

PRODUCT TRIAL PROCESSING (PTP): A MODEL APPROACH FROM THE CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study is a theoretical approach to consumer's processing of product trial, and equally explored the literature of product levels, concept benefit and life cycle. Product trial is described as consumer's first usage experience with a company's brand or product that is most important in determining brand attributes and the intention to make a purchase. Among the constructs used in the model of consumer's processing of product trial includes; experiential and non-experiential attributes, perceived validity of product trial, consumer perceived expertise, perceived diagnosticity of product trial, others are emotions, evaluations of trial performance and attitude towards a brand. In conclusion it is believed that consumers processing of product trial are interwoven in these clusters of constructs.

KEY WORDS: P.T.P., Consumers, Experience, Expertise and Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

A consumer can make an informed judgment about the usefulness of a product or satisfaction derived from the consumption of a product based on past experience with the product, which could be favourable or unfavourable, which ever is the case a decision has been taken at that level of abstraction. But the important thing to note is that, this decision or judgment is premised on the individual's subjectivism and perception of what usefulness or satisfaction means. The way customers measure or evaluate a product's value or usefulness is quite different from what manufacturers or sellers do. For experience consumers that are familiar with a particular company's brand, usefulness and satisfaction could mean repeat purchases of the same product in future, and more market can be created for the company, depending on what information buyers give to untapped market. This is because they have benefited much from the consumption of the product. But on the part of the producer or seller, if a product meets the needs and desires of the target market in terms of

satisfaction, the product will be in high demand and the producer or seller's evaluating instrument is the rate of turn-over. How the seller can replenish stock to fill the gap of finished stock. On the other hand if turnover rate and mark-up fall short of expectation, it means un-acceptance and dissatisfaction for the seller or company's brand.

It is imperatively difficult for a buyer to perceive favourable impact of a product at the first sight of the product without initial trial that may lead to subsequent decision. Such buyer or customer needs series of information processing regarding the physical configuration, quality and value of the product. In processing information about the company's brand or product, a consumer would need to perceive these attributes just in the same manner of the informant or sales agent in order to create a positive impact; otherwise the reverse is the case. This leads us to the core of the study—consumers processing of products as first timer in the trial stage. What then is product trial? It is defined as consumer's first usage experience with a company's brand or product that is a critical factor in determining brand beliefs, attributes, and purchase intentions (Marks and

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Kamins, 1988). This provides the consumers with direct sensory or physical conduct with the tangible product. Therefore before the conceptualization and development of a model of consumers trial processing in the mix of obscurity, it is the desire of this study to delve into brief literature of product as a generic word. Furthermore, the remaining part of the study include; product concept, levels of product, consumers' product knowledge, others are product life cycle and product trial, methodology of consumers processing of product trial, summary and conclusion.

Product as a Concept

It implies a bundle of physical and psychological satisfaction that consumers receive from a purchase (Nwokoye, 1996). From the literature of product development, it is expected that each trial of a product or particular brand by a consumer, such a brand should be capable of meeting consumers will prefer product that give them the best satisfaction In terms of high desires and needs. This is because consumer's quality, performance and possible future purchase decision

Products are used by marketers to satisfy the needs and wants of consumers, but how these customers or buyer process new product trial is most important to them and a thing of concern to marketers and producers. What consumers want in a product is essentially the service benefit or solution to their problems. Thus, the idea of product as potential customer's satisfier is very important in every effort to appeal to first timers. When a company markets a product, what it is really marketing is the expected satisfaction, use or benefit that the customer wants (Mc Carthy and Perreault, 1982).

Marketers and manufacturer should not confuse the physical product with the functional aspect. In other words what really is important in a product is the services or benefits which the product will offer, and ease or facilitate customer's processing of product trial. Therefore, manufacturers should be more preoccupied with those good qualities and features of a product that would enhance consumer's satisfaction. This is because consumers or buyer will base their product trial decision on the above salient factors or even more discerning ones.

Leaves of Product

There are five levels of customer value hierarchy, which include; core benefit, basic

product, augmented product and potential product.

