

# Product Experience Is Seductive

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Product experience seduces consumers into believing that they learn more than is actually so. There are several reasons for this. First, experience is more engaging than most attempts at education, both more vivid and intentional, and consequently more memorable. Second, experience is viewed as nonpartisan, devoid of the didacticism of formal education and the self-serving interests of advertisers. Third, much of experience is ambiguous, but not recognized as such. Experience supports a pseudodiagnosticity that draws the consumer in as a willing partner in the seduction. Finally, the endogeneity of tastes allows consumers to accommodate to chosen alternatives and results in infrequent regrets about being seduced.

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Experience without learning is better than learning without experience. (ANONYMOUS)

That all our knowledge begins with experience, there is indeed no doubt . . . but although our knowledge originates with experience, it does not all arise out of experience. (IMMANUEL KANT 1998, p. 41)

Personal experience is overrated. People find it more compelling than they should. In many consumption situations, people are too trusting of what they have learned through experience, seduced by the very real nature of an ongoing stream of activity. They believe they have learned more from product experience than they actually have, trusting themselves more than partisan marketing sources. And people are not adept at recognizing the diagnosticity of their consumption experiences, confusing familiarity with actual product knowledge.

I am not arguing that product experience teaches us nothing, but I agree with Kant and disagree with the anonymous author. Obviously everyone learns from experience. Bad product experiences can be painful, and hopefully, most people can figure out how to avoid the obvious punishing mistakes. But I believe that the old adage, "Experience is the best teacher," is dead wrong. Experience does not set out to teach us anything; any learning that does occur is either incidental or largely a result of the learner's own instrumental behavior. In itself, experience is benign. But it can be put to

malevolent purposes, either intentionally by self-serving external parties or unintentionally through self-delusion.

## EXPERIENCE IS AMBIGUOUS

Experience is defined as the act of living through and observation of events and also refers to training and the subsequent knowledge and skill acquired. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) make the distinction between: (a) familiarity, the number of product-related experiences accumulated by the consumer, and (b) expertise, the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully. Although familiarity may be necessary for the development of expertise, it surely is not sufficient, since "there's no fool like an old fool." Here I want to distinguish personal experience from education. Education involves the imparting and acquiring of general knowledge and the development of reasoning and judgment. Education is intendedly didactic, while experience is not. Personal experience, unlike information delivered by third parties, has that fresh, unvarnished realism that draws us in. Education is pallid, while experience is vivid.

Prior musings about the value of learning from experience mention the value of the painful lessons learned from experience. For example, "One thing about the school of experience is that it will repeat the lesson if you flunk the first time" (author unknown). And to the extent that experience provides poignant and clear feedback, learning can be quick and enduring. The problem, as I see it however, is that most of experience carries with it a certain level of ambiguity. Ambiguity, not surprisingly, has two meanings that have distinct effects on the ability to learn from experience. One definition of ambiguity is vagueness and lack of clarity, as used by Ellsberg (1961) in his classic paper on risky choice. Ambiguity in the vague sense refers to uncertainty about the level of uncertainty, and most studies have found that people are even more ambiguity averse than they are risk averse. Vagueness is not a problem when it comes to learning from experience as long as the consumer recognizes the

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lack of clarity; the consumer will realize the lack of diagnostic information and discount the unclear experience for what it is—noise. Mukherjee and Hoyer (2001) note the general positive effect of novel attributes on product evaluations, but only for low-complexity products where consumers assume they have the ability to accurately assess product quality. Ubiquitous overconfidence, however, may render such instances of humility rare for mundane consumer decisions.

It is ambiguity's second meaning that makes experience seductive—openness to multiple interpretations. This definition is the one long favored by linguists, such as Empson (1930), who saw an ambiguous speech act as any verbal nuance, however slight, that gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language. Ambiguous language allows people to lock onto one meaning without it ever occurring to them that another meaning could be sustained with a slightly different reading. Psycholinguistic research has shown that people readily and confidently come away with one and only one meaning from sentences such as, "She walked past the bank along the river." As Deighton and Grayson (1995) wrote, "Ambiguity is a necessary condition for marketing generally and seduction in particular" (p. 666).

