

GERALDINE FENNELL

# CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRODUCT— USE SITUATION

A conceptual framework  
for identifying consumer wants and  
formulating positioning options.

**M**ARKETING'S FIRST LAW, "Don't sell what you happen to make; make what the consumer wants to buy," is implemented through the identification of consumer wants and the formulation of brand positionings to respond to these wants. In a competitive environment, this means, in particular, the identification of consumer wants that are not being addressed or adequately satisfied by the brands currently available.

Yet we lack not only a statement of alternative positioning options, but a conceptual framework from which positioning options may be derived. In consequence, when practitioners embark on segmentation research, or on idea-generation for brand and new product positioning, they do so lacking a statement of possible consumer wants that permits addressing these assignments systematically.

Accordingly, a major purpose of this article is to present a simple model of consumer brand choice that states general classes of consumer wants applicable to any good or service. A second objective is to

outline various positioning options which follow from the analysis of consumer wants. Applications to segmentation research and positioning idea-generation also are indicated.

## Consumer Wants

The notion that it is possible to state consumer wants in a manner that applies, across the board, to any good or service is generally met with disbelief, if not outright rejection. The comment, "Products are different, and it's impossible to think of them within a common framework," accurately reflects a state of affairs in which consumer wants are stated in terms of product benefits or attributes. Physical attributes differ so much from one product to another that it seems unlikely we should ever be able to use a common language to describe consumer wants across product categories. Car buyers are said to want power, ease of handling, trouble-free use, good mileage; facial cleanser buyers are said to want complexion care, cleansing, fragrance; perhaps only *economy* comes to mind as a possible want shared in common by both car and facial cleanser consumers. The different words in which consumer wants are expressed mislead one into concluding that cars and facial cleansers respond to different kinds of consumer wants.

### About the Author

GERALDINE FENNELL is Adjunct Professor, Graduate School of Business Administration, Fordham University, Lincoln Center, New York City, and consultant, marketing and consumer psychology.

### From Product to Situation

A moment's thought makes it clear that words such as power, ease of handling, complexion care, cleansing, etc., while referring to product benefits that may satisfy wants, do not in themselves tell us anything about the situations in which consumers find themselves—the situations that make power, complexion care, and the like desirable to them.

In fact, such experiences can be motivationally ambiguous. For example:

▶ Three motorists may say power is important to them. But Consumer A may want power because his habitual driving pattern makes it necessary to be able to enter fast-moving traffic; B, because owning a powerful car is associated with his masculine self-image; C, because he enjoys the sensory experience of driving a powerful machine.

▶ Three facial cleanser consumers may rate complexion care as important. But Consumer A may want complexion care because she believes sun and central heating dry her skin; B, because taking good care of her skin is part of her feminine self-expression; C, because she enjoys the appearance and feel of lovely skin.

Accordingly, when we learn from the consumer that he or she wants *power* or *complexion care*, we have done little more than scratch the surface of consumer wants. We begin to have some understanding of what the consumer is asking for only when we refuse to be satisfied with answers expressed in the form of product benefits and enquire further into the conditions that lead the consumer to ask for *power* and *complexion care*. When we shift focus from what consumers ask for to the conditions that lead them to want what they ask for, we become better able to understand their wants and we find a common motivational ground for all goods and services.

### Consumer's Perceptions

The conditions that lead consumers to want specific product benefits are found in aspects of both their personality and their life situation. In recent years, the psychological literature increasingly reports dissatisfaction with the ability of personal variables such as traits<sup>1</sup> and generally-stated attitudes<sup>2</sup> to predict behavior, and it stresses the dual influence on behavior of person and environment factors. But there is, as yet, no agreement on how environmental influences should be conceptualized,<sup>3</sup> including the question whether situations should be described objectively (as by an outside observer) or in terms of their meaning to the participant.<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that

both objective and subjective approaches will be found necessary and useful, depending on the purpose at hand.

