noise. For others, these tools provide extensive guidance for their decision making process. The paper seeks to determine which information sources are perceived as more reliable and trustworthy by the consumers. But products fall into different categories in function of the involvement level of the consumers. Therefore, we intend to establish how much and what data is considered and accepted as credible for high and low-involvement products.

All in all, the focus of this thesis is to highlight assertive and non-assertive consumer behavior styles in relation with advertising appeals used in marketing practices, the way of conducting the information gathering process, the information consumers seek and find about the products and the purchase intention.

Key words: assertive consumer, non-assertive consumer, advertising stimuli

J.E.L. classification: M31, M37, E21, L67, L68

1. Introduction

There is a long tradition in putting effort to better understand human thinking and feeling processes as part of their behavior. The reasons have varied over the history and therefore the issue has been addressed from varied points of views. Identifying needs and establishing better communication with customers is what marketers seek. One of the paths to follow in this respect, is to assess the assertiveness of individuals and how this influences their purchase process. Assertiveness and non-assertiveness are closely associated with a type of communication. Sales people are trained to better cope with these behavior styles.

The paper seeks to determine which information sources are perceived as more reliable and trustworthy by the consumers. The three groups form the Influential Mix also called the PMO. The acronym stands for Personal previous information, that provided by Marketing tools and that provided by Others in the form of product reviews.

The research was conducted on 160 international students in two Viennese universities: University of Applied Sciences and Vienna University of Economics and Business, in the spring of the year 2014. The results and the discussions of this thesis are useful for marketers, sales representatives and consumer behavior researchers.

The approach was divided in two phases. First, a preliminary survey was applied on a group of 30 students that fit into the target group. A series of images presented as advertisements for two products were tested in order to establish the perceived advertising appeals. The two products are a holiday van, the high-involvement product, and a milk box, the low-involvement product.

Next, assertive and non-assertive respondents have been tested, through an online questionnaire to establish how the information gathering process is conducted in each product case and how advertisement appeals influence the purchase decision for the two behavior categories.

The results and the discussions of this thesis are useful for marketers, sales representatives and consumer behavior researchers.

2. Literature review

The most relevant literature that helped our research is summarized in the table below (Table no. 1) which also show in what manner this information support our research hypotheses.

| | |
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| H1. Percent wise, women are more assertive compared with men. | |
| Ganesan, P., Venkatesakumar, R., Sampth, G. V., & Sathish, A. S. (2011, p.91) | Men are significantly more likely to strongly voice their opinions and seek redress for the emerged situations, thus, engage in non-assertive behavior. |
| Richins, M. (1987, p.79) | Men show non-assertive behavior styles. |
| Crutsinger, C., Knight D. and HaeJung. K. (2010, p. 202) | Young men engage easier in aggressive behavior. |
| H2. Cognitive advertising appeals trigger the highest rate of purchase intention for the high-involvement product. | |
| H3. Affective advertising appeals trigger the highest rate of purchase intention for the low-involvement product. | |
| Ruiz, S. and Sicilia, M. (2004, p. 661) | Have used comparative advertisements for cameras, a high-involvement product. They have obtained better results for high cognition processing styles. |
| Crutsinger, C., Knight D. and HaeJung. K. (2010, p. 202) | Assertive buyers have reported distrusting advertising, being rather sceptical to the message and content in the case of high-involvement products. |
| Hansen, H. M., Samuelsen, B. and Sallis, J. (2013, p.1174). | Non-assertive consumers have a greater preference for feeling stimuli because they match their need for affect. |
| Medina, J. (2008, p. 27) | People learn to filter what they receive through marketing. Therefore, affective stimuli are more efficient for non-assertive consumers as they put up less mental barriers. |
| H4. Assertive consumers have stronger preference towards the thinking processor (high cognition) when purchasing a low-involvement product. | |
| H5. Non-assertive consumers have stronger preference towards the feeling processor (high affect) when purchasing a low-involvement product. | |
| Chang C. (2002, p. 533) | Proposed that even though the message of an advertisement was showing the consumers' self-congruency in relation with the product, the influence over the decision making process was rather limited. |
| Crutsinger, C., Knight D. and HaeJung. K. (2010, p. 202) | Non-assertive teens had positive attitudes about advertising, relying more on it when making the purchase decision. |
| H6. Both assertive and non-assertive consumers have stronger preference towards the cognitive advertising appeals when purchasing a high-involvement product. | |
| De Pelsmacker, P., and Geuens, M. (1998, p. 286) | There is clear connection between the thinking processing style and cognitive appeals. |
| Fabrigar, L.R. and Petty, R.F. (1999, p. 378) | Appeals are more persuasive when the nature of the appeal and the complexity of the product match. |
| Pham, M.T. and Johar, G.V. (2001, p.140) | Rational advertising appeals are more useful in promoting functional products. |
| H7. Assertive consumers value more information sources provided by other users rather than on information provided by marketing tools and by their personal experience. | |
| H8. Non-assertive consumers value less information sources provided by other users when compared with the information provided by marketing tools and by their personal experience. | |
| Simonson, I. and Rosen, E. (2014, p.44) | In the case of high involvement products, people tend to rely more on product reviews and personal information shared by other users. |
| Zhang, A., Zheng, M., Jiang, N., & | Non-assertive consumers are prone to seeing and buying behavior |