Seduction typically is defined as a persuasion or temptation to do something disobedient, disloyal, or evil. When seduced, people are led astray, enticed by strong desires. The metaphors that accompany seduction involve heat, fire, and excitement (Lakoff 1987), where the seducee is enraptured and overcome. Some seductions require the transformation of initial resistance into a willing, even avid, compliance (Deighton and Grayson 1995). Although aspects of experience do ring true with the above definition, unlike the accomplished seducer who actively works to set up the victim, experience is a passive partner in seduction. A prominent theme in discussions of seduction is complicity on the part of the seducee (Greene 2001). The victim must play along or else it turns into coercion. Experience also requires a willing victim to engage. The seductive nature of experience requires that the consumer end up as a coconspirator. And just as research on ingratiation and flattery has shown (Vonk 2002), product experience can seduce irrespective of whether consumers acknowledge the seduction explicitly.

### THE SEDUCTIVE ASPECTS OF EXPERIENCE

Learning from experience is more seductive than learning from education in at least four ways. First, experience is more engaging than education because it is more vivid and intentional. Second, experience is seen as less partisan, not tarnished by the self-interested motives of sources that seek to formally educate. Third, experience is pseudodiagnostic, often offering only ambiguous evidence that is not recognized as such. Fourth, experience is endogenous in that people have the ability to either modify their production functions or strategically change their tastes as an accommodation to present

circumstances. These seductive aspects of experience have been recognized—"Nostalgia is a seductive liar" (George Ball 1971). Real experience brings with it an authenticity not carried by most formal education.

These four aspects have led a variety of thinkers to elevate learning from experience to hallowed ground. Albert Camus said, "You cannot acquire experience by making experiments. You cannot create experience. You must undergo it" (in Bartlett [1919] 2000). I think that this is nonsense. Not only are experiments necessary for learning, but we absolutely create many of our experiences. And in fact it is not clear that we have to undergo actual experience, since there are readily available surrogates easily acquired from others. With due respect to Camus, I actually think that Ralph Waldo Emerson had a more reasonable view of experience, as reflected by his statement, "Our knowledge is the amassed thought and experience of innumerable minds" (in Bartlett 2000).

### Experience Is Engaging

"What one has not experienced one will never understand in print" (Isadora Duncan 1927, p. 23) Although I disagree with this quote, after many years of teaching M.B.A. students I do appreciate that education is abstract, which is one of the reasons that we draw upon cases, simulations, live examples, and other surrogate forms of experience. Certain basic, less cognitive concepts are difficult, if not impossible, to learn in the abstract. For example, I doubt that one can appreciate the distinctive taste of a truffle by just reading about it in one of M. F. K. Fisher's books. At the same time, the popularity of romance novels suggests that ersatz experiences can substitute for the real thing. Singh, Balasubramanian, and Chakraborty (2000) found that infomercials could be as convincing as direct experience, presumably because they mimic the protracted nature of experience.

Experience is more dramatic and intense than education. Because experience impinges on more than one of the senses, it is more memorable due to multiple traces in memory. This is especially true for gustatory, aural, and olfactory experiences. For example, Herz and Schooler (2002) found that odor-evoked memories are more emotion laden and make participants feel more "brought back" to the original event as compared with the same cue presented visually or verbally. The fact that much of experience is self-selected and self-generated also produces lasting memory advantages. This is what Goethe meant when he said, "All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience" (in Bartlett 2000). Reflection is required for good memory and internalization to what we already know. The multidimensional character of experience is capable of supporting and transmitting emotional content.

Much of learning from experience is instrumental in nature, driven by the self-identified goals of the consumer, and therefore more likely to be relevant and involving to the consumer. Huffman and Houston (1993) found improved

consumer memory when information learned through experience was organized around a goal. The engaging aspects of product experience can lead to illusions of control. Griffiths (1995) found that certain features of slot machines, such as near misses (like one cherry followed by a second and then followed by a bell, rather than vice versa), increase personal involvement and lead gamblers to the conclusion that they possess pseudoskills; this illusion of control increases habitual gambling.

