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CONSUMERS' INTENTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR: A NOTE ON RESEARCH AND A CHALLENGE TO RESEARCHERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the widespread attempts of market researchers to predict aspects of consumer choice on the basis of survey respondents' verbally-expressed intentions to buy. In particular, it assesses the Fishbein behavioural intentions model which represents the most sophisticated technique available for such work. Theoretical, experimental and practical evidence is advanced to demonstrate the futility of employing models which assume linear continuity between intentions and behaviour in the predictions of many managerially-relevant aspects of consumer behaviour, notably brand choice. The major purpose of the paper is the identification of an important source of weakness in the assumptions which underpin current market research practice. The concluding section draws attention to the need for viable alternatives.

INTRODUCTION

Much marketing research practice rests upon an assumption which is sometimes superficially reviewed but seldom seriously questioned. It is the hypothesis that aspects of consumer behaviour that are relevant to managerial decision-making can be predicted with useful degrees of accuracy from survey respondents' statements about how they think and feel towards the performance of such behaviour. Such market dimensions as brand share, consumers' brand preferences and repeat buying propensities are frequently estimated via techniques based upon this assumption. This is especially so in the case of new products whether they are still undergoing pre-launch development or at an early stage of commercialisation. Forecasts of the overt choices which consumers will make in future circumstances are (to put it at its simplest) made on the basis of what they have said they intend to do when making a choice in those circumstances. Although several versions of this approach are in use, all (to put it a little more technically) derive from the view that measures of cognition and affect can be combined into an index of purchase intention from which actual consumer choices (usually for a specific brand within a generic product class) can be satisfactorily predicted.

The behavioural intentions model devised by Martin Fishbein (1967) has proved particularly attractive in this respect. In his formulation, the probability that an individual will perform a specific act approximates the strength of his verbally-expressed intention so to act. This behavioural intention is itself a function of the individual's overall evaluation of (affect or attitude towards) that act, plus his beliefs about the expectations held by significant others towards so behaving ('subjective norm'), weighted by his motivation to comply with those expectations. (Detailed exposition is provided by Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975. A less technical account is available in Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980.) The

popularity of this expectancy-value modelling approach is apparent from the accounts of research practitioners (e.g. Sampson and Harris, 1970; Tuck, 1976), as well as from the central place it has found in more basic research (Cf. Bagozzi, 1982; Bonfield, 1974; Ryan and Bonfield, 1975, 1980; Wilkie and Pessemier, 1973). The confidence of so many applied researchers is matched by the faith of Fishbein and Ajzen themselves in the predictive and explicative powers of their model: they describe as the 'theory of reasoned action' the proposition that the causal sequence detailed in the model - which portrays the individual as acting consistently with his intentions, established through a rational and informed decision process - is determinative of overt behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). It is this assurance of a causal sequence which underlies the marketing researcher's assumption that the intentions model provides precise and trustworthy estimates of specific consumer choices.

The limitations inherent in the model and their implications for research practice and managerial decision-making have received only scant attention in the applied marketing literature and have certainly not been allowed to detract from the use of the model. Yet it is clear from consideration of the nature of the extended intentions model/theory of reasoned action that it can make only trivial contributions to the understanding and prediction of managerially-relevant aspects of consumer choice; moreover, most of the limitations to the use of the model for predictive purposes of the kind which predominate in marketing research and management, are made explicit by Fishbein and Ajzen themselves. Marketing researchers appear by and large to have overlooked their caveats.

RELATING INTENTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

The most significant feature of the Fishbein model which applied researchers should appreciate is that it is a highly situation-specific instrument of prediction: it is capable of predicting choice accurately but only under the most rigorously-specified circumstances. As has been noted, its main apparent benefit to the research practitioner is the possibility that measures of behavioural intention will approximate actual behavioural choices in the market place so closely that usable predictions of the latter can be founded on the former. Investigators have, therefore, assumed that high correlations between intentions and behavioural measures are probable and have acted accordingly. However, as Fishbein (1973) clearly points out, conditions and circumstances must be 'maximally-conducive' to high correlations before these can be obtained. Notably - and crucially in marketing research - the measurement of behavioural intention must occur as the immediate antecedent of the behaviour to which it refers: anything other than a very short intervening interval reduces correlations dramatically. Furthermore, the behavioural intention in question must refer to the specific determination of the respondent to perform a closely-defined, specific action in a given situation: the intervention of unexpected consequences of so behaving or of changes in the subjective norm of the individual is bound to reduce correlations (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1972).

