

## 3.4: The Consumer Purchasing Decision Process

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the first stage in the consumer purchasing decision process.
- Summarize the second stage in the consumer purchasing decision process.
- Describe the third stage in the consumer purchasing decision process.
- Discuss the fourth stage in the consumer purchasing decision process.
- Explain the fifth and final stage in the consumer purchasing decision process.

### Consumer Decision Process

This chapter has examined many of the factors that influence consumer buying behavior, but behind the visible act of making a purchase lies an important decision process that takes place before, during, and after the purchase of a product or service. Figure 3.12 shows the five stages of the consumer decision process.

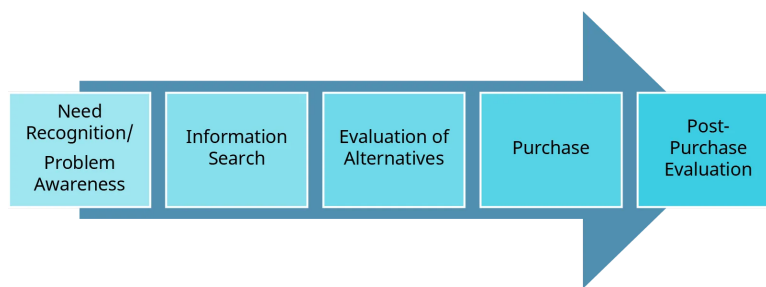


Figure 3.12 The Consumer Decision Process (CC BY 4.0; Rice University & OpenStax)

A buyer passes through five stages of the consumer decision process when choosing which products or services to buy. Let's examine each, starting at the beginning.

#### Stage 1: Need Recognition

The buying process starts when you sense a difference between your actual and desired states. This is referred to as problem awareness or need recognition. You might become aware of a need through internal stimuli (such as feeling hungry or thirsty when you're on a long road trip) or external stimuli (such as passing a bakery and smelling the wonderful aroma of cookies baking).

Sometimes, recognizing the problem or need is easy. You've run out of toilet paper or milk. But other times, recognizing the problem or issue is more complicated. For example, think about this first stage in terms of your decision to enroll in college. What was the stimulus that triggered your interest in attending college? Are you a working adult who has recognized that upward advancement in your company won't happen without possessing a college degree? Have you long aspired to be an entrepreneur and wanted to get some business and marketing courses under your belt so that you're better prepared for the challenges of entrepreneurship? Perhaps a career in marketing has been on your internal radar since high school, and you've decided to take the plunge and get your degree in marketing. Or perhaps your parents gave you an ultimatum after you graduated from high school—either find a job or enroll in college.

#### Stage 2: Information Search

Now that you've identified the problem or need, you'll be inclined to search for more information. There are two different search states. The milder search state is called "heightened attention," in which you become more receptive to information about the product or service. The stronger search state is called "active information search," in which you might do some research about the product or service on the Internet (referred to as an internal search), ask friends and/or family members their opinions (what's known as an external search), or even visit stores to view and touch the product (called an experiential search).

Keep in mind, of course, that not all needs/problems identified in Stage 1 will require this second stage. If you've run out of bread or toilet paper, you're probably not going to do an information search; rather, you'll just go to the store to buy what you need, and your information search may be as simple as checking prices at the grocery store to see if your favorite brand is available or another brand is on sale. However, more consequential purchase decisions will usually trigger an information search.

Again, consider the process you went through in deciding which college to attend. What sources of information did you use to find out about the colleges or universities you considered attending? Did you look at their websites, talk with friends or family who attended that school, or perhaps even visit the campus and meet with an admissions counselor?

### Stage 3: Evaluation of Alternatives

Consumers are said to view a product or service as a “bundle of product attributes,” and you evaluate several attributes of a product or service in reaching your purchase decision. For example, if you’re buying a smartphone, you’ll consider factors such as battery life, speed, storage capacity, or price. If you’re booking a hotel, you’ll probably consider its location, cleanliness, free Wi-Fi, whether it has a free breakfast in the morning or a pool, and, of course, price.

What bundle of attributes did you use when evaluating your college alternatives? You may have considered factors such as location and campus size, whether the school had the program of study you wanted, whether it had online learning, and cost.

### Stage 4: Purchase Decision

This stage involves actually reaching a decision on the purchase of the product or service. One way people navigate all the information, evaluations, and choices in their purchase decision is to use heuristics—mental shortcuts or “rules of thumb.” Heuristics are types of preexisting value judgments that people use to make decisions.

For example, do you believe that the more expensive product is always of higher quality than the lower-priced product? That’s known as the price = quality heuristic. Brand loyalty is another heuristic people use in reaching their purchase decisions. For example, do you eat cereal? Do you always buy the same brand, or do you buy whatever’s on sale or a brand for which you have a coupon? Country of origin is still another heuristic. Given a choice, do you prefer to buy products made in the United States versus products made in other countries?

How did you make your purchase decision to enroll in your college or university? What heuristics did you use?