- **Core Benefit:** This means the fundamental service or benefit that the customer is really buying. This of course is the most important level of product.
- **Basic Product:** This is the specific form of the tangible product or item which helps to deliver the core benefit. It is equally referred to as generic product.
- **Expected Product:** Here the marketer or product developer prepares an expected product, with all the set of attributes and conditions that would spur consumer's trial decision.
- **Augmented Product:** These are the extra benefit attach to the product. This enables a company or a marketer to offer benefits that exceed customer's expectations.
- **Potential Product:** This encompasses all the possible augmentation and transformation the product might undergo in the future. Thus it requires companies to be innovative and creative by searching for new ways to satisfy customers through their product offer.

Consumers' Product Knowledge

Peter and Olson in 1996 listed three types of product knowledge which consumers may be privilege to have. They include;

- **Knowledge of Product Feature:** Companies should work towards ascertaining which product characteristics and attribute appeal most to consumers. What they mean to consumers, and how consumers use this knowledge in cognitive processes, such as product trial and the final decision of making the purchase.
- **Knowledge of Product Benefit:** Consumers often think about product and brands in terms of their consequences, not their attributes. Consequences are outcome that occur to a consumer when the product is purchased and put to use. These outcomes could necessitate to acceptance or rejection in the future.
- **Knowledge of Product as Value Satisfiers:** Consumers also have knowledge about the personal symbolic values that products and brands help them to satisfy or achieve (Ozo, 2005). Values are buyers or consumers broad life goals and involve the feelings and

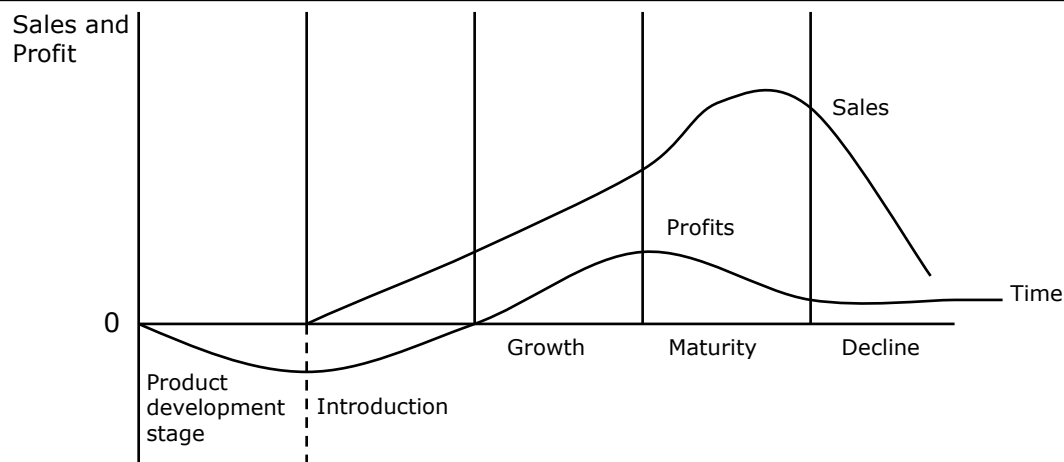
emotions associated with such goals and needs. Since they represent important consequences that are personally relevant, values are associated with strong affective (emotions, feelings, belief) responses. Satisfying a value usually elicits strong affect (happiness, joy, satisfaction), while blocking a value produces negative affect (rejection, frustration).

Product Life Cycle and Product Trial

Nickels, et al (1999) defined product life cycle as a theoretical model of what happens to sales and profit for a product class overtime. Thus it is a concept that seeks to describe the product sales, profits, customers, competition and marketing emphasis from inception to removal from the market (Ewah, 2007). It has five or more life stages, depending on the product.

- **Product Development:** This is the first stage in the product life cycle, because it begins with the introduction of new product idea by the company or marketer. During this period, sales are at zero level while the company investment cost increases. This time also characterizes the period consumers have not seen or heard about the product, talk less of product trial and processing.
- **Introduction Stage:** It is the period in which the product is first distributed through marketing outlets and made available for purpose. This period is a characteristic of slow sales growth, non existence of profit and heavy expenses to create awareness and acceptance. This period implies consumer's first contact with the product.