The demanding nature and extent of the required specificty are apparent from the analysis of 142 studies of attitudinal predictors and behavioural criteria reported by Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) from which they conclude that strong correlations are probable only when measures of both variables evince very high levels of correspondence in terms of (i) the action to which they refer, (ii) the target towards which the action is directed, (iii) the

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

The Fishbein technique has been singled out for attention in this paper not because it is the sole means currently employed in marketing research to predict consumer choice but because it represents the most sophisticated methodology available for the attempt. The measurement of consumers' purchase intentions in consumer research is often far less elaborate than this technique demands, consisting simply in the requirement that respondents indicate the strength of their behavioural intention on a five point interval scale. Levels of measurement correspondence in investigations which attempt to predict behaviour from attitudes/intentions frequently fall drastically short of those which Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) showed to be the minimal acceptable for reasonable tests of the external validity of attitude models. By confining the present discussion to the Fishbein model, it is possible to draw the most far-reaching conclusions with respect to the nature of intentions testing in current marketing practice. Within this limited context (related issues have been raised elsewhere: see Foxall 1983, 1984a), important consequences of our severely limited capacity to predict the minutiae of consumer choice are apparent.

It is of central importance that consumer researchers recognise how far removed is the typical marketing research investigation from that specified by Fishbein and Ajzen for acceptable levels of behavioural prediction to occur.* Even if marketing investigation included the attempt to measure behaviour (e.g. brand purchase) under conditions which corresponded

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* Somewhat uncharacteristically Ajzen and Fishbein (1980, p.48) claim that the events which intervene between intentions and behaviour and render them inconsistent can be expected to 'balance out' so that group behaviour can be accurately predicted over time even if that of individuals cannot. They offer no evidence for this, however; neither is it borne out by attempts at forecasting new product acceptance on the basis of verbally-expressed intentions.

to those which governed the earlier measures of intention (action, target, context and time), the degree of correspondence achievable in such research would be slight simply because of the nature of marketing research and consumer behaviour. In the marketing context, the verbal expression of an intention (to purchase) is of necessity temporally-separate from the opportunity to purchase: many marketing research studies, especially in new product development, precede consumers' first opportunity to purchase by weeks or months. However skilfully the measurement of such intentions, it is inevitable that situational interventions will occur during the ensuing period and that the correspondence between intentions and behaviour will be reduced accordingly. The implication is that the context in which buying will occur cannot be accurately predicted. Especially where relatively low-commitment consumer behaviour is involved - as is certainly the case in the purchase of fast-moving consumer goods (Robertson, 1981) - changes in social, physical and temporal situations are only too likely to throw completely any attempt at predicting such aspects of consumer preference as brand choice. The conditions 'maximally-conducive' to high intentions/behaviour correspondence are simply not available to the consumer researcher except in the most tightly-controlled experimental circumstances and the results obtained therein cannot be expected to predict subsequent choices in the market place with reasonable accuracy.

The strong probability that expected and unexpected events will intervene between the expression of an intention and the chance to perform the intended act lies at the heart of the difficulty of using the intentions model in marketing. This problem has been occasionally acknowledged and has led some theoreticians to incorporate an additional term (such as Unexpected Events) between behavioural intention and behaviour in their models (cf. Sheth 1974, van Raaij, 1981); the problem of making this notion operational

remains, however. Another way of putting the problem is to note that an opportunity to act in the intended manner may simply never arise, a fact which renders the ascription of a 'causal sequence' to the intentions model/ theory of reasoned action somewhat pretentious (Sarver, 1983). Behavioural intentions themselves may be most satisfactorily viewed as inchoate prior to the occurrence of such an opportunity (Schuman and Johnson, 1976). Ehrenberg and Goodhardt (1980a) have suggested that the behavioural term included in the Fishbein model may correspond in marketing terms to product rather than brand choice; if this is so, the model can hardly be expected to distinguish and predict buyers' future preferences for brands within product classes whose members represent numerous combinations of an identical set of attributes. More than this, however, the preceding discussion suggests that the Fishbein model may be an inappropriate means of forecasting product choice itself: the availability to consumers of high levels of discretionary income and of choice among product classes reduces even the predictability of produce purchase. Such a conclusion would be consistent with the observation that statements of purchase intention for brands are generally a function of usage; they are statements of overall evaluation or affect which refer backwards rather than forwards in time (see also Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 1980b). Sarver (1983, p.161) argues that the model cannot possess predictive value in the case of those activities 'where a person, entirely within a context of opportunity, must quickly formulate an intention and quickly exercise a behaviour consistent with that intention'. Brand choice is an example par excellence of such a case.