### Experience Is Nonpartisan

Consumers are skeptical of advertising claims, especially those that can only be verified through experience (Ford, Smith, and Swasy 1990). Information learned from experience generally does not arouse the disbelief that accompanies information gleaned from second- and third-party sources. This is one reason that product experience has more influence on subsequent attitudes and behavior as compared with advertising and other indirect experiences (Kempf and Smith 1998). Unlike learning from education, where the source can self-servingly manipulate both the content and manner in which information is presented, experience is more likely to be viewed as agnostic. Although young children generally do not appreciate the strategic intent to persuade, at about age 7 they begin to understand the notion of persuasion, the idea that certain sources present information in a strategic fashion in order to influence both belief and subsequent behavior (Friestad and Wright 1994). Adolescents become more skeptical about all forms of social communication, and advertising is no exception. Consequently, older children trust product experience more than younger children (Moore and Lutz 2000). Whereas education can be more heavy-handed, experience is nondidactic.

Experience subtly affects beliefs. Since people are not alert to any overt intention to persuade, they approach learning from experience in a less critical, nonevaluative fashion. In contrast, when consumers expect to make an evaluation, they make less favorable judgments (Ofir and Simonson 2001). A nonevaluative approach to ongoing experience leaves people more susceptible to mere exposure effects and repetition-induced belief effects. There is some evidence suggesting that mere exposure effects and other forms of implicit learning are greater when the subject is unaware of being exposed (Bornstein 1989). Hawkins and Hoch (1992) showed that repetition-induced increases in belief of marketing statements are two times bigger when subjects adopt a comprehension versus an evaluation goal at encoding. Braun (1999) argued that postexperience advertising could be effective when accompanied by instant source forgetting where the language and imagery from recently presented advertising comingles with consumers' experiential memories.

Product experience is credible because it is basic, with no obvious staging by a self-interested outside party. Experience is often private and as a result unique, not necessarily reproduced in the exact same form for anyone else. Kempf and Laczniak (2001) found that pretrial advertising actually increased the perceived diagnosticity of product

experience. The fact that product experience can also be painful when things go bad undoubtedly increases the credibility of experience. Not only is it assumed that negative feedback is powerful but, without experiencing the mistakes, it is more difficult to learn from them. Finally, product experience suggests consumer sovereignty, leading to what I view as the naive conclusion that good advertising kills a bad product (e.g., Schudson 1984).

### Experience Is Pseudodiagnostic

We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it—and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove lid. She will never sit on a hot stove lid again—and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore. (MARK TWAIN 1897, chap. 11)

Product experience often provides only ambiguous information from which to make a good decision. Quality parity is the norm in many categories. Products in frequently purchased categories have similar features and offer comparable levels of overall quality levels even when they are distinguished by superficial attributes that serve to mask similarities (Brown and Carpenter 2000). Even in categories where products do differ on relevant attributes, most successful brands are likely to reside on the Pareto optimal frontier. Here no brand strictly dominates another, and which brand a consumer chooses depends on the relative weights s/he places on different attributes. Different weights lead to different interpretations of quality and, therefore, result in a potential for ambiguous product experiences. Since seduction typically requires some complicity on the part of seducee to move things forward, the inherent ambiguity in many product experiences can support interpretations that serve the consumer's best interests, whether that be a consistency with prior knowledge (confirmation) or prior choices (status quo). Studies of conflicts of interest have shown that ambiguity exacerbates the bias, and knowledge of the bias does not help to reduce it by much (Babcock et al. 1995).

One might think that if consumers just worked harder and thought more intently they would correctly recognize the diagnosticity of a product experience and that this would rectify the problem. In some instances such debiasing efforts do work (e.g., counterfactual thinking does ameliorate self-serving biases). However, too much introspection can actually induce inconsistency in preferences (Sengupta and Fitzsimons 2000). Moreover, although the frequently used accountability manipulation has decision-enhancing qualities in some domains (anchoring, order effects), it actually exacerbates other decision biases including loss aversion, status quo, dilution, and attraction/compromise effects (Lerner and Tetlock 1999).

Experience is selective, and since it does not come along with a control group, interpretation is required. Budget constraints (time and money) preclude consumers from considering all options, and so we are unaware of "roads not

taken.” The vivid, proximate character of experience tends to inhibit considerations of the need for comparison. Product experience is more likely to be evaluated in an absolute sense (feels good or bad) without consideration of relevant standards (compared to what). People confuse the sheer volume of data with information content. In a forecasting context, Hoch and Schkade (1996) found that people anchor heavily on prior cases and insufficiently adjust for the level of error in the environment and that decision confidence is immune to the level of diagnosticity in the data. Selectivity also is a hallmark of how consumers are likely to deal with experience in a retrospective sense, as retrieval interference inhibits the generation of conflicting evidence.

