

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHILD IN THE BUYING BEHAVIOR OF FOOD PRODUCTS OF HIS OR HER PARENTS

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“ Your survey must not focus on reality.
You must study one of the possibilities that are hidden behind reality.
We know reality. But we know quite badly the possible. ”

F. Durrenmatt, Justice, 1985.

Today, can ethnology be a tool in the improvement of marketing survey techniques dealing with explanations of buying behavior of consumers? Can it help in the understanding of the role of communication in buying decision processes? The survey on the influence of the 9 to 13 year-old child on the buying decision process will help answer these 2 questions.

The results that follow come from a qualitative survey conducted for the conference titled “‘Gastromômes’ : the child as consumer, the child as influencer” organized by BERCY-EXPO on December 6 1990. This qualitative survey was a round table that lasted 4 hours and included 10 children from 9 to 12, boys and girls. Most of the references concerning the parents make up the synthesis of various round tables realized prior to this survey in the context of other studies.

1. Anthropology applied to marketing: an approach that looks for practices.

In the magazine Terciel of November 1988, Anne Gillet claims that the opinion of the child is decisive especially in 70% of food products purchases². On the face of it, this figure seems too high if we refer to the round tables of female consumers, composed of mothers who all seem to claim that they are the ones who make the decisions concerning the purchase of food. Their children are supposed to eat every kind of food. However, when we work on practices we find that, incidentally, if the child did not like or did not eat the product, the mother will not buy it again. With hindsight, if we

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²Quoted by Dominique Desjeux and Laurence Sicot *La Prescription Infantile en Matière Alimentaire* (The Influence of the Child on Food Questions) (intermediary report), “Gastronomy” symposium in Paris on 12/6/90 ARGONAUTES/TANDEM.

talk about not buying again a product, the influence of the child, at least indirectly, seems very important. The claim that children influence directly or indirectly the choice of their parents for food products that concern them, especially at the moment of buying again the same product, becomes more precise and the figure of 70% quite plausible.³

However, the roads of this influence are problematic, to paraphrase the book of J.N. Kapferer⁴. Without entertaining illusions on the final answer which comes closer to the quest of the Holy Grail than to science, a more ethnological than psychological qualitative approach will allow us to throw light on these roads⁵.

Anthropology applied to marketing⁶ postulates that the decision is not a moment but rather a process that begins well beyond the shelves of supermarkets. In this sense, it complements merchandising studies that only deal with the end of the chain, in front of the shelf, when the buyer puts the product in the cart.

The method also postulates that the practices observed (by the means of interviews or round tables or better by participant observation organized in the daily life places of consumers outside of places where they buy their products) can better forecast the future decisions of consumers than studies dealing only with motivations. Motivations are also analyzed but rather from an anthropological perspective, like the indicators of the collective imagination that surround the product⁷.

Relying on the sociology of organizations, anthropology applied to marketing shows that a buying decision is a strategic process (i.e. a process that refers to phenomena of influence, of power relationships or alliance) that employs interactions between social actors (father, mother, children, brothers, sisters etc...) all along the decision process from the house to the place where they buy the products. The decision, then, is also the result of a social network effect, as various studies on the importance of word of mouth on buying decisions have already shown but without integrating the fact that information is an issue in a power relationship. The circulation of information, then, is not neutral that is why it possesses a strong emotional charge.

³ This conclusion helps understand the advantage of not opposing the qualitative approaches of an ethnologic or psychological type to the quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach allows us to spot decision mechanisms which are not easy to quantify, and to point out the diversity of daily practices and signs through which the buyers recognize the quality they look for in a product. However, only the quantitative approaches allow us to weight their importance in the buying decision process.

⁴ Les Chemins de la Persuasion (The Roads of Persuasion), 1979, Dunod.

⁵ In the field of researches on human behaviors, there are two attitudes, those who think that the limits of the forecasts depend on the limits of information that we possess on the individuals but that one day we will possess this information, and that it is only a question of time; and those who think that there will always be a part of mystery in human behaviors and that action will always only be an approximation with regard to possibilities. I notice everyday that an imperfect, or even a wrong knowledge of the consumer behavior is often enough to decide on the launching of a new product.