The previous discussion has adduced evidence which underlines and partly explains why marketing research which involves the prediction of consumer choice on the basis of survey respondents' statements of intent are likely to founder. This evidence is in the form, first, of Fishbein and

Ajzen's admitted constraints, theoretical and practical, on the nature and scope of their model, and secondly, of experimental results obtained in scholarly marketing investigations of the external validity of that model. Nevertheless, technological achievement has more than once flourished within an antagonistic theoretical or academic environment and the argument which has been put forward here would present no disqualification to the use of intentions models if researchers able to make accurate behavioural predictions in practice. However, the outcome of new consumer product development indicates that this is not the case. Surveys of the commercialisation of innovative consumer goods have consistently shown that the overwhelming majority fail. (For reviews and discussion of the evidence, see Baker, 1983; Foxall, 1984b; Urban and Hauser, 1980). The success rates of new products have not, moreover, improved during the last quarter century (Rockwell and Particelli, 1982). Numerous factors contribute to this state of affairs but an important consideration is the inability of statements of intent obtained at the concept testing stage of development to provide accurate forecasts of repeat purchase; as new product development proceeds, estimates of future purchasing behaviour based on expressions of purchase intention certainly improve but remain a poor means of reducing the uncertainty which surrounds this process (Tauber, 1981). That between thirty-three and fifty per cent of new products which have successfully completed test marketing nonetheless fail supports this view, as does the fact that whatever predictive validity is offered by intentions measures during the corporate innovative process applies only to relatively continuous new products; the greater the discontinuity posed by new products, the less valuable is marketing founded upon consumers' verbal statements of future actions. At best, the use of intentions statements in this phase of research must be negative - concerned with eliminating obvious losers rather than capable of identifying winners.

CONCLUSIONS

New product development is a lottery: the strategic need to innovate is usually so strong and the possible benefits of success so enticing that companies will always be tempted to develop more new products than can succeed in the market place. The responsibility for failure cannot be placed unequivocally at the feet of consumer researchers. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on those engaged in marketing research to recognise the shortcomings of their techniques and to propose alternatives. In view of the fact that the main obstacle to prediction lies in situational interventions, the main thrust of the required developments in research may well lie in the study of the situational determinants of consumer choice (cf. Belk, 1975; Kakkar and Lutz, 1981). There is pervasive evidence in the social sciences, concisely and persuasively summarised by De Fleur and Westie (1963) to the effect that verbal and overt behaviours are quite separate phases of action, each governed by its own consequences and predictable from the other only when those consequences coincide. Such a phrase is reminiscient of Skinner's axiom that 'Behaviour is shaped and maintained by its consequences' (Skinner 1973) and might indicate that an approach to consumer choice based more firmly on overt consumer behaviour should be pursued. This possibility has recently been advanced by several authors; (cf. Nord and Peter, 1980; Peter and Nord, 1982; Rothschild and Gaidis, 1981; Foxall, 1983a, 1984b), but the effective use of behaviour modification techniques in marketing remains at present a promise rather than a fact. It is noteworthy that the role of reinforcement in maintain attitudinal behaviour consistency was raised some years ago by Fishbein (1967): 'although an individual's attitude might initially influence and be related to specific behavioural intentions (or to specific behaviours), this relationship may or may not persist, depending on the nature and

schedule of reinforcement associated with the behavioural intentions.' And there is certainly a good deal of evidence to show that whatever practical predictive value derives from statements of behavioural intention arises after consumers have had an opportunity to try the produce and experience the consequences of purchase and consumption (Tauber, 1981; see also Ehrenberg, 1974). The role of a behaviour modification perspective in marketing can only be established by direct empirical investigation and it may well be that the small reinforcements offered by most consumer products will prove inadequate to substantiate such a managerial approach. In their necessary attempt to demonstrate a useful contribution to managerial decision-making which goes beyond the current, facile preoccupation with projecting verbal statements of intention*, researchers may choose to explore this or any other alternative avenue of investigation. Until they do so convincingly, the need to regard all marketing as test marketing will remain. That is, the capacity of research to reduce effectively the uncertainty which surrounds marketing action, particularly in the context of innovation, cannot be assumed. Perhaps that is an inevitable state of affairs, given the nature of new product marketing. If it is, marketing researchers should not be afraid to say so.

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* In particular, the practice of making behavioural intention or attitude rather than behaviour the dependent variable (e.g. Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980) must be overcome.

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