A standard view of learning characterizes consumers as intuitive Bayesians, who start with a prior belief, gain new information, and then revise their beliefs in light of new facts. Typically, problems with consumer learning have been attributed to placing too much weight on the prior. More recent work, however, has shown that this is an incomplete view. Boulding, Kalra, and Staelin (1999) showed that prior beliefs not only influence the impact of new information on beliefs, via Bayes rule, but also influence interpretation of new information, something not consistent with a Bayesian updater. “Perception is not a one-directional process in which stimuli cause ‘brain events’ that in turn get converted into an internal experience of an outside occurrence. Stimuli cause ‘brain events,’ but the way in which those events are coded depends partly on what the brain expects and remembers” (Cohen 1996, p. 47). Russo, Meloy, and Medvec (1998) found that when equivocal information about two brands is acquired attribute-by-attribute, the evaluation of the next attribute is distorted to support the emergent leader. This predecisional distortion endures even in the face of diagnostic information.

Klayman and Ha (1987) showed a strong proclivity to engage in positive versus negative hypothesis testing. The sufficiency principle leads to motivated reasoning in order to guarantee a reasonable level of confidence in a given set of circumstances (Jain and Maheswaran 2000). Recent work by van Osselaer and Alba (2000) on blocking suggests that the learning of sufficiency relations may be a more basic, hardwired tendency. Using a simple associative learning procedure, they showed that, in a few trials, people learn brand associations that later block the learning of new predictive attribute associations. Janiszewski and van Osselaer (2000) suggest that this results from a forward-looking, parallel associative learning system. Given the busyness of life and the relatively low stakes of many consumer decisions, adopting a “if it’s not broke, why fix it” approach seems reasonable. We are more apt to learn sufficient relationships than those that are necessary.

It is not that consumers are incapable of recognizing an uninformative product experience. When people realize that experience is ambiguous, they generally dislike it and engage in additional search or avoidance (Ho, Keller, and Keltzka 2001). When faced with overwhelmingly large assortments, satisfaction decreases because consumers realize that

they cannot fully appreciate all the alternatives available to them (Huffman and Kahn 1998). Hoch, Bradlow, and Wansink (1999) found that people react negatively to disorganized assortments, but only when they adopt a choice orientation toward the task. When in a browsing mode, they perceive greater variety from disorganized rather than organized displays. Chronic confidence will work against the consumer relinquishing control, especially when product experience is readily available, since experience increases decision confidence (Muthukrishnan 1995). In certain situations, consumers realize that they do not possess the requisite expertise to make an intelligent choice, and then they outsource the task to recognized experts. Many decision environments, however, are not exacting; when faced with undemanding tasks, informative negative feedback is not common, and so consumers are less motivated to learn and improve upon what they already know (Hogarth et al. 1991). Whether or not consumers correctly recognize ambiguity in the context of an initial choice determines the level of certainty in the initial preference. Muthukrishnan and Kardes (2001) found that certainty in an initial preference combines with uninformative additional experience to produce persistent preferences for the attributes of a previously chosen brand.

### Experience Is Endogenous

“Happiness isn’t something you experience; it’s something you remember.” This quote from Oscar Levant (in Kashner and Schoenberger 1998, p. 43) rings true and suggests that retroactive evaluations of product experience are influenced by endogenous changes in tastes. True experience is encoded on-line as it unfolds, but experience also is reinterpreted as decisions are rationalized. I am not arguing that people are unaware that they are capable of adapting to current circumstances. Consumers understand that it is adaptive to come to like what one has. People also understand that their preferences are to some degree self-constructed, but consumers underappreciate exactly how flexible they are in accommodating to product experiences. This is like econometricians who recognize the inherent circularity in market data but place too much faith in their ability to instrument the problem away. Endogeneity is difficult to detect because most of the time we do not bother to reconcile outcomes with predictions. This form of self-seduction renders a product experience more attractive *ex post* than *ex ante*. The endogenous nature of experience increases the difficulty in predicting changes in preferences over time (Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999). At the time of judgment and choice, consumers do not anticipate that they will naturally accommodate to later experiences, leading to overestimation of satiation, contrast, and other hedonic effects.