- **Growth Stage:** Now is the time for rapid market acceptance and increasing profit because the product's sale has started increasing. Equally competitors start coming into the market and each tries to develop the best product design. While some competitors copy the most successful product, the increase in competitors leads to more number of distribution outlets, and promotion becomes the weapon of communication for trial especially amongst untapped market.
- **Maturity Stage:** This stage is characterized by increasing sales but declining profit level. The competitive pressure may require companies lowering their price to reach more consumers. Profit level often decline because of increased marketing outlay or promotion cost to promote trial and defend it against competition. This stage normally last longer than any other stage in a product life cycle.
- **Decline or Demise Stage:** At this stage of a product life cycle, firms can cut back on marketing or promotion, terminate a product completely or prune some. This is as a result of decrease in sales which may have been necessitated by intense competition in the market, change in consumer's taste, improved technology in other firms, etc. A consumer's processing of product trial at this stage of its life cycle has detrimental effect. How would the consumer perceive a product that is almost not commanding a reasonable share of the market? Definitely such a product will be viewed with negative nostalgia.



Source: Adopted from Ewah (2007).

Figure 1: Product Life Cycle (PLC)

Table 1: Summary of product Life Cycle Characteristic, Objectives and Strategies.

Characteristics	Introduction	Growth	Maturity	Decline
Sales	Low sales	Rapidly rising sales	Peak sales	Declining sales
Cost	High cost per customer	Average cost per customer	Low cost per customer	Low cost per customer
Profits	Negative	Rising Profit	High profits	Declining profits
Customers	Innovators	Early adopters	Middle majority	Laggards
Marketing Objectives				
	Create product awareness and trial	Maximize market share	Maximize profit while defending market share	Reduce expenditure and milk the brand
Strategies				
Product	Offer a basic product	Offer product extensions, service, warranty	Diversify brand and models	Phase out weak items
Price	Use cost – plus	Price to penetrate	Price to match or beat competitors	Cut price
Distribution	Build selective distribution	Build intensive distribution	Build more intensive distribution	Go selective: phase out unprofitable outlets
Advertising	Build product awareness among early adopters and dealers	Build awareness and interest in the mass market	Stress brand differences and benefits	Reduce to level needed to retain hard – core loyals

Sales Promotion	Use heavy sales promotion to entice trial	Reduce to take advantage of heavy consumer demand	Increase to encourage brand switching	Reduce to minimal level
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Source: Culled from Kotler and Armstrong (2001)