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|---|---|
| Zhang, J. (2013, p. 438) | without really thinking things through and, in most cases, they end up regretting their purchases. |
| Crutsinger, C., Knight D. and HaeJung. K. (2010, p.202) | Non-assertive teens had positive attitudes about advertisements, trusting them. |
| H9. There is not a significant difference between assertive and non-assertive consumers in the importance given to the information sources available for low-involvement products. | |
| Gligorijevic, B. (2012, p.284) | Traditional marketing techniques face an increasingly greater challenge to reach and persuade the consumers in the social media era. |
| Murray, P.N. (2013) | The consumer does not analyse low-involvement advertisement cognitively, and thus, do not give them much importance in the decision making process. |

Source: Authors' contribution

Starting with these hypotheses, we have developed our approach and our research methodology.

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight assertive and non-assertive consumer behavior styles in relation with advertising appeals used in marketing practices, the way of conducting the information gathering process, the information consumers seek and find about the products and the purchase intention.

The research objectives are:

O1. Identify the consumer behavior style of the respondents from the assertiveness point of view.

O2. Determine the purchase intention for the two product categories (low-involvement and high involvement), shown distinctively in relation with the advertising appeals.

O3. Identify the type of advertising appeals, towards which each consumer behavior style (assertive and non-assertive) is more responsive when making the purchase decision of a low-involvement product (milk box).

O4. Identify the type of advertising appeals, towards which each consumer behavior style (assertive and non-assertive) is more responsive when making the purchase decision of a high-involvement product (holiday van).

O5. Identify the type of information source (previous Personal experience, Marketing tools, Other people's experience and reviews) most relied on in the decision making process of purchasing a high-involvement product, shown distinctively on the two consumer behavior styles (assertive and non-assertive).

O6. Identify the type of information source (previous Personal experience, Marketing tools, Other people's experience and reviews) most relied on in the decision making process of purchasing a low-involvement product, shown distinctively on the two consumer behavior styles (assertive and non-assertive).

The target group represents students in Viennese universities, both those that were born and raised in this country, and also internationals. The main universities in which the responses are collected are Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien and Fachhochschule des bfi Wien.

The method: Because the research intended to test several marketing appeals in some advertisements, for objectivity reasons, we have chosen to conduct a preliminary research in order to find out what are the perceived advertising appeals by the target group. A small sample of 30 respondents has been asked to associate the related marketing stimuli with the pictures that was used as advertisements for the product later on. The survey was conducted using an online survey structured in three parts. First part showed the pictures of the holiday vans, the second part showed the pictures of the milk boxes advertisements and the last part contained personal information in order to check and prove the belongingness to the target group. After each image a checklist question followed asking the respondents to choose from a list of advertisement appeals (Hetsroni, 2000, p. 63).

