



Chapter XIV

Consumer Motivations for Commercial Web Site Use: Antecedents to Electronic Commerce

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore theoretical background and previous research on new media uses and motivations as an avenue to understanding consumer motivations to use commercial Internet resources. This chapter will explore the communications theory of uses and gratifications, and will report and discuss the implications of a descriptive research process that establishes the domain of consumer motivations for Web site use. Building from a series of on-line focus groups conducted with the HotWired Internet site, the research discussed in this chapter includes the construction of an inventory of descriptive terms used to indicate the various areas of utility and enjoyment represented by the on-line experience.

The objective of the chapter is to expose the reader to a theoretical perspective that is useful for understanding how consumers are motivated to use the Internet, by exploring and describing what consumers enjoy and seek in the on-line experience of Web sites. Knowledge of what consumers seek from a medium (uses), and what they enjoy about a medium (gratifications) prepares the reader to understand and utilize the tremendous communications and marketing resource represented by the World Wide Web. Research from previous studies of new media introductions provides a unique historical perspective available for grounding the conceptualization of the Web as a communications and marketing channel. The theoretical perspective developed from this research has been robust – applied over time to the introduction of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as to the innovations of video recording and time-delayed media exposure and media control through electronic remote devices.

Although the World Wide Web is not much like television, nor computers much like video recorders and remote controls, the approach that has been developed for constructing an understanding of new media innovations of the recent past appears to be applicable to the situation represented by the Web in today's society. To that end, an additional perspective of this chapter is to help the reader ground his or her understanding of what the World Wide Web represents in terms of a useful commercial medium in an understanding of how new media generally are perceived and how consumers are subsequently motivated to attend to them. Knowledge of this sort can enhance the efforts of electronic marketers to more fully utilize and enhance the communicative properties of the new communications channel represented by the Web, and a critical component in the success of any electronic commerce effort will be the marketers' understanding and utilization of the factors which bring the consumer to the Web in the first place.

To that end, the reader can expect three specific benefits from reading this chapter:

- 1) To gain a working knowledge of the theoretical perspective of uses and gratifications, useful for the investigation of motivations leading to commercial Web site use.
- 2) The beneficial knowledge of the specific results of a U&G study of Web user motivations.
- 3) Managerial implications, related to such results, useful for improving performance of commercial Web sites.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the Web as an instance of commercial media, and this is followed by a brief introduction to the uses and gratifications concept as a useful theoretical tool for investigating consumer motivations for using commercial Web sites. A review of uses and gratifications theory is provided in preparation for a discussion of the specific application of U&G perspectives to Web media, which is followed by a detailed explication of the distinctions between the two main classes of gratifications: process and content. The design, execution and results of an on-line uses and gratifications study are presented, which is then followed by discussion of issues and problems related to the application of U&G to Web media. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Web-based trends which imply further usefulness for the U&G research tradition, and several specific recommendations are provided for improving the effectiveness of commercial Web sites.

THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Any discussion of the Web as a commercial medium requires an understanding of media's place in modern society. An evolutionary process has formed a new societal structure based on information and communication (Ball-Rokeach and Reardon, 1988; Rogers, 1986). This popularly-labeled "information society" has evolved from mass exposure to interactive communication media, with interesting implications for commerce. The World Wide Web gives customers the opportunity to *self-select* themselves as potential prospects for market offerings, which might obviate the need for traditional segmentation practices, but which also implies the need for a greater understanding of the motivations which attract customers to attend to commercial offerings.

Companies have traditionally reached customers through promotions carried on broad-reach media; in the information society, customers can use Web sites to gather the product and company information which matches their interests. Not only is there a new

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