⁶ "L'Ethnomarketing" (Anthropology applied to marketing) in the magazine Sciences Humaines n°1, 1990.

⁷ The study of that collective imagination allows us to bring out the main points of "seduction" in advertising; the packaging signs, even the location on the shelf-space that is also coded with regard to a collective imagination. This approach refers to an anthropology of decision that seeks to link social practices, culture and social groups, with individual cognitive processes.

In the case of the influence of the child, we are going to point out the moments and the strategies that the child uses to influence his or her parents all along the decision process. Motivations in themselves do not exist anymore. They are the strategic indicators in a game that, in turn, opposes and brings together the mother and the child (here from 9 to 13 years old)⁸

2 The chain of influence and strategic practices between parents and children.

- The starting hypothesis is, then, that the influence is first a power relationship whether it is based on love and the desire to make the other happy, or on divergences of interest on the purchase or non purchase of a product. In the case of love, the relationship is a matter of seduction, in the other case, it is a matter of cunning or, even, of strength. How many times have we seen a kid, sadly or angrily putting back a pack of candies on its shelf. The strength relationship had worked against him!⁹.

- The second hypothesis is that the child needs all the more to engage in an influence process that he is not the buyer since he does not hold the purse strings. His problem, then, is to find ways to better distribute in his favor the allocation of a rare resource, the content of his mother's purse or, even more mysterious, that of his father's credit card.

- The third hypothesis is that the child is a rational being who possesses his own logic of action. However, as for any actor in any social game, this rationality is limited, it can be unconscious. Feelings, imagination and the unexpected also have their place.

Finally, all this forms a chain of influence and strategic games between parents and children. This chain goes from the occasions of meals, that we can classify in two categories: the formal meals and the informal meals. These occasions are the material triggers of desires and motivations. Then, the chain follows a series of considerations and strategies in the store which ends with a buying or non buying decision in front of the shelf, or with buying or not buying again if the product has already been on the family table. It is this chain that we are going to reconstitute in order to point out the fact that the buying decision is not only linked to a moment, to a person or to motivations, but that it is rather a dynamic process in which the shelf-space in the supermarket is only the last link. Putting the product in the cart is only the most visible part of this process that merchandising and cognitive approaches (in terms of sign and choices mechanisms) analyze well. We postulate that this act is the

⁸ The fact that we postulate a power relationship between parents and children does not prejudice the affection or the love that they feel for one another. Like in any group, any organization, any society, friendship or emotional relationships go through influence processes. To argue for the good of the child (for example, to fear for teeth decay) remains an influence process, a power relationship. It is not because the objective seems good that the power relationship disappears: only its meaning changes.

⁹ The strategic approach is morally neutral. It does not judge whether or not the behavior of the actors are well founded. The mother may have good reasons, such as fearing for tooth decay, to prevent the child from getting the candies. The child may desire an additional proof of love, both are right at the same time, each from their perspective.

result of a social structure that organizes itself around the daily practices of social networks and collective imagination.

a. The starting point of the buying decision: the occasions of meals.

Generally speaking, it is possible to distinguish between two types of meals, the formal ones during which the parents' control is strong (the midday meal and the evening meal) and the informal ones during which the parents' control is limited, even nonexistent. In the first case, the degree of freedom of the child, when the time of buying comes, will be small, except for the deserts and breakfast products. The child does not seem to influence a lot the food products purchases destined for the parents, except when he is concerned too, but even then, he only plays a secondary role.

In the case of products for snacks, for meals without the parents or even for birthdays which can be either formal or informal, the child will have a larger degree of freedom therefore his margin of negotiation and his influence will be more important.

b. The pieces of information that trigger the children's desire.

