



Chapter VII

Motivation and Search Intensity: An Investigation of Online Consumer Search Behavior*

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is drawing consumers in search of information about a broad range of topics. In order to understand how consumers search for and benefit from information online, this chapter presents a set of hypotheses and an explanatory model concerning web-based information search behavior. Our model was tested within the patient health domain, wherein consumers are often highly motivated to seek relevant information. The analysis suggests that there is a clear link between an individual's health and his or her use of online health information, and also that the search intensity that individuals undertake results in an increased propensity to talk with health care providers about the information.¹ Though the context of our data analysis has limitations related to the source of the data (in the health domain), it can nevertheless be generalized that the higher the consumer's involvement with the decision, the higher the motivation to seek information online.

*This chapter was adapted from: Lueg, J., Moore, R. S. & Warkentin, M. "Patient Health Information Search: A Exploratory Model of Web-Based Search Behavior," *Journal of End User Computing*, 15(4), Oct-Dec, 2003, pp. 40-61

This chapter appears in the book, *Advanced Topics in End User Computing, Volume 3*, edited by M. Adam Mahmood. Copyright © 2004, Idea Group Inc. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of Idea Group Inc. is prohibited.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is having an enormous impact on culture, society, and business. The Internet is drawing consumers in search of information about a broad range of topics. In terms of purchase and consumption decisions, Internet users are becoming empowered consumers armed with more complete information than previous generations, and, in the process, are forming virtual communities offering information about a broad range of topics, ranging from pop culture to gardening to academic issues to health care. However, as numerous failures of dot-com organizations have illustrated, the Internet has not fully lived up to its much-hyped promise. Organizations are refining old business models and creating new business models to achieve success in this new virtual realm. In order to understand how end users² search for and benefit from Internet information search, this chapter presents a set of hypotheses and an explanatory model concerning web-based information search behavior. Of particular interest is how end users are locating and utilizing information. Ultimately, what are the implications of end user Internet search for providers of information online?

An area of particular interest where the Internet has not been as successful as expected is in the field of health care. Recently, pundits have speculated how information available via the Internet would empower patients, involve them more in the care of their health, and have fundamental impacts on the patient-physician relationship (Friedewald, 2000). However, recent reports state that in the health care area the Internet is not living up to the hype. This runs from patient apathy (Wilkins & Navarro, 2001) to the dissemination of potentially bad information (Webster, 2001). Therefore, the proposed model is tested in the patient health information domain. Correspondingly, the operationalizations of the model constructs are contextually specific to the health information area. Hence, the tested model is constrained to look at characteristics unique to health information search.

HEALTH INFORMATION SEARCH BACKGROUND

The Monday, June 10, 2002, issue of *The Wall Street Journal* included a special section on e-commerce, in which several articles report the state of adoption of information technology in the health-care industry. As one reporter, Laura Landro (2002), puts it, "The health-care industry finally has little choice: It *has* to get wired" (p. R6, emphasis in the original). However, most articles in this special section report about utilizing IT for activities such as cataloging patient information, facilitating efficient patient billing (and insurance payments), and effective tracking of disease outbreaks (due to post-September 11 bioterrorism concerns). Yet little is mentioned about how the Internet is utilized for the dissemination of health information, either by sources seeking to "push" the information to patients or by patients seeking to "pull" the information from the Web.

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