For the preliminary survey, the sample, consisting of 30 respondents, 20 females and 10 males, most of them, 90%, with ages between 21 and 24 years old, meet all the requirements of the target group. All of them live currently in Vienna, 17 follow the lectures of Fachhochschule des bfi Wien and the other 13 those of Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien. The nationalities of the respondents are: French, Albanian, Austrian, Moldavian, Hungarian, German, Romanian, Finish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Czech and Turkish.

The final survey was also online, and the instrument had three parts. It first establishes the behavior category in which the respondent fits. A tested instrument is utilized to provide the most accurate evaluation. Frank Atkinson [2010] provides the tool used in the survey. It consists on twelve statements that show the extremes of a situation, bipolar semantic differential scale. The respondent has to score himself on a ten points scale to show his personal tendency towards one of them. On the left side are statements that correspond to a non-assertive behavior and in the right side are those specific for assertive people.

By adding up the points, two groups will result. Scores under 60 points belong to the non-assertive group and those above to the assertive group. No modifications are made to the questionnaire.

The second part of the survey tests how the consumer engages and conducts in the information gathering stage for a high-involvement product. For this matter, the respondents have been asked to imagine they would buy a holiday van. The assumption is that a high majority does not have previous experience with this neutral product; therefore the respondents would have to think of a strategy on the spot.

As it has been pointed out, a paradigm shift is happening due to the development of technology and, thus, consumers start checking other, more neutral sources of information like online reviews made by other consumers and/or specialists. A five points Likert scale has been used to check how much importance the respondents give to each information source category. It is expected that this product will be placed close to the "O-Dependent" end of the "O-Continuum" (Simonson and Rosen, 2014, p.44).

Further on, through a multiple choice question, this part also checks how involved they would be in the information seeking process. They have to predict how long (how many days) would it take them to make a decision.

Moreover, to check also the marketing component that is involved, through an open question the respondents are asked to name a cars' brand they would first check for holiday vans. No options are provided for them so that the question can test what they can recall without the possibility of making comparisons between the components of a list.

A page break is inserted in the survey at this point so that marketing appeals effect can be better tested as they are separated from the sources of information. It is expected that this technique will clear the minds of respondents so that they only respond to the advertisements shown.

The advertisements are presented as pictures and the marketing appeals are named in the description of each of them without using the word "appeal". The six pictures are divided as follows: three of them use emotional/feeling appeals (joyful and popular; adventure; beauty), one shows neutral appeals (family and friends) and the remaining two appeal to the rational/ thinking aspect (modern and efficient' luxury). The respondents are asked to say what their first two preferences are. A correlation between the behavior style and the degree of responsiveness towards one of the appeals categories is pursued.

In the end of this part of the survey, through a dichotomous (yes/no) question, the previous experience in deciding on such a product is checked.

The third part of the questionnaire seeks to analyze how marketing appeals influence the choice for a low-involvement product, a milk box. Again, six pictures are shown but this time, the appeal is not named in their descriptions. Instead, the brand advertised for makes the description. The respondents are asked to decide for one of them based only on the advertisements shown.

Next, it is established what additional information the respondents need to make their decision. The answers are provided and they have the possibility to check multiple-boxes. It is verified how much more and what more the buyers need to know, by this question. Using two Likert scale questions, it is verified, in turns, how much importance do the information gathered and the advertisement displayed have over the purchase decision.

How valuable the product is for the consumer is checked by the following two questions. Using a 5 points Likert scale, the respondents are asked directly about the perceived importance of the product in their life and then, through a multiple choice question, the quantity used is checked.

The last part of the survey contains the contact information questions. Gender, age, nationality, location, studies and income are the requested details. This are used to ensure the belongingness to the target group.

The structure of the resulted sample consists in 160 respondents, 98 females representing 61.2%, and 62 males representing 38.8%. All of them currently live in Vienna. 42.5% of them study at Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, 53.8% study at Fachhochschule des bfi Wien, and the rest of 3.8% study at another University. The great majority, 68.8%, follow an Undergraduate program. From the age point of view, the sample is also homogeneous. 80% of he respondents have ages between 21 and 24 years old. The disposable income level obtains the highest percentage, 41.3%, between 301 and 600 € per month. 21.3% have less than 300 €, 17.5% between 601 € and 900 € and 20% more than 901 €, disposable income per month. The last variable used to describe the sample is the nationality. We obtained a sample of 24 nations from all over the globe.

