

4.19: Multi-attribute Model

Learning Objectives

- Using the multi-attribute model, explain how customers evaluate retailers

“You can’t be all things to all people.”

-Michael Porter

All firms, when making strategic decisions, must choose between alternative courses they could pursue. In doing so, they make appropriate trade-offs, which they believe will best position them for future success. Part of this requires understanding what they are and what they are not, what they can and cannot do.

This is true for how firms orient themselves, meaning the markets they enter, the products they make, the consumers they target, their marketing investments and more. The result for the consumer is that you might encounter some products or brands or firms that are consistent with your needs, but not all. Thus, shoppers regard them as a collection of characteristics or attributes that must be evaluated.

Yet, just as the firms have made decisions about who they are and what they do, consumers make similar decisions about what they value and what they need. Thus, not all the traits of the product or brand or firm are equally important to the consumer. Instead, some are more important than others because a shopper will evaluate the offering based on how well it performs on the characteristics most relevant to them.

Think about this example. You’re invited to a friend’s home. To show your appreciation for the invitation and to ensure that they think well of you as a guest, you want to bring a gift—a bottle of wine. Let’s assume you don’t typically shop for wine or know much about how to make a selection. What becomes most important for you in making a purchase?

- Is it the convenience of the store? Or, would it matter more that you shopped at a store specifically dedicated to selling wine and spirits?
- How important is the price? Would you be willing to pay a little bit more to be sure that your selection would impress your friends?
- What about the region where the grapes were grown or the year it was bottled? Would they rate higher than the recommendation of the salesperson or how high the wine was rated?

As you can see, there are multiple attributes on which to judge this shopping experience and the products that will be considered. Consciously or unconsciously, you’re making decisions based on how it (the product or brand or firm) can meet your needs. But, based on your experience, you may already have strong attitudes and beliefs about how well the product or brand or retailer will deliver on its promise.

Attitudes are the summary assessment a consumer makes about a product or brand or firm. It’s the result of their personal experiences, positive and negative, which endure. Psychologist Daniel Katz described attitudes as being functional in his *Functional Theory of Attitudes*, meaning that they can explain how consumers arrive at their decision. They can serve:

- Utilitarian Function: how well does this meet needs or solve a problem?
- Value-expressive Function: how well does this reflect my values or how I want to reflect myself to others?
- Ego-defensive Function: would this negatively affect my image or standing?
- Knowledge-based Function: what criteria were used to arrive at this conclusion?

Thus, two consumers who both have positive attitudes about a particular toothpaste may have arrived at their decisions for different reasons. They may have different motivations. For example, one may believe that the toothpaste is the best at providing whiter teeth and fresh breath. They believe that it does far better than any other product or brand, thus they’re motivated to select the product for its utilitarian function. While the second customer, who also has a favorable attitude about the product, may prefer it because they’re concerned that not using it would expose them to stained teeth and bad breath. Thus, they are motivated to select the product to protect their ego (ego-defensive function).

Marketers measure and assess consumer attitudes, using the multi-attribute attitude model, to improve the positioning of products and brands and firms. To begin, the model has three components: attributes, beliefs, and weights.

Attributes are the characteristics of the product or brand or firm. Beliefs reflect how much a consumer believes that the product or brand or firm will deliver the attribute. For instance, if a toothpaste brand advertises that it freshens breath (attribute), a consumer may judge that to be true or untrue or even true on a relative scale compared to other toothpastes (belief). Simply, the manufacturer is making a claim and the consumer is reflecting how much they believe the claim is credible. Weights are the significance of the attribute. So, in the case of our example, consumers could strongly agree (belief) that a toothpaste freshens breath (attribute), but prioritize that lower than brightens teeth or protects teeth from gingivitis (weight). In this case, the multiple attributes (freshens breath, brightens teeth and protects gums from gingivitis) are weighted differently.

By weighting assessing beliefs and weights for each attribute, the multi-attribute attitude model can help marketers understand how to position the attributes of their product or brand or firm more effectively to differentiate for a given market segment.

$$\text{Attribute as Differentiator} = \text{Beliefs (1 – 10 Scale)} \times \text{Weight (1- 10 Scale)}$$

That is, if consumers have lower belief in an attribute, compared to a competing brand, then the marketers could choose to downplay the significance of that attribute, emphasizing the attribute that is more credible for them. For example, Burger King cannot compete with McDonald's operational excellence, which makes it highly effective in mass-producing standardized hamburgers. So, as alternative, Burger King promotes customization, wherein customers can select toppings to make the hamburger they prefer. This is an important differentiator for consumers who value customization.

Further, the results of the multi-attribute attitude model can also help marketers understand how well marketing messages are being understood or their relevance for a segment. That is, much marketing communication is intended to differentiation products or brands or firms from their competitive set. If the output of the multi-attribute attitude model implies that consumers don't believe or value the differentiation, it may imply that a change needs to be made to the messaging or strategy, such as points of differentiation or target consumer segment.

The multi-attribute attitude model provides a framework for understand and assessing consumers' attitudes about a product or brand or firm. Not only does it help reflect the multiple dimensions, against which consumers make inferences and judgments, but it also helps show how consumers value elements of differentiation. And, with this perspective, marketers can make changes to their communication and positioning strategies.

? Practice Questions

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