They are of two kinds: advertising, on television or anywhere else, and the network effect with friends, or brothers and sisters. The goal of our analysis was not to study the effects as such but to show how they could play the trigger part. Quite obviously their influence exist, but it appears that advertising, for example, is limited on one hand by the occasions (a commercial for a product which does not correspond to the informal meals occasions has a limited impact) and on the other hand by the "rationalism" of the children who are wary of the commercials' "swindles". Children are not passive in front of advertising. For a commercial to be fully efficient, there must be a positive influence from the network effect (even then the children can be suspicious of the advice given by their friends if the way they push for a product does not seem convincing) and the product, in the game of influence that they play with their parents, must be at the top of their priority. The impact of a campaign can be very limited if the reasons for getting or not getting the product on a scale of buying priorities and energy to spend to influence the parents are not favorable to the product, even if it is desired and the motivations exist.

As a follow-up to desire, there are two possibilities: a purchase without the parents (it will not be studied here since, in this case, the child is the only one to decide) and a purchase with the parents or by the parents.

c. The children's strategy: how they "physically" control their parents.

Like for a soccer game, the children will try to “mark” their parents as much as possible. They have three possibilities:

- to put pressure on them systematically on the way back from shopping to remind the mother of what she was supposed to buy. In the children’s opinion, this is not a very efficient strategy, except for a precise product.
- To have the product added to the mother’s list, just before going shopping. This is not a very efficient strategy either, especially if the mother doesn’t follow her own list!
- To go with the parents: with this strategy, the child maximizes his chances of control. But this does not secure him success (neither does it for the advertiser!)

d. The products on which the children have a direct influence.

Once they are with the parents, the children face two choices: the food products on which they have an influence and the other kinds of products (hi-fi, video, toys, clothes), but we are not dealing with the latter here. There are two kinds of food products, the sweet ones and the salted ones, and for each of them we have to distinguish between those for the parents and those for the children. The sweet products for children, those they have an influence on, are the snacks, the ice-creams, the cereals, and the beverages; the salted products are the frozen food and the dairy products (some of which are sweet). The children can exert their influence on some products for their parents, sweet or salted, if they are also concerned by the product either because they like it too (or dislike it) or as an influence strategy: by helping to choose a product and to do the shopping, chances to get what they want increase. Children’s products are very coded finally. The child’s room for maneuver widens in the realm of children’s products. It appears that the children’s influence is quite small in the realm of products for adults. In the final analysis, the figure of 70% seems right mostly for the purchases for the children. The role of children as influencer then is limited to the realm that concerns them and in which they are competent.

e. Purchase and power relationships between parents and children.

In the store, the children are not only confronted to two realms of products but also to two situations:

- a situation of decision in which the child is alone to make the decision. His parents gives him a free hand. We left this situation aside for this survey.
- a situation where he must decide with his parents. We are at the heart of the power relationship and of the game of influence. The children develops four strategic models:

-the discussion: they discuss the quantity (quantity of product in a box for example, trying to get the largest possible); they show that the price of the product is low or that it is dietetic (they know, from advertising, how to influence their mother: women are sensitive to dietetics, like in the commercials, therefore they play the commercial.)

-the seduction: they make sheep's eyes at their mother, they beg. It is the case, for example, of coca cola or beverages that "frighten" the parents.

-the blackmail: they sulk and spoil the shopping time; they get away from the mother who stays alone to do the shopping, they use threats of abandoning her; they refuse to eat the food products that are supposed to be bought for them (ex: cheese); they put on the pressure (they put the product in the cart without hiding it) .

-the swindle: they put the product in the cart when the parents are not looking (candies, sweet beverages).

In fact, to influence their parents, the children, consciously or not and in a more or less confrontational way, play on the uncertainties that hang over their parents: the health of the child (with the dietetic counter-argument), the limit of the budget (with the low price), the desire to make the child happy (with the seduction and threats as pressure means on the part of the child), the speed (to put things in the cart knowing that the risks to put it back is limited if the mother is in a hurry).

f. In front of the shelf-space, what is at stake for the child: putting the product in the cart.

In front of the children's pressure, and if they want to say no, the parents can keep or cut the communication. To keep the communication and avoid the sulking or the blackmail of the child, the parents have several strategies:

-to go fast and avoid stopping in front of the "dangerous shelves" (sweets of all kinds).

