Chapter 7

Investigating Social Motivations for Internet Use

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The uses and gratifications theoretical framework has continued to prove useful in the study of new and emerging media. This chapter utilizes the uses and gratifications perspective to better understand the factors motivating commercial Web site use. Through the cooperation of two major on-line companies, this research reports the results of a two-part study that begins with the identification of 179 motivations for Web use and subsequently reduces those to five primary underlying factors. These factors are discussed and related to three key indicators: frequency of Web use, frequency of computer use, and affinity with the computer. Implications for a third general media gratification beyond the basic gratifications of content and process are discussed, and directions for future research are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Information forms the underpinnings of modern society (Ball-Rokeach & Reardon, 1988; Rogers, 1986), and since media are required for the transmission of information at any level other than the interpersonal, the new medium represented by the World Wide Web might be considered the vanguard of the information

society (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). The marketing strategies of industry are evolving into a mediated process that will support the commercial viability of "segments of one" in the form of direct-to-consumer commerce over computer networks (Rogers, 1986; Sheth, 1992). As this evolution takes place, the marketing communications flows that support commercial activity are reversing from marketer-consumer to consumer-marketer (Sheth, 1992); consumers are beginning to seek out the companies and products that interest them rather than relying on traditional mass marketing activities to inform and persuade them about opportunities.

As this idea of the segment of one develops in practice, it seems clear that the World Wide Web will present potent capabilities for reaching and commercially serving consumers (Drèze & Zufryden, 1997). However, throughout this evolutionary process, it also seems clear that marketers must begin asking questions about the unique characteristics of this new commercial medium; one critical question will concern the nature of motivations which bring consumers to *utilize* this new medium for commercial purposes (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). This consideration implies not only a need to understand what might motivate consumers to attend to marketing efforts on the Web, but also what might motivate them to use commercial Web sites, in general. In short, what are consumers' uses for, and associated gratifications in use of, commercial Web sites?

The Internet is experiencing phenomenal growth; it is growing so fast that researchers have a hard time simply keeping up with its current size and likely future growth. In previous years, the growth rate was estimated at between ten percent (Rubinstein, 1995) and twenty percent *per month* (Thomsen, 1997), with early estimates of the Internet audience suggesting that there were between 30 and 50 million users (Fox, 1995; Kambil, 1995). Audience size was expected to be near 150 million by the millennium (Barker & Groenne, 1997), but more current reports (Applegate, McFarlan & McKenney, 1999) placed 1995 audience levels at 40 million, with 100 million consumers logged on in 1998 and estimates of one billion Internet users by 2005. Presently, at least one home in four in the U.S. has Internet access (Clark, 1999), and the number of registered Internet commerce sites nearly tripled, from 600,000 to 1.7 million, in a one-year period monitored between 1996 and 1997 (Applegate et al.., 1999).

This combined pattern of growth among both consumers and businesses in the use of the Internet underscores its obvious utility for making connections between buyers and sellers. The Web promises to be a potent marketing vehicle, combining the power of promotional communications with the instant gratification of on-line purchases. A better understanding of the motivations which bring consumers to specific sites and the uses consumers might make of those sites can assist marketers in the design of more effective and compelling offerings in the new Internet medium. Consequently, the overall purpose of this chapter is to report a study that examines consumer motivations that drive Web site use.

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