For my purposes here, the choice of situational units corresponds to the activities and conditions for which products are created and marketed, such as doing the laundry, feeding the dog, having a headache. The marketing concept implies that the meaning of such product-use situations differs in important ways across consumers, and calls for an approach stated in terms of participants' perceptions. Accordingly, a *product-use situation as perceived* is my unit of analysis.

Further, I take it as given that brands are tailored to respond to consumer wants, and that consumer wants exist independently of, and are logically prior to, the brands that are created to satisfy them. Accordingly, I consider separately the determinants of the consumer's perception of the product-use situation and of brands.

### Person-Environment Intersections

Exhibit 1 shows some of the variables involved in two person-environment intersections which are of interest to the marketer.

To the left are pre-marketplace environment variables<sup>5</sup> that, in conjunction with person variables,<sup>6</sup> structure the consumer's perception of the product-use situation. In large measure, determinants of the consumer's perception of the product-use situation are outside the control of the marketer. But the marketer needs to understand how this person-environment intersection has structured the product-use situation for the consumer, for its elements direct the consumer's choice among competing brands.

More immediately under the marketer's control are the marketplace variables, in particular the physical and intangible aspects of brand offerings, and their communication through advertising and promotional activity. Even here the marketer's control is limited, not only by the influence of other environment variables, but also by the consumer's interpretation and evaluation of the marketing communications and brand offerings.

### Brand Choice

A simple model of consumer brand choice is diagrammed in Exhibit 2. The way consumers view the product-use situation sets the direction for their brand search. From the array of available brands, consumers select a brand that best responds to the salient features of the product-use situation, as perceived by them. The *wants consumers bring to the marketplace* are to be found in their perception of the product-use situation: *what they buy* represents a

## EXHIBIT 1 Two Person - Environment Intersections of Interest to Marketers

Environment Variables	Person Variables	Environment Variables
Premarketplace		Marketplace & Related
Physical Natural & Manmade, e.g. weather terrain, pollution, technology  Social e.g. family, reference groups, norms  Task e.g. homemaking, transportation, personal care	Cognitive units and processes  Traits Needs Values Self-concepts Attitudes  Abilities Skills Interests  Physiology	Brands  Marketing Communications  Sales Personnel  Word-of-Mouth  Institutions e.g. media, consumer testing services, regulatory agencies
	Product-Use Situation As Perceived	Brand Array As Perceived

reconciliation of their wants with available brand benefits, as perceived and evaluated by them.

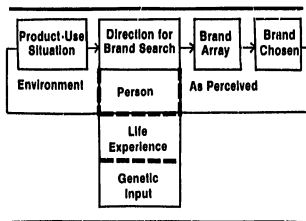
The person is viewed as a unique composite of genetic inheritance and past experience, now in a current set of life circumstances (family, job, circle of friends, avocational activities, geographic location) that are perceived through the filter of his or her individuality. As he or she moves from one activity to another, different environment and person systems intersect to structure the immediate situation as perceived.

Many activities recur, in particular those for which marketers tailor their products. We may assume reasonable stability in the person and environment elements that combine to structure the situations in which consumers use products. Consider the earlier examples of different consumer orienta-

tions to the product benefits *power* and *complexion care*. Motorist A was depicted as wanting *power* because of a driving pattern that compelled him to enter fast-moving traffic. The life circumstances and personal make-up which combine to make this aspect of driving disagreeable for him are relatively permanent. Similarly, facial cleanser Consumer A was depicted as wanting *complexion care* because of dry skin that she attributes to the effect of sun and central heating.

Both consumers share a common perception of their respective product-use situations—i.e., that it contains aversive elements which are outside their immediate control, and from which they want relief. Both perceptions reflect the influence of premarketplace conditions which give specific direction to the consumer's brand search, and which will be used as a basis for evaluating the marketer's brand offerings.