4. Findings

For analyzing and interpreting the results, this part is structured in function of the objectives, which leads to five sub-chapters. All of them contain tests that help developing a comprehensive overview of the research problem.

O1. Identify the consumer behavior style of the respondents from the assertiveness point of view.

More than two thirds of the respondents are assertive, 68.8%. This gives the research a stronger basis for analyzing the assertive category of respondents. By comparing the assertiveness scores of the test, we can see that there is a difference in favor of the female respondents. However, the fact that it is only of approximately 2 points. More male respondents are assertive compared with female respondents: 74% of men compared with 65% of women. Still, an important majority of both groups is composed by assertive people. Overall the respondents are assertive, 68.8% of them. There is no evidence supporting correlations between gender, region and disposable income level with assertiveness. However, percent wise, a bigger percentage of men (74%) are assertive compared with women (65%). So the first hypothesis is supported.

O2. Determine the purchase intention for the two product categories (low-involvement and high involvement), shown distinctively in relation with the advertising appeals.

The findings shoe that the neutral advertising appeal manages to persuade the smallest share of the respondents to buy the holiday van: 13.8% from the first attempt and 23.8% from the second. The most efficient are the affective and the cognitive. Talking about a high-involvement product, it was expected that the cognitive advertising appeal would be more convincing.

However, we can see that the results of the affective and cognitive advertising appeals are quite close: 46% of the respondents choose the thinking stimuli and 40% choose the feeling stimuli, in the first attempt. In the second one, more than half of the times, 55%, the respondents have chosen the affective appeal and only 21.3% the cognitive appeal. We can think that, at first, the respondents weight all the benefits and the products before making the purchase and choose it wisely, whereas, when given a second chance, they choose to indulge themselves and go for the product that displayed the affective advertising appeals.

Also, the majority of respondents, 58.8%, have a preference for the thinking processor, which is composed from neutral and cognitive advertising appeals. The feeling processor, with a score of 41.3%, is composed from neutral and affective advertising appeal. The difference of 17.5% in favor of the thinking processor shows us that, when faced with the situation of purchasing a low-involvement product, people are not impressed by the affective advertising appeals, but more by the benefits they bring shown by the cognitive stimuli.

In both cases, low-involvement and high-involvement product purchase, the respondents choose the thinking stimuli in favor of the affective stimuli. This means that Hypothesis H2 is supported. The possible reason for which Hypothesis H3 is not supported by the evidence is that, being a low-

involvement product, the consumers are not even open enough to allow the advertisements to influence their feelings.

O3. Identify the type of advertising appeals, towards which each consumer behavior style (assertive and non-assertive) is more responsive when making the purchase decision of a low-involvement product (milk box).

Assertive respondents have chosen 38 of the times "Organic Valley" milk boxes. This is represented by a cognitive oriented advertisement. The second choice is "Fairlife", 32 out of 110 responses, a product introduced by an affective advertisement. The least preferred option, 4 out of 110, is "Got milk?" This milk box was introduced by an affective stimuli, namely, by the humorous and youthful spirit appeal.

Non-assertive respondents have chosen "MariGold" milk boxes 18 times out of 50 (36%), which has a cognitive advertisement. The second position belongs to "Organic Valley", 12 responses out of 50. 56.36% (62/110) of the assertive respondents and 64% (32/50) of the non-assertive respondents have based their purchase intention on cognitive stimuli.

Hypothesis H4 is supported by the findings: assertive consumers do prefer cognitive advertisements, whereas hypothesis H5 is contradicted by the findings. Non-assertive consumers also show a greater preference towards the thinking processor.

O4. Identify the type of advertising appeals, towards which each consumer behavior style (assertive and non-assertive) is more responsive when making the purchase decision of a high-involvement product (holiday van).

