



Manipulating Consumers is Not Marketing

Consumers increasingly view marketing as manipulation. It is important to dispel this notion and the profession should take steps to do so.

There can be little argument that consumers are growing more suspicious of business. They question its motives and, increasingly, its marketing which has recently been said to be manipulative. Consumers are ever more aware of the array of internet pop-ups and exaggerated claims they receive in an increasingly targeted fashion, especially on social media channels.

Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law Professor and former Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Obama administration, recently published **an essay** in the **Journal of Marketing Behaviour**, which argues that manipulation is indeed pervasive in daily life, both in public and commercial realms, and is especially prevalent in marketing. Sunstein believes “those who sell products are engaged in at least arguable forms of manipulation.”

Sunstein defines manipulation as something that does not sufficiently engage or appeal to someone’s capacity for reflective and deliberative choice. But this is problematic. Many choices are made without reflective deliberation. Furthermore, the notion of consumers making cognitive and purely rational decisions is a myth at best. Customers are also becoming more aware of marketing, its motives and its tactics, from price discrimination and discounts to loyalty programmes and atmospherics, and may

discount it in their decisions.

Nevertheless, in **a reply** article, I point out that this awareness is understandably leading to perceptions that marketers are manipulating customers. But marketing is not, and should not be considered, manipulation. Given the pervasiveness of the perception that marketers are manipulators, I suggest that the profession, both academics and practitioners, should be proactive in changing these viewpoints.

Influence, don’t manipulate

To do this, we should turn to the broader definition of manipulation to examine whether this is what marketing is. According to a definition used in the **psychology literature**, “psychological manipulation is a type of social influence that aims to change the perception or behaviour of others through underhanded, deceptive or abusive tactics.” To say, therefore, that marketing uses deceit and abusive tactics would be inaccurate.

If marketers employ covert tactics to manipulate customers, then they run the risk of being seen as unethical. Take the example of subliminal advertising, where viewers are exposed to information that slips below their conscious awareness. Such practices caused moral outrage in

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1957 when it emerged movie goers had been exposed to split second advertisements of Coca Cola and popcorn without their conscious knowledge. Such practices have been banned in the U.K. ever since and it's still unclear as to whether the practice even works to influence purchase decisions.

As we saw in the case of Volkswagen, where customers were falsely led to believe their cars had lower emissions than they really did, deception was not only detrimental to the customer relationship but to the firm as a whole, landing it in legal hot water. Telemarketing ploys, such as the use of surveys to mask the true intentions of the caller and then pressing customers to commit to a purchase are widely shunned.

Change the perception

To counter the perception that businesses are deceitful, marketing should seek to be a social influence, specifically the kind that is not exerted covertly and does not use deception or abuse to achieve its aims. Given increasing awareness of marketing tricks among consumers, marketers need to approach customers with sustainability in mind. While it is true that the marketers of the 1930s used to think of their job as directing the flow of products to consumers in a very one-way fashion, marketing professionals today are coalescing around the notion of exchange between customers and producers, focusing on value for the customer. This can be seen in crowdsourcing and push and pull strategies in social media. L'Oréal for instance, **created a product** in response to online customer chatter around a new hair style. Exchange in this way implies agreement and is a status quo that customers not only accept, but take part in. Crucially, organisations should think long-term in such marketing efforts.

Most marketing classes I teach start off with a debate about whether marketers are filling needs or creating them to sell products. This is tricky territory. Who could say consumers wanted iPhones until they were shown the product? Luckily for the profession, the era of big data gives us a golden opportunity to understand customers more deeply than ever before, provided the practice is conducted transparently. Facebook's **famed experiment** in which it purposefully manipulated users feeds by changing what appeared in front of them in order to study how this affected their behaviour, caused widespread condemnation and rightly so.

Management practices for marketers

Marketers should aim to create sustained value, considering both the long-term and short-term

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motivations in marketing a product or service. This will mean the closer study of customers, the creation of experiences not just products and services, developing equitable relationships with customers and considering the impact of all practices on society more broadly. Only then, will we be able to counter the perception that marketing is manipulative.

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Started at INSEAD, the **Journal of Marketing Behaviour (JMB)** is a new, peer-reviewed behavioural journal launched by the European Marketing Academy (EMAC). Compared to other journals in marketing, JMB places a greater emphasis on external validity and behavioural outcomes. It encourages a wide range of research approaches and the combination of multiple methods that have practical implications for managers, policy makers and consumers. **Klaus Wertenbroch**, is the Editor-in-Chief and also a Professor of Marketing at INSEAD.

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