-to remind the risks of decay and visit to the dentist. By reminding this danger, they create a counter-uncertainty.

-to say that it is too expensive, to "forget" or say that "we already have it".

The golden rule for the child in a confrontational situation: "when parents are irritated, better not contradict them".

If the parents do not seek to oppose the purchase, the child will face two situations of purchase: routine and novelty.

In both cases, he will have in mind an objective quality (taste for example) or a subjective one (an expected but unknown pleasure in the case of a novelty) and he will mobilize the signs (spontaneous

semiotics to be reconstituted product by product)¹⁰ by which he will recognize the quality he is looking for. For example, he may be looking for a practical quality, the gadget that exists or does not exist, for the quantity, or for something that tastes good. He will spot some positive signs (size, packaging, price) as indicator of the quality of a product and some negative signs (dirty, dented, poorly presented). The price as value (within or without the range of price that he thinks his parents are ready to pay for) will serve as a last criterion to chose or not to chose the product.

g. Acting out: putting the product in the shopping cart or not.

The child will be able to pressurize his parents in two ways: by putting an average pressure that refers to a hierarchy of priorities, if the product is not a priority, the child must keep a means of pressure for another purchase that is more a priority; by putting a strong pressure, an all or nothing kind of method, with the risk of cutting the communication and of losing everything: emotion and calculation will be taken in consideration in the mobilization of such or such sort of pressure. The product is bought or not bought.

If the product is bought, it comes back to the beginning, the occasion of a formal or informal meal. At this point, there are two possibilities: the product is satisfying or not.

The satisfaction will often be linked to the balance of taste by eliminating the extremes¹¹: sweet but not too sweet; toasted and fast; no sweet and sour combination (allowed combination: ketchup; forbidden combination: duck in orange sauce), etc. If the parents hesitate before buying, the child's tactics will be to attempt to make them taste. After that there will or there will not be buying or not buying again.

If they do not like the product (for example something new), they will not buy it again. But if there is a risk that they buy it again, the child will try to have his mother taste to show her how bad it is.

Conclusion.

The fine analysis of the buying decision as a process in time from practices, occasions, and interaction strategies directly comes from ethnological questions that focus on the observation of acting out moments rather than on motivations. In this sense, it allows for a better precision because

¹⁰ On the semiotic method to gather the signs of recognition of quality by the consumer (by opposition to the classic semiotics of images or packaging) cf. Desjeux D. (ed), 1990, Rapport sur la Mise au Point d'une Méthode Anthropologique d'Analyse Micro-individuelle des Comportements Alimentaires (A Report on the Implementation of an Anthropological Method of Micro-Individual Analysis of Food Consumption Behaviors); qualitative analysis, Paris MRT, Laboratory of ethnology of Paris V Sorbonne, 266p (multig.).

¹¹ For a good analysis of tastes and distaste, see Fischler C. L'omnivore, Paris, 1990, Ed O.Jacob, one of the best books today on the food question.

it permits the integration of what is uncertain and threatening in the analysis of the decision, for the actors who influence it.

In terms of communication, this means that it is not enough to play on the “irrational” dimension of seduction and desire but that we also must integrate the safety dimension; we must, more than anything, reintroduce a more rational dimension that integrates calculation and practices, especially gustatory; and finally, the example shows that the efficiency of communication, the basis of which is often individual and psychological, is limited by the very existence of interactions between actors subject to issues, alliances, and influence relationships that transform and divert the emotional energy triggered by advertising. This is rather reassuring in terms of freedom (people cannot be manipulated as easily as some think) and more efficient in terms of marketing (it returns its value to the survey rather than the costly bulldozer of communication by focusing on the quality of the product without putting the priority on the cost of persuasion).

(Translated by Liliane Barlerin, revised by Ray Horn, 1999. First published in French; Unpublished in English: Desjeux, Dominique, 1999, *The Influence of the Child in the Buying Behavior of Food Products of His or Her Parents*, Paris, Argonautes

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