That product experience induces the need for rationalization has been known since Festinger (1962) originally discussed cognitive dissonance. After a decision has been made, consumers engage in a variety of tactics including avoiding negative information and attitude change (Elliot and Devine 1994). Postdecision interpretation of experience is just one

way that consumers can give themselves the benefit of the doubt about the wisdom of their decisions. The mere ownership effect also suggests that experience can lead to endogenous changes in preferences. Beggen (1992) found that people evaluated an object more favorably merely because they owned it. The status quo bias also may be driven by experience-induced changes in preferences. When consumers engage in an attribute-based comparison process, the unique attributes of a status quo brand are weighed heavily, whereas the unique attributes of the referent brand are neglected. Attributes of the focal brand are mapped onto the attributes of the referent, rather than vice versa (Mantel and Kardes 1999). This direction-of-comparison effect is reduced with brand-based processing or when high involvement increases systematic processing of accessible attributes.

Chernev (2001) showed that consumers engage in creative motivated reasoning when faced with justifying a choice. After consumers formed a preference for one alternative over another, Chernev found that adding an attractive feature shared by both brands increased relative preference despite the fact that shared features make the alternatives more similar. He argues that consumers engage in confirmatory reasoning, and so shared attractive features provide additional support for the initial choice. Related findings appear in Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto (1994), who found that trivial differentiating attributes could nonetheless increase preferences for a chosen brand. Brown and Carpenter (2000) argue that pragmatic implication suggests relevance and the irrelevance of trivial attributes cannot always be determined through usage (e.g., credence attribute). These attributes are tiebreakers with instrumental value because they allow the consumer to make a choice and then consume.

Economists also have taken an interest in endogenous preferences. Beginning with Stigler and Becker (1978), however, they have taken a very strong view—specifically that consumers' tastes are stable over time. This perspective, of course, is anathema to psychologists and just about everyone else. The reason for this strong view is that, if tastes could change on a whim, then economic systems become overdetermined and anything is possible. Although economists assume constant tastes, they do allow for changes in consumers' production functions that come with experience. And so when a consumer reports an increased preference for country and western music after a move to Nashville, economists would explain this as a change in the music appreciation production function. This sounds a lot like the development of expertise, which makes the production function seem more reasonable. West, Brown, and Hoch (1996) showed that experience could be made more meaningful by providing consumers a simple consumption vocabulary with which to interpret experience. My point is that accumulated product experience will alter the production function to accommodate future experience.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that product experience often proceeds like a seduction. The engaging aspects of experience catch the consumer's attention. The consumer becomes intrigued. The

nonpartisan nature of experience leads the consumer to let her or his guard down a bit and be more open than s/he would be with the more partisan sources that are responsible for marketing the product. The pseudodiagnostic aspects afford the consumer plenty of leeway in interpreting the product experience in whichever way serves her or his personal interests. It is here that the consumer begins a partnership with product experience in her or his own seduction, possibly assisted by marketing communications from a partisan source. Finally, the endogenous nature of experience allows the consumer to adapt her or his taste to what s/he has chosen. Is the consumer likely to be happy with the seduction, or will s/he feel a bit betrayed? The history of well-known seductions suggests a little bit of both (Greene 2001).

There has been and will continue to be research to help us better understand how the engaging, nonpartisan, and pseudodiagnostic character of experience helps to promote the seductive nature of product experience. I believe, however, that a better understanding of taste endogeneity is the key to understanding the conditions under which consumers will regret the seduction and consider it a fraud. My guess is that this does not happen very often, either because consumers (a) remain completely oblivious to the fact that they were seduced, or (b) despite knowing that they have been seduced accept the fact that they enjoyed it. Part of the reason for this is that people underestimate the influence that they themselves exert over their own ex post level of satisfaction with a chosen course of action (Gilbert et al. 2000). Whether we label it cognitive dissonance, self-perception, ego defense, or emotion coping, the evidence is that we are adept at adapting to unchangeable circumstances. In fact, Gilbert and Ebert (2002) found that people were more satisfied after the fact with alternatives that they could not later change, despite ex ante preferring alternatives that included the change option. But I believe that taste endogeneity goes beyond the strong motive to rationalize experience. It also is the case that consumers can change their production functions, be it through the development of a consumption vocabulary or some other form of expertise, and alter their ability to more effectively extract utility from the experiences that they encounter. Hopefully, further investigations into the motivational and cognitive forces that allow consumers to effectively endogenize their product experiences will help us to better understand why product experience is so seductive.

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