Methodology of Consumers Processing of Product Trial

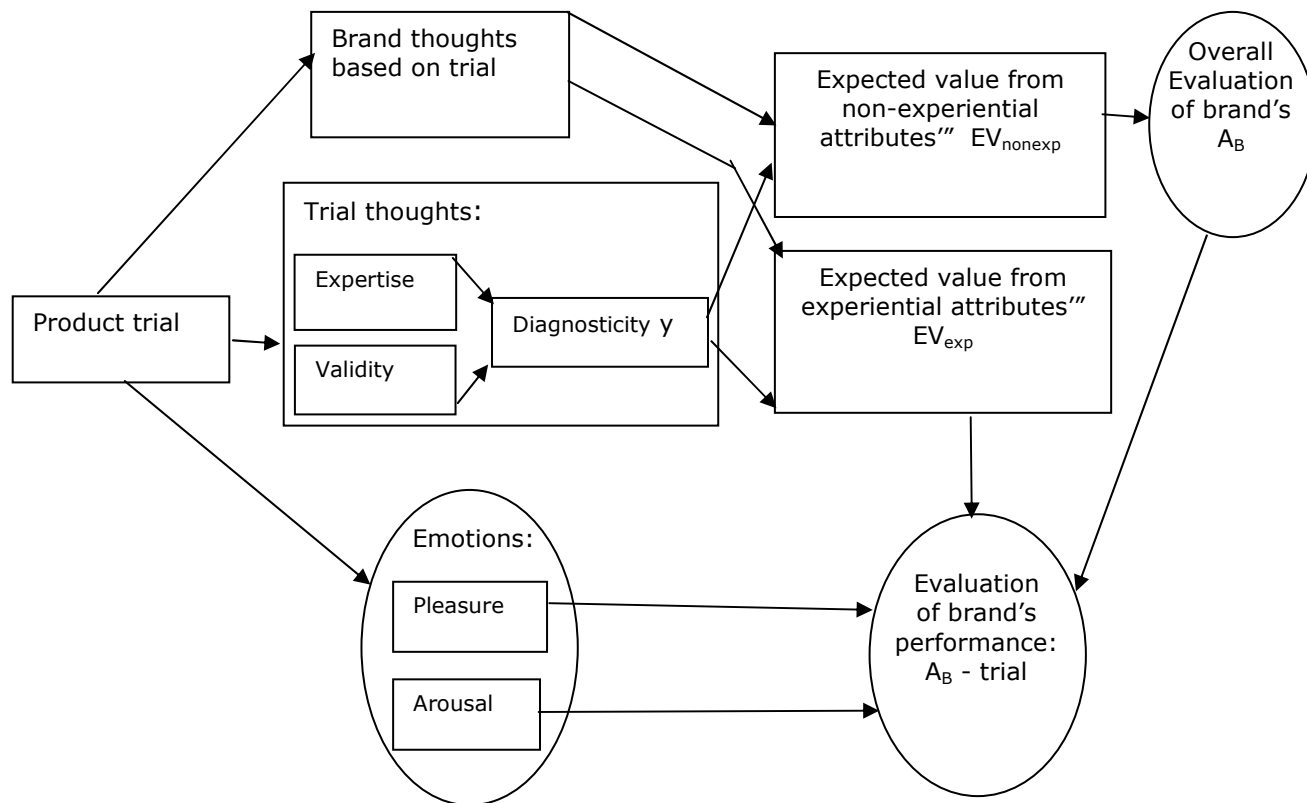


Figure 1: Model of Consumers Processing of Product trial

Source: Culled from Kempf and Smith (1998: 326).

Based on the scholarly work of Kempf and Smith in 1998, product trial processing starts with some combination of visual, tactile, auditory and/or taste data that are channeled to the sensory register for attention and evaluation. The memory of these stimuli needs to be relatively high because consumers are normally in an evaluative mind-set during the product trial and are motivated to remember the brand's performance. Also sensory information is self-generated hence there is maximum trust worthiness. Craik and Lockhart (1972); Greenwald and Leavitt (1984); and MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), confirmed that, the degree of

personal evaluation used in encoding can affect subsequent recall strongly and that direct experience should create both personal and elaborate memory codes because of its vividness (Fazio and Zanna, 1978). Consumers are subject to have relatively high involvement with a trial when it serves an information function. That is, the trial is used to determine which attributes are associated with the firm's brand. According to Smith and Swinyard (1982), when a trial serves an information function, consumers can be expected to make a conscious effort to evaluate the brand's salient experiential attributes. This is because the main purpose of

trial is to find out if consumers like the particular brand.

CONCEPT USED IN THE MODEL

Experiential Attributes: These are those features or characteristics of a product that can be evaluated directly by trial. Such attributes can be in the form of content, weight, hardness or taste of the product. It is important to note that when consumers consciously evaluate the brand's experiential attributes during trial, they are likely to produce a series of brand-related thoughts. This could be positively perceived or negatively perceived.

Non-experiential Attributes: These are indirectly observable features that are attached to the product to aid information processing during trial by the consumer. These equally implies credence attributes that are conveyed better through indirect marketing tools poor information, such as advertising (Darby and Karni, 1973) and (Wright and Lynch 1995). Non-experiential attributes, such as, the aesthetic value of a product of vitamin content of a tin of bourvita can be ascertain or judged based on a single trial experience which the consumer finds himself. Although in some instances beliefs and perception about non-experiential attributes are influenced more effectively by external forces (like advertising or other promotional tools) apart from the individual personal decision during the trial period. However consumers sometimes make inferences about non-experiential attributes, even when they can not-substantiate or validate their trial experience with the product. But such inferential brand beliefs are normally weaker and less confidently held, than experiential beliefs formed through direct experience.

Perceived Validity of Product Trial: This refers to the extent a particular product trial is perceived to perform in the mind of consumers. It is a representative of a product's true performance in terms of its credibility and enhancement. When cues that threaten product trial validity occur, there is every likely hold that consumers may think about validity overtly. For example when a customer has insufficient time to test the product adequately or if the trial is suspected to be unrealistically manipulated and vague, such are the multiple examples of invalid trial that can result to customers discontinuing the trial.

Consumer Perceived Expertise: This trial-related cognition is the magnitude to which consumers feel confident in their ability to process the information provided through the trial. Thus it is the subjective judgment of a product performance during trial and not consumer's objective knowledge level. Perceived expertise is a function of the consumer's degree of prior experience and when it is at comfortable level, trial cognitions regarding expertise are likely to be produced consciously. It is rather beliefs about expertise that are likely to become conscious if they are activated by a cogent cue. This means that trial cognitions is being governed by a management-by-exception rule, that is, most explicit trial cognitions regarding perceived expertise will occur when factors detrimental to expertise are present or conditions are extremely favourable.