The expressed purchase intention towards the first two options has the lowest scores for the neutral advertising appeals. Assertive respondents have expressed their purchase intention relatively equal for holiday vans presented through affective and cognitive advertising appeals. For their second choice however, they have clearly showed a greater preference for the affective stimuli. The same is the case for the non-assertive respondents.

There is no significant difference between assertive and non-assertive respondents with regard to their preference of advertising stimuli. Both groups have balanced number of affective and cognitive choices, whereas neutral stimuli are the least preferred by both groups. Hypothesis H6 is supported.

O5. Identify the type of information source (previous Personal experience, Marketing tools, Other people's experience and reviews) most relied on in the decision making process of purchasing a high-involvement product, shown distinctively on the two consumer behavior styles (assertive and non-assertive).

First of all, it is important to see the classification of the information sources tested in the survey according to the Influential Mix, as depicted in *Table no. 2*.

Table no. 2 Classification of the information sources tested according to the Influential Mix

| Item number | How much importance you give to the following information sources? (1 meaning the most importance and 5 meaning the least importance) | Influential Mix Component (PMO) |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | I find someone I trust and leave the research to him. | Others |
| 2 | I have strong preferences in terms of car brands. | Personal |
| 3 | I rely on personal knowledge about car brands. | Personal |
| 4 | I choose between what cars/ brands, are currently advertised. | Marketing |
| 5 | I ask selling representatives. | Marketing |
| 6 | I consult professional reviews in specialized magazines | Marketing |
| 7 | I read other people's online reviews about the holiday vans they have bought. | Others |
| 8 | I consult professional reviews online. | Others |
| 9 | I discuss with friends who have (more) knowledge about it. | Others |

Source: Authors' contribution

Assertive respondents value less information sources provided by marketing tools (with mean scores of 3.29, 3.22 and 3.15). Next, they grade higher their personal experience and the most reliable information sources are provided by others with mean scores smaller than 2.31. The most

reliable source of information is considered to be friends that have knowledge or more knowledge about the subject than the respondent themselves. Non-assertive respondents also find the information provided by others more reliable (with scores of 2, 2.44 and 2.66) than all other kinds of information. In contrast with assertive respondents, this category finds marketing tools more reliable than their personal previous experience. The respondents have been asked to think of a car brand that they would check to see if they have also holiday vans for sale. The reason for this question was to check whether or not there is a minimum of information in the mind of the respondents regarding the selected product. Only 6.3% cannot think of any car brand. An interesting fact is that 32.5% have thought of Volkswagen. Other higher scores are achieved by BMW (10%), Mercedes (8.8%) and Audi (7.5%). All other car brands have scores below 3.8%.

Hypotheses H7 and H8 are both confirmed. The most trusted source of information for high involvement products is that provided by other peoples' shared experiences. Assertive and non-assertive consumers differ only when speaking of the other two sources: the first category trusts marketing tools the least whereas the second category of consumers rely the least on their personal previous experience.

O6. Identify the type of information source (previous Personal experience, Marketing tools, Other people's experience and reviews) most relied on in the decision making process of purchasing a low-involvement product, shown distinctively on the two consumer behavior styles (assertive and non-assertive).

When asked what is the information they would require to make the purchase of the low involvement product milk the two most important characteristics have been found to be price and the expiry date. With scores a little over 50%, the production place and the fat content follow. The least important aspect has been found to be who else drinks that kind of milk. It is clearly that the product milk box is on the O-Independent end on the O-continuum and marketing tools can still make an important difference in determining the sale of the product.

However, when asked to rate how important is the information checked and the advertisement itself, on average, the information is "very important" (4.26 on a scale from 1 to 5), and the ad is close to "important", with a mean rating of 2.84. The differences in answers are of approximately one point in addition or in minus as the standard deviation is 0.805 and, respectively, 1.192. With a mean score of 3.3, the product milk box is considered to be important, answers varying with 1.092 more or less. Most respondents are quite frequent buyers of milk boxes: 76 of them buy one to 3 pieces in a week and 52 of them buy one in two weeks.

