Understanding the new breed of reflexive consumer

April 28, 2010

Why do some people buy Pepsi over Coca-Cola? We know that our purchase decisions are not just a question of utility but rather statements of our identity.

When the strength of your company's brand is the key factor in its market position, understanding the way consumers think and behave is absolutely crucial. But such a task is easier said than done. For well over a century, economists and other social scientists have endeavored to explain, with varying degrees of success, what it is that actually makes consumers tick.

Classical economists were among the first to do so, arguing that our only real motivation as consumers is to maximize utility. Their model, however, fails to account for the meaning that we bestow on our relationship with the goods we buy. It may help explain why we buy a car, but sheds no light whatsoever on why we prefer a BMW over an Audi, or a Renault over a Peugeot.

Consumption as social positioning

Sociologists tried to fill in this gap by underlining factors such as the ceremonial function of goods and their role in marking social relationships and demonstrating social position. This model, however, completely negates the role of subjective motives for the acquisition and enjoyment of goods and service.

Other theories, meanwhile, have depicted consumption as an inherently experimental

activity, as an expression of individualistic hedonism or as a search for ostentation, psychological comfort or mere enjoyment.

In their book chapter, "Reflexive Consumers: A Relational Approach to Consumption as a Social Practice," IESE Prof. Carlos Rodriguez Lluesma and University of Navarra Prof. Pablo García Ruiz critique these models, concluding that, on the whole, they adopt too narrow a focus to provide a truly representative picture of modern consumer behavior.

Constructing a lifestyle

Borrowing from certain elements of these models as well as the findings of recent research, the authors propose an alternative that ties consumption in with "the human capacity to create and pursue projects of action." Modern consumers, they say, appropriate the meanings of objects so as to build a modus vivendi — a lifestyle — that is meaningful for themselves and for their social context.

To support their claims, the authors cite Daniel Miller?s one-year study of the consumption habits and practices of residents of a North London borough. Miller found that people's choice of goods depended primarily on whom they were buying for and what they wanted for them.

As Miller puts it, "Shoppers develop and imagine those social relationships which they most care about through the medium of selecting goods." A married woman, for example, will buy a particular brand or style of menswear for her husband, not only based on what she thinks he wants but also on the basis of what she thinks would most improve the way he dresses. Miller's findings confirm that the purchasing act rarely boils down to a purely self-regarding act.

A global language of dress

The book chapter also cites the experience of one of the world's leading "coolhunters," Francesco Morace. Together with his team of photographers, Morace has observed how people dress in 50 cities around the world. One of his main findings is that dress — together with other aspects of personal image — is fast becoming a language reflecting the person's deepest values and existential choices, rather than a symbol of socioeconomic status.

Global trends now reach all countries and cultures, where they are read, interpreted, adopted and adapted by a local audience to reflect their own cultural references. Morace also identifies a growth in what he terms "micromega luxury," whereby consumers acquire and

use small, everyday glamour objects, materials and craft icons to express their originality.

Morace's findings reveal that consumers are able to organize their consumption practices into projects that enable them to implement the values and goals they care most about. Rodriguez Lluesma and García Ruiz take this concept a step further, identifying consumers as inherently reflexive beings — i.e., they talk to themselves about their relationships to others and seek to mold those relations through the acquisition and use of consumption objects, be they goods, services or experiences.

Four models of reflexive consumers

In her *Making Our Way Through the World*, the sociologist M.S. Archer identified four types of reflexive subjects in relation to occupational trajectories. Borrowing heavily from Archer?s model, Rodriguez Lluesma and García Ruiz outline four similar models of "reflexive consumers."

- *Communicative consumers* seek to carry out their deliberations with the approval of others. They may prove more sensitive to value consumption, due to their capacity to express and foster integration in the group, imitating and reproducing tastes and styles.
- *Autonomous consumers* tend to seek in their consumption the same social success they pursue in their occupations. They are more prone to conspicuous consumption and fads and trends.
- *Meta-Reflexive consumers* frequently assess their own conduct and tend to adopt a more critical stance toward certain types of consumption. They are likely to include consumers of ecological foods, fair trade goods and members of online communities supporting moral causes.
- *Fractured consumers* are so overwhelmed by the influence of their social environment that they can hardly organize and pursue plans for themselves. They are likely to feature among the ranks of so-called "fashion victims" and compulsive buyers. They know the marketing messages and the existence of a language of objects, but they just don't speak it. These consumers should be of particular interest in the future study of consumption.

The global consumer

In an age of growing globalization, fewer and fewer people have relatives or peers on hand to provide guidance on their purchase decisions. As a result, consumers are increasingly coming

to resemble autonomous agents. This may help explain why "new marketing techniques are on the rise that hinge upon customization and client service, where the point of sale and the brand itself provide the certainty lost" in a world of fractured relationships.

Another important consequence of globalization is the access it provides to products and services from other cultures. "Today, not only a privileged few, but most of the population have the opportunity to sample Chinese chrysanthemum tea, Indian cotton, Uruguayan mate or Swedish reindeer meat."

We are also increasingly exposed to other cultures — worldviews, values and traditions. All these elements, as part of our global culture, will help further enrich, modify or transform our lifestyles, as Morace has documented. The age of the global consumer will no doubt provide us with ever greater opportunities to elaborate and construct new lifestyles. The world, it seems, is truly becoming our oyster.

www.iese.edu/insight