Perceived Diagnosticity of Product Trial: In the model it represents the extent to which the consumer believes that the product trial is useful in evaluating the firm's brand or products attributes. In addition to being influenced by perceived expertise and perceived validity, trial diagnosticity is affected by-whether the attribute being evaluated is experiential or non-experiential. Therefore, a product trial will be perceived as most diagnostic when the product salient attributes are mostly experiential (i. e. attributes that can be directly evaluated during trial) and when there are no doubts about expertise or trial validity. Conversely product trial would be perceived as relatively non diagnostic when doubts about validity or expertise exist and when the brand or product's salient attributes or characteristic are mostly non-experiential, because by definition, product trial does not convey direct information on these features. The marketing implication is that, the resulting brand beliefs and acceptance for the product by consumers will be weak or held with less confidence (Koriat Lichtenstein, and Fischhoff 1980). When consumer's experience a diagnostic product trial, the product or brand beliefs and acceptance is stronger and held with more confidence, thus there is a positive relationship between trial diagnostic and evaluation value (EV).

Emotions: Emotional components in the model are pleasure and arousal. It is an established fact that consumers emotional temperament or balance, influence the way they process product trial. This is because trial involves direct physical

contact with the product and a consumer's affective response includes emotional reactions to the product or the experience from the trial (Mano and Oliver 1993). It is quite logical to say that emotions elicited during product trial is important because it comes from the individual's perspective and it is not being influenced by external factors. Smith (1993) attributed the greater effects of trial on brand attitudes to cognitive antecedents, such as belief confidence and to a lesser degree, belief strength.

Evaluations of Trial Performance (AB-Trial):

This is the evaluation of the brand or product performance for acceptance or rejection during the first usage experience. AB-Trial construct represents the trial performance's contribution to overall brand attitude (AB). It has both cognitive and affective antecedents. At the cognitive level, evaluative value (EV) from experiential attributes has a direct impact on AB-Trial whenever the consumer consciously analyzes the brand's performance. The goal of any product trial is that EV experiential should play a major role in determining AB-Trial, though the magnitude of the effect may depend on the number of experiential attributes involvement in the trial and trial processing intentions. Emotional components, such as pleasure and arousal experienced during product trial will contribute to AB-Trial and depending on product type, may be a major determinant of AB-Trial.

The marketing relevance of the trial model is the development of the AB-Trial construct which has a diagnostic value needed by marketers to analyze consumer's overall evaluation of brands performance during trial.

Brand Attitude or Attitude towards the Brand (AB):

This is the consumer's overall or aggregate evolution of the product trial. Consumer's attitude towards a brand may be favourable or unfavourable. The former implies acceptance and possible decision to buy a particular company's brand or product. While the latter signifies rejection and negative attitude towards the actual purchase decisions. Brand attitude will be more favourable for products that are easily processed during trial, especially when they meet the requirements of consumers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The model indicates that perceived expertise influences perceived diagnosticity of the trial for both experiential and non-experiential attributes for some class of products especially

for non-complex ones. Therefore, for a trial to be diagnostic, the consumer must feel sufficiently expert in processing the information offered in the trial. Thus perceived diagnosticity has a strong effect on product trial based beliefs and suggests that marketers and producers should take into consideration how diagnosticity will influence product trial and response for specific product and attributes classification.

Furthermore, the more expert the consumer believed themselves to be, the more diagnostic the product trial is perceived to be. Therefore, marketers and producers can gain differential advantage in their trial programmes if they can make consumers feel competent to judge the trial. This height can be achieved through enlightenment campaigns for complex products, package information, pre-trial promotion, etc; for consumers to create awareness and preference. Moreover, the higher the perceived expertise the more likely consumers will interpret the product to be successful, since they are familiar with the product, that the benefit can be deduced based on first-hand experience. When consumers' expertise is low it will be difficult for consumers to be certain or sure of the satisfaction a product will give during trial processing, especially when complex products are involved. Though, with the aid of other promotional tools that are targeted towards consumers, to induce consumer product trial decision by the marketers, they might be lured into buying.

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