### Stage 5: Post-Purchase Evaluation

After purchasing the product or service, you’ll experience either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. You may have second thoughts after making a purchase decision, and these doubts lead to cognitive dissonance, or buyer’s remorse—tension caused by uncertainty about the correctness of your decision. This may lead you to search for additional information to confirm the wisdom of your decision to reduce that tension.

What determines whether a consumer is very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, or dissatisfied with his or her purchase? Satisfaction is a function of how closely the buyer’s expectations match product’s perceived performance. If the product’s performance falls short of expectations, you’ll be dissatisfied. If the product’s performance meets your expectations, you’ll be satisfied, and if the product’s performance exceeds your expectations, you’ll be very satisfied.


Think about the purchase decision you made when you decided to enroll in your college or university. Are you very satisfied, satisfied, or dissatisfied with your decision? Refer to Table 3.1 for a summary of the five stages of the consumer decision process.

Summary of the five stages of consumer decision process.



Stage	Description
Stage 1: Need Recognition	The buying process actually starts when you sense a difference between your actual state and your desired state. This is referred to as problem awareness or need recognition. You might become aware of the need through internal stimuli (such as feeling hungry or thirsty on a long road trip) or external stimuli (such as passing a bakery and smelling the wonderful aroma of baking cookies).
Stage 2: Information Search	Once the problem of need is identified, the next step is to search for more information to help you make a choice. There are two different search states—heightened attention and active information search.
Stage 3: Evaluation of Alternatives	This is the stage in the process where you’ll evaluate several attributes of the product or service in deciding on a purchase.

Stage	Description
Stage 4: Purchase Decision	This stage involves actually deciding on the purchase of the product or service.
Stage 5: Post-Purchase Evaluation	After purchasing the product or service, you'll experience satisfaction or dissatisfaction. You may have second thoughts after making the purchase decision, and these doubts lead to cognitive dissonance, or buyer's remorse. This may lead you to search for additional information to confirm the wisdom of your decision to reduce that tension.

Table 3.1 Five Stages of the Consumer Decision Process


**Careers In Marketing: You Are Also a Consumer**

Learn about the five stages of the consumer decision process in this video from Open Up (Upatras) Entrepreneurship and this [article from Business Study Notes](#).

GWI, a company that researches global consumer thinking, published its [2022 consumer trends report](#), which showed that consumers' needs and priorities have shifted. Read the report and see if you find the same results for yourself. Have your priorities and needs changed since the pandemic hit? What are the other factors influencing your needs assessment?

Several tools can help you with a personal needs assessment. Practice your marketing skills on yourself by trying this [needs assessment worksheet](#). This personal awareness will help you in many ways, including finding the right job that best fits your interests and abilities. Also, take a few assessments and compare your results to better identify jobs worth learning more about. There are several free career aptitude tests to try:

- [123 Career Test](#)
- [Interest Assessment](#)
- [Work Values Matcher](#)
- [A Personality Color Test](#)

In addition to career aptitude tests, personality tests assess your skill level and your ability to succeed in a career. Try a few of these:

- [Typology Central Jung Personality Test](#)
- [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#)

The Balance Careers site also provides [a wealth of resources](#) on additional aptitude, personality, talent, and pre-employment tests. It's worth your time to dive into this information to help you identify which career might be your best fit.

### Knowledge Check

It's time to check your knowledge on the concepts presented in this section. Refer to the Answer Key at the end of the book for feedback.

1.

Janelle and her sister are planning a reception for their parents' 50th wedding anniversary. They have looked at several venues, comparing size, location and accommodations, photo opportunities, and parking. What stage in the consumer decision process model does this best illustrate?

- a. Need recognition
- b. Information search
- c. Evaluation of alternatives
- d. Purchase decision

2.

Ra'Shana's car broke down on the way to work, and she realizes that she needs to find a repair shop quickly to take care of her vehicle. Which stage of the consumer decision process model does this represent?

- a. Need recognition
- b. Information search
- c. Evaluation of alternatives
- d. Purchase decision

3.

Jason is considering buying a new laptop computer. He is researching different models based on factors such as the processor, the hard drive capacity and speed, RAM, operating system, and price. He has also asked a few friends what they like and dislike about their laptops. Which stage of the consumer decision process model does this illustrate?

- a. Problem identification
- b. Evaluation of alternatives
- c. Information search
- d. Post-purchase evaluation

4.

What is a heuristic?

- a. It is the mental conflict that occurs when a person's behaviors and beliefs do not align.
- b. It is a mental shortcut that allows people to solve problems and make judgments more quickly and efficiently.
- c. It is a function of the closeness between your expectations of a product or service and its actual performance.
- d. It is the process of assigning the cause of behavior to either internal or external characteristics.

5.

Nathan and his husband have decided to purchase a new car. They have narrowed their list to a few models and visited a few dealerships to see the models and test-drive them. Which stage of the consumer decision process does this illustrate?

- a. Need recognition
- b. Information search
- c. Evaluation of alternatives
- d. Purchase decision

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