

4.17: Conflicting Needs of Customers

Learning Objectives

- Identify a situation in which a customer has conflicting needs

How can a customer have conflicting needs? If they need something, shouldn't it be clear what they want? How can there be conflict? We'll work toward this by evaluating needs in multiple contexts. First, we'll consider them as abstractions of what is and what is not communicated. Next, we'll consider how they can derive from a rational or an emotional place. Then, we'll review ways to consider explicitly what benefits consumers seek.

Let's revisit the question of how customer needs can be in conflict. The explanation is that there are differences in how consumers express need. Some needs are truly requirements, even demands, while others can be characterized as "nice to have." Some needs are never expressed, but are critically important to how the customer will arrive at a purchase decision and influence how the consumer perceives the product, brand and provider. To get a better understanding of these distinctions, marketers classify needs to describe their underlying meaning.

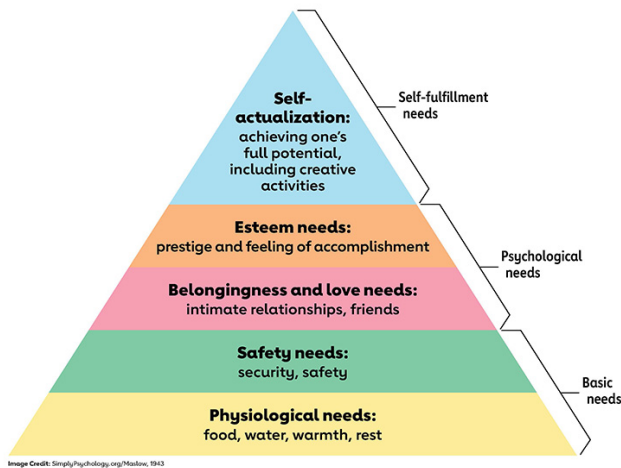
Customers express needs in the following ways:

- **Stated or explicit:** the specific "what" the customer asks for
- **Real:** what the stated needs actually means; what value the customer is going to derive from the stated good or service
- **Unstated:** what the customer expects implicit with the good or service
- **Unexpected:** needs that are not expected or required, but would delight the customer
- **Secret:** needs that the customer does not express, largely because they're intangible


Yes, this is relatively abstract. But, it's easier to understand these classifications if we add context with an example. Consider a shopper visiting the meat counter at the local supermarket. They tell the butcher they'd like to buy three 16oz ribeye steak. That's the *stated* or *explicit* need. The *real* need is that they're planning a small gathering at their home, and the steaks will be served to the guests. What's *unstated* is that they're hoping that serving steaks will impress the guests. When the butcher picks the three best steaks in the case and trims them, the shopper might experience delight, as the additional service satisfied an *unexpected* need—a need to be validated and treated with the same care they're putting into the menu and event. Further, if the butcher agrees that the shopper's planned preparation will work well with the meat, they have a *secret* need fulfilled—that they've planned a special event well and will likely impress their guests.

Clearly, there are multiple factors at-play, as consumers describe their needs. And, it's worth remembering that these consumer needs and related behaviors are influenced by each individual's unique motivations, assumptions, beliefs and biases, informed by experience and perspective. But, at their simplest, needs are either rational or emotional. Rational needs are consumer preferences or selections based upon objective measures or a conscious, logical reason, whereas emotional needs are based upon personal, subjective criteria.

Yet, consumer needs and behavior are continually adjusting, updating, and evolving, given ongoing interactions with media. That is, a consumer's unique motivations, assumptions, beliefs, and biases are supported or undermined by how they process messages, engage, and evaluate alternatives. As such, marketing activities marketing, the shopping/search context and actions/inactions in-market can have a tremendous impact upon how customers describe their needs.



More recently Maslow's Hierarchy has been extended to 7 levels. adding Aesthetic Needs and Cognitive Needs

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A useful tool for understanding needs and putting them into context when they're expressed is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Proposed in 1943 by Abraham Maslow as a theory in psychology, the hierarchy has been applied to marketing. It reflects the motivations that determine the needs humans seek to satisfy. Often shown in the shape of a pyramid, the most fundamental are in the base (Figure 1).

Humans are first motivated to satisfy physical needs, such as air, food, water, sleep, and shelter. Maslow's theory suggests that the most basic level of needs must be met before the individual will strongly desire or be motivated to pursue secondary or higher level needs. Once these basic physiological conditions are satisfied, the individual can shift focus to security, which includes financial security, health, and well-being.

After physiological and security needs are fulfilled, the third level of human needs is interpersonal and involves feelings of belonging. Social belonging needs include friendships, intimacy, and family.

Esteem is the fourth need and it is related to ego needs or status needs, a concern with getting recognition, status, importance, and respect from others, including the need to have self-esteem and self-respect.

Self-actualization and self-transcendence are abstract, but equally meaningful for understanding customer motivations. Self-actualization refers to what a person's full potential is and the realization of that potential. Maslow describes this level as the desire to accomplish everything that one can, to become the most that one can be. Maslow developed the concept of self-transcendence later in his career, adding it as the peak of the hierarchy. He said, "Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos."^[1]

You might challenge this, pushing back on how a theory from psychology resonates in marketing. But, think about a given consumer's wants. What is driving that need? Think again of the shopper at the meat counter buying steaks. What was their motivation?

Is it physiological because they want food for their guests? Perhaps. Social belonging because they want to be accepted and validated by their guests. This could also be true. Esteem because they want to be recognized and respected by their guests as a good host. That's also possible. Could it be self-actualization, believing that caring for guests is what hosts do? Yes. In fact, it may be all of these. And, as such, you can plainly see how marketers apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a commercial context.

This completes the different ways that we can regard customer needs. Their needs can be spoken or unsaid, rational or emotional, and could be motivated by any of the categories in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Practice Questions

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...sessments/9165>

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1. *Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York 1971, p. 269 ↵

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