

Better understanding of the long-term consumer landscape can improve marketing effectiveness

By [David Blyth](#), issued by [Delta Victor Bravo](#)

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From discussions about Gen-this and Gen-that to the seasonal shifts that demand immediate attention, marketers often find themselves navigating a whirlwind of short-term changes and it's easy to become ensnared in the allure of the latest trends and buzzwords. Amidst this flux, it's crucial not to overlook the deeper, more enduring and longitudinal shifts in consumer behaviour that silently influence and shape the context for marketing effectiveness.

While the marketing landscape is replete with myriad changes, I've chosen to delve into three fundamental shifts that have unfolded over the past two decades:

Proliferation of choice

The adage "choice is a good thing" may hold true in theory, but in practice, the modern-day abundance of options has led to decision fatigue and overwhelm for consumers. The depth and breadth of products available today far surpass what was accessible two decades ago, contributing to a phenomenon known as 'choice overload'.

American psychologist Barry Schwartz explores choice overload in his book *The Paradox of Choice* and explains how an excess of options can lead to decision-making paralysis and heightened anxiety among consumers. Other studies show that consumers may abandon their exploration when overloaded with choice or revert to the safest most familiar option.

There are both internal and external factors to consider here. On the internal front, whether you offer a range of options or propositions under one brand name or a range of differently branded offerings, optimising your portfolio is important. It involves reassessing the relative roles of each brand or proposition, their alignment with consumer needs, their impact on both volume and value, and their tangible and intangible contribution to the business.

In today's everything-as-a-service environment, customer retention within your portfolio or ecosystem is paramount, and so one should re-evaluate these issues regularly.

On the external front, to help consumers navigate complexity, brands must strive for the kind of clarity and consistency that fosters trust. In his book, *Business of Choice* behavioural scientist Matthew Willcox talks about how to leverage non-conscious mental short-cuts that people use to become the easiest and most instinctive choice for example: familiarity, sequencing, context, comparison, and affirmation.

These techniques can create implicit trust. Focusing on incontestable functional benefits helps switch consumers or attract new consumers while focusing on emotional benefits helps retain them by creating a sense of belonging to something bigger than the product itself. Winning brands do both of these things well, all the time.



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Importantly, being more clear and consistent doesn't mean sticking to the same old recipe day in and day out. Deloitte's "2023 Consumer Products Industry Outlook" underscores the necessity for brands to keep pace with shifting consumer demands and hence influence their choices through digital investments and product innovation. This is not limited to new messaging, digital offerings or innovation at a product level, but could also be about creating alternative pathways for connection that are not limited by the constraints of the physical world, for example, valuable content or more accessible advice, or a community within which to share ideas or experiences.

Immediacy of access

Advancements in technology have ushered in an era of unparalleled access, enabling consumers to procure products and information instantaneously from anywhere, at any time.

In SA, online retail passed the R50bn milestone in 2022 (4.7% of the total R1,16tn retail spend) according to a study by World Wide Worx and Mastercard. The June 2023 Global Consumer Insights Pulse Survey conducted by PwC, highlights that a majority of consumers (63%) now opt to purchase products directly from a brand's website, underscoring the shift towards online shopping and direct-to-consumer platforms (Pulse Survey of 8,975 consumers in 25 countries and territories). The proliferation of e-commerce and subscription services has transformed the retail landscape, offering new convenience to consumers worldwide.

Convenience is often the way in for many market entrants, who make things simpler and easier for the consumer. Being available at the right time and place expands availability, and when the benefits align to consumer needs, it opens the door to new possibilities and emotional connection.

With this in mind, marketers must be careful not to overlook the potential of smaller players whose offer may resonate with consumers. I recall being in a meeting a long while back where executives were laughing off Capitec as a new entrant. Capitec now has 21 million customers and there are no prizes for guessing who is laughing now.

If a new competitor or alternative product or service emerges, they have the chance to capture attention. How can marketers effectively compete in such scenarios? The answer, according to author of Clarity Wins and consultant Steve Woodruff, is to be clear and as a marketing person, I would add the word 'consistent', to clear.

Woodruff's emphasis on clarity as the cornerstone of effective business (and by inference marketing) underscores the importance of consistent messaging that differentiates brands in a crowded marketplace. It's crucial to consider what precisely we're striving for clarity on.

Notably, there's a growing consensus among influential thought leaders such as marketing consultant Mark Ritson and vice chairman of Ogilvy UK Rory Sutherland that achieving both relative differentiation and distinction is imperative, rather than prioritising one over the other. Furthermore, it's essential that both elements hold genuine significance.

Perceptions of value

While consumers have access to an abundance of choices, their discernment regarding value has become increasingly pronounced. Marketer Al Ries' assertion that "positioning is the battle for the space a brand occupies in consumers' minds" underscores the multifaceted nature of perceived value. Whether it's a sense of belonging, style, or environmental consciousness, consumers seek value propositions that align with their evolving preferences and values.

Think about value as a ladder; when navigating up the ladder, the price-quality equation centres around products boasting durability, a sense of uniqueness, and craftsmanship. On the other hand, down-the-ladder strategies target consumers seeking affordability and accessibility, often embracing built-in obsolescence, mass production or automation.

Take the mobile handset industry, for instance: while some revel in the constant allure of new, shiny devices every 24 months, others reminisce about the days of robust and straightforward phones like the Nokia 3310.

It's crucial to recognise that straddling the middle ground isn't viable. If you commit to delivering durability or similar quality attributes, your operational model must support handling fewer but more significant returns issues. This requires an intimate knowledge of and confidence in your product. Similarly, in service-oriented sectors, automation might appeal to those preferring a hands-on approach, while others value human interaction, especially in complex matters like finance. Individual preferences can vary widely within the same person, depending on the product or category.

The rise of sustainable products as a significant driver of perceived value underscores the growing importance of environmental consciousness in consumer decision-making.

As highlighted by TheRoundup.org, a substantial percentage of consumers actively seek out eco-friendly brands and are willing to pay a premium for products that align with their values.

The key takeaway is to grasp and adapt to these dynamics in our marketing strategies to make them more effective. We must offer consumers clear, compelling, and uncontested reasons to believe in our brand, rather than just presenting a checklist of points, hoping that one of them will hit the mark. It's essential to ensure that our proof points are genuinely relatively different and authentically aligned with our brand identity.

More effective marketing requires adaptation to shifting preferences and values, while maintaining a steadfast commitment to clarity, consistency and innovation. By understanding and addressing the fundamental, longitudinal shifts in consumer behaviour, marketers can cultivate longer and more lasting relationships with consumers that endure seasonal folly and drive sustainable growth in an ever-changing marketplace.

The big take-out: Marketers need to offer consumers clear, compelling, and uncontested reasons to believe in their brand, rather than just presenting a checklist of points, hoping that one of them will hit the mark. Proof points need to be genuinely and relatively different and authentically aligned with their brand identity. For more information, visit www.deltavictorbravo.com

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