

wide use as a companion book to a formal text in a Service Marketing or service Management course at the MBA level.

Sudas Roy

Marketing Group

IIM Calcutta

Understanding the Consumer by Isabelle Szmigin. 2003. New Delhi: Response Books. 202pages + vi, Rupees 280.00 (paperback)

Historically, the study of consumer behavior has evolved from an early emphasis on rational choice (micro economics and classical decision theory), to a focus on apparently irrational buying needs (some motivational research), to the use of logical flow models of bounded rationality. Most recently, however, researchers have begun to question some of these foundations. The emergent thinking wants us to believe that people as consumers no longer purchase, consume and use things for functional, utilitarian purposes but rather for how they speak to us, what they say about us to our fellow men and women and how they make us feel about ourselves. Amidst all this, marketing practice has progressively become more concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually satisfying long-term relationships with customers. If the 1950s was the era of mass marketing, and the 1970s, the era of market segmentation, then the 1990s represent the genesis of personalized marketing and customer relationship marketing in which knowledge about individual customers is used to guide highly focused marketing strategies. The proliferation of information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of new empowered and knowledgeable consumers, who are aggressive in their desire to know more and to communicate more. As information percolates freely to a new age consumer, the diffusion of innovation has also taken a new

meaning. It has become even more central to business success rather than being functional. However, though its practical assimilation has progressed fast, no attempt has been made to accumulate and present these developments and the philosophies behind it to a larger audience. The prominent area of consumer diversity, creativity and innovation has been left unexplored to a large extent, even today.

The present contribution **Understanding the Consumer by Isabelle Szmigin** is one such attempt, where the author has tried to fill the vacuum by providing an in-depth and multi-faceted analysis of facts about emerging consumers and their culture. Through this book, the author has attempted to present comprehensive details about the new age consumer in order to help marketers understand the emerging realities in this very domain from an altogether distinct yet inclusive perspective. A sincere effort has been made to put forth a framework to understand the forces driving the changes in the way consumers think and act in markets or purchase situations. The author has further elucidated on new developments, challenges and paradigms concerning understanding consumers and tried to build a case for an all new perspective of analyzing consumer behavior for better marketing decisions by exploring how these new developments fit with existing paradigms.

The book is organized into ten chapters, which can be viewed in two parts informally; the first part begins with **Chapter 1** which contains a critical review of marketing practice called relationship marketing. It looks at the genesis and benefits of relationship marketing to the consumers and suppliers. Through a critical analysis of particular cases, it asserts that this form of marketing is seriously limited in what it offers to the consumers. An attempt has been made to highlight the strategic failure to analyze the nature of relationships within a social context and hence to embrace the consumer as

an active participant in these relationships. The author has also focused on the notion of risk and risk reduction which has often been cited as a reason why consumers might want to maintain long term relationships. However, it has been argued that consumers, while requiring to be informed appropriately, are well able to face up to the risks the commercial world presents. Finally, the contents of the chapter, though inadequate in the coverage of the relationship marketing perspective, do ably illustrate the limitations of relationship marketing which has led to a lack of consumer confidence in both business and government thus changing social attitudes to risk.

Chapter 2 builds on the agenda set in the previous chapter by going deeper into the postmodern marketplace, first, by focusing on the nature of the product and brand, its life cycle and cultural orientation, and how changes and innovations in products are directly related to consumers and new lifestyles. The author has focused on the connection between consumers and the products and brands they employ in their lives. She distinguishes between the proliferation of new things and the development of meaningful innovations. She concludes by recommending that marketing needs to understand the paths of products through time and consumers' shifting relations with goods and their meanings to them. Some examples of meaningful new products which made an easy and ready connection with consumers are also discussed.

Chapter 3 deals with the fundamental relationship between persons and the things they possess which identifies a key aspect of consumer culture in a contemporary perspective. The author has succinctly explained how goods are used, consumed and understood in many different ways by consumers, making successful classification of consumers a difficult and a possibly fruitless objective. The author here has also succeeded in an attempt to counter the traditionally accepted consumer behaviour view-point; self identity is much

more than a cultural resource or possession, primarily, because consumer behaviour is always about choice. Consumers associate with their possessions in diverse ways; sometimes, purely functional while at other times more symbolic or indicative of their identity. The author argues that to understand the people's relationship with products and brands, one needs to seek a better understanding of the meanings of things to people.

Continuing further in **Chapter 4** the author has examined the changes happening in the marketplace especially in terms of reshaping consumer relationships with their companies. The deliberations in this chapter focus on how companies falter in responding to growing consumer assertiveness and hence consumers readily fight back at perceived injustices, but they also act creatively, developing ways of doing things unanticipated by the suppliers. Here the author has brought the issue of technological evolutions facilitating both consumers and marketers in their adventures. Warning companies about the potential implications of consumer activism and complacency on the part of the company, the author has further cautioned that, unless a change in thinking comes forth, a more aggressive reaction from consumers may lead to some moving into "terrorist" mode causing great damage to the organizational reputation through various communicational means.