Hypothesis H9 is totally supported by the findings. As expected, both consumer categories give the same amount of importance to the two categories of information sources. They regard the information they gather themselves as "very important" and that obtained from marketing tools as almost "important". The two most valuable pieces of information are seen to be the price and the expiry date. It is more logical to advertise for the first one but the second, the expiry date can also provide significant marketing advantage.

5. Research conclusions and limitations

A great majority of the respondents, approximately, 70%, have assertive behavior style. This might indicate that the majority of the population is also assertive. A research on this matter would be indicated. Establishing this aspect would make it easier for marketers to design their marketing campaigns as it is easier to design a message knowing the dominant communication style.

There is not sufficient evidence to support correlations between region and disposable income level and assertiveness. This shows a behavior style levelling tendency at least at the European level. Relevant variables in determining the assertiveness level might be those related to the social context. The education, family and friends, and possibly hobbies and interests can influence the behavior style determining the subject to be more or less assertive. Further on, wider age groups can also be considered in the study.

In addition, percent wise, men have found to be more assertive than woman. Close to 10% of the male respondents have been found to be assertive. However, when comparing the mean scores for the behavior test, the difference is of only 2 points out of 120 maximum points. This indicated

that male respondents register smaller differences in the scores whereas for females, the standard deviation is higher.

How to deal with the assertive behavior styles?

- Use facts and logic
- Show disagreement towards facts but not opinions
- Use the KISS principle: Keep It Short and Simple
- Personal assurances are not effective enough. Show different options and facts
- Achieve mutual understanding by sharing opinions
- Communication should be about both people and facts
- Keep summarizing
- If you do tell stories, keep them short and leave out irrelevant details
- Make sure to pin them down in a friendly way
- Focus on the future state as well as on the present state

How to deal with the non-assertive behavior styles?

- Work together, find out the common points
- Learn more about hobbies, interests and social background
- Be patient. Do not try to push the consumer
- Use personal assurance. Guarantee for the product and limit the number of options
- Give the consumer time to assess the proposal and be agreeable
- Emphasize on how the product works to lower the levels of perceived risk
- Be helpful and willing
- Do not try to overstate
- Nurture relationships. It makes the consumer be more cooperative
- Prevent the consumers from finding out by themselves the flaws of the products by letting them know from the beginning
- Emphasize on why they should buy and use the product.

In both cases, low-involvement and high-involvement, the respondents choose the thinking stimuli in favor of the affective stimuli more often, when expressing their purchase intention. Possibly, the reason for this is that, being a low-involvement product, the consumers are not even open enough to allow the advertisements influence their feelings. They simply choose to filter out the information received through advertisements.

In contradiction to what was expected, non-assertive consumers also show a greater preference towards the thinking processor. Hypothesis H4 is supported by the findings: assertive consumers do prefer cognitive advertisements in more cases.

However, the difference in the number of cases in favor of the cognitive stimuli for the two product categories, expressed for assertive and non-assertive respondents, is not high enough to show a clear tendency in favor of the thinking processor. What is absolutely clear, is that for both groups neutral stimuli are the least preferred.

The most trusted source of information for high involvement products is that provided by other peoples' shared experiences. Assertive and non-assertive consumers differ only when speaking of the other two sources: the first category trusts marketing tools the least whereas the second category of consumers rely the least on their personal previous experience.

In the case of the low-involvement product, both consumer categories give the same amount of importance to the two categories of information sources. They regard the information they gather themselves as "very important" and that obtained from marketing tools as almost "important". The two most valuable pieces of information are seen to be the price and the expiry date. The first one could be advertised easier than the second. Other important information for the low-involvement product milk box, have found to be fat content and place of production.

Research Limitations:

A first limitation of the research is the sample size which may not be highly representative. The multitude of nationalities of the respondents can be considered a factor to determine a heterogeneous sample. Most of the respondents are Europeans, but cultural differences should be

taken into account in a further research. A study at the level of each country or region should be made before applying the results in this paper.

Only 31% of the respondents are non-assertive, meaning that the results for this category can be considered not significant enough.

The high-involvement product chosen is an untypical for most participants, therefore it can lose its value as high involvement, as the complexity and the length of the information search process might not be enough to classify it as such. A preliminary test to establish the level of involvement for the product is recommended.

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