The second part of the book begins in **Chapter 5** with a detailed examination of the role of innovation for today's company and consumer. The author has looked at the history of innovation research in marketing and its applicability to today's marketplace. Celebrated works on innovation have been reviewed and the author has outlined how the balance between identifying innovation characteristics and their relevance in terms of consumer acceptance and the type of value, particularly related to functional and symbolic aspects, is likely to impact upon the nature of adoption and ultimately the relationships. In

particular, this chapter highlights the complexity of what an innovation is to consumers today and focuses on the key differences between symbolic and functional in the innovation context. However, a case has also been made for further analysis to explore the nature of potential relationships and complexities that consumers have or may develop with new symbolic innovations.

Continuing the discussion of innovations in **Chapter 6**, the author has raised issues in simple linear notions of how consumers adopt over time by arguing that time has both a functional and a symbolic role in the adoption of new things and in the relations that consumers have with goods. The complexity of the marketplace is such that it is increasingly difficult to make generalizations and neat categories of innovative behavior based on notions of who adopts first. However, accepting the fluidity of diffusion and the varying relative values associated with a variety of products makes it easier to embrace resistant behaviour as a part of the diffusion process. A comparison is made between the functional approach to diffusion and one that is built on the social consequences of the innovation. The same tone and theme continues in **Chapter 7** where a detailed analysis of creativity in individuals as displayed by their innovative behaviour is presented. While attempting to distinguish between creativity and innovation, the author has considered some existing views on creativity and introduced a major conclusion of the book that much innovation in marketing thinking will involve a realignment of production and consumption both by consumers and the company that serves them. The author has rightfully concluded, in this chapter, that seeing how people use products and want to use the products is potentially a more useful tool, both for developing new things and for marketing existing products, than segmentation variables developed from lifestyles and existing behavioral variables.

Chapter 8 takes a critical look at some current creative consumer responses. The author then goes on to analyze the nature of both conspicuous consumption and downshifting before moving onto a more detailed look at how consumers are beginning to reconceptualise their own consumption, which is termed in this book as 'reconsumption'. The chapter also provides a broad insight on how possessions can become defining elements of our self identities and questions raised about the effect of such developments upon individuals both as people and consumers. This analytical journey culminates in the final chapter, **Chapter 9**, which examines the historical precedents for reflecting on the nature of consumption in broader terms and, in particular, revisiting the importance of the production process. Increasingly, a repositioning of the consumer is happening in line with the production and consumption issues concerning them. Hence, the author effectively argues that marketing in emergent times will need to have a more subtle conceptualization of consumers, their motives and responses and within this rethinking, the reemergence of the importance of how, where and why goods are produced and consumed will be critical.

Finally, a comprehensive look at the book gives the reviewer a mixed feeling. The present contribution has succeeded in integrating and, to some extent, synthesizing the value of knowing the consumer mind in a completely different perspective as compared to numerous other consumer behavior texts available. However, the present contribution needs some improvement in the knowledge about how to integrate these analytical insights into each stage of the marketing process. The book emerges as an embodiment of the author's thorough research effort, sincerity and objectivity of purpose and it does reflect, though in parts, flashes of the author's academic brilliance in first converging diverse views together and then trying to draw a uniform and readable-and-understandable

picture on the existing maze of Consumer Psychology.

However, the book could have benefited with the inclusion of more application oriented insights in the form of more comprehensive and easy to fit illustrations or live case studies to supplement an excellent thought presentation. Another weakness is its lack of comprehensiveness on certain issues such as descriptions and antecedents of Relationship Marketing Theory and the marketing angle of Innovation. The inclusion of live case studies at the end of chapters would have certainly enhanced the learning worth of the book for the academic fraternity as well as for practitioners. Comprehensive research inputs in chapters, and readings at the end makes the book more helpful to researchers interested specifically in the area of Understanding the New Age Consumer.

The book also lacks enough details on psychological, sociological and other such cross domain inputs and perspectives which are so critical at times to understand the whole phenomena of relationships of markets and consumers or consumers and their possessions.

Nonetheless, the present book is a praiseworthy treatise on Consumer Behavior and will be of great help to followers of this paradigm, irrespective of their affiliations whether academic, research, or practice. This book will introduce a broader scope to thinking about consumers within the context of marketing and business, and will also act as a bridge between critical works on the consumer society and business school functional thinking to open up a more inclusive future.

Prashant Mishra
Marketing Group
IIM Calcutta

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