## EXHIBIT 2 Brand Choice Model



## Consumer Motivation Classes

The word motivation refers to getting behavior started and giving it a direction. We want, then, to identify various consumer perceptions of the product-use situation that activate product purchase, and that direct choice among available brands. Exhibit 3 lists seven different perceptions of the product-use situation and the direction for consumer behavior associated with each.<sup>7</sup> Each of the first five classes is defined in terms of one motivating element. Classes 6 and 7 are complex cases, where the marketplace adds a second motivating element. Each motivation class is described below.

### EXHIBIT 3 Consumer Motivation Classes

Perception of Product-Use Situation	Direction for Brand Search
1. Current Problem	Solve Problem
2. Potential Problem	Prevent Problem
3. Normal Depletion	Maintain Stable State
4. Interest Opportunity	Explore
5. Sensory Pleasure Opportunity	Enjoy
6. Product-Related Problem	Resolve Conflict
7. Satisfaction-Frustration	Restructure Situation

The question of interest to the marketer is: Which is the appropriate situation perception for this consumer as he or she enters the marketplace for my product? How the consumer's personality manifests itself in other contexts is not of immediate interest. Accordingly, in the descriptions that follow, the phrase "these consumers" is always intended to mean: *this person as he or she views a particular product-use situation.* (The same person may have a Class 1 perception for one product, a Class 2 perception for another, and so on.<sup>8</sup>)

#### 1. Current Problem—Solve

The salient aspect of the product-use situation for these consumers is the problem they perceive. They find themselves faced with an existing problem that must be dealt with. They seek a brand that solves the problem.

One or more significant consumer problems are readily identified in a product category—e.g., dry skin (toilet soap), unmanageable or oily hair (hair products), heavy driving schedule (tires), strong or heavy beard (blades), overweight dog (dog food). Historically, it would appear that the identification of these consumer problems has been a key source for the development of special product formulations, directly tailored to solving the problem.

Consumer problems may arise from intensification, increased frequency, or special cases of the condition or activity for which the product is used. All three may be illustrated with reference to having a headache—for example, consumers' perceptions that their headaches are especially severe, frequent, or occur at specific times ("when I miss a meal"). Likewise with doing the laundry, consumers' perceptions that their laundry is especially dirty, large (implying high frequency), or contains fabrics that need special attention. More general sources of consumer problems are boredom, shortage of time, or

money, and the perception that prevailing conditions outside the product category of interest are thwarting strongly held beliefs—"My family won't eat a substantial breakfast, as they should," or, "Prevalence of highly processed foods makes it hard to get the nutrition we need."

The common element in all of these cases is the consumer's perception of discontent with currently existing conditions that, in the short run at any rate, the consumer sees no way to change. Marketers respond to these consumer problems in one of two ways, by providing a brand that helps deal with the unpleasant condition or by confronting the source of the problem directly. Laundry detergent for "ground-in dirt" is one response to the problem of dirty laundry; disposable work and play overalls would be another.

#### 2. Potential Problem—Prevent

These consumers have invested the product-use situation with symbolic significance for their self-concept, their view of appropriate social behavior, and their need for social rewards and recognition. They are focusing, not on a currently present problem, but on an anticipated problem. Unless appropriate action is taken, these consumers anticipate a departure from self-concept, or social norms, or a loss of social rewards which calls for preventive action. They are concerned about the impact of their behavior on important "others." They view their behavior as it registers in the eyes of a real or imagined "other"—a loved one, a friend or business acquaintance, a social group, the self, an infant, or a pet.

Marketers have responded to the consumer's perception of symbolic significance by imbuing a brand with image connotations of social acceptance, esteem, or approval. This is done by associating a brand with the successful avoidance of the feared outcome, a success that may be depicted in the admiring, approving, or loving response of the brand user's important "other." Marketers may also respond to these consumer perceptions by creating and communicating special quality-ingredient versions of the product.

#### 3. Normal Depletion—Maintain Stable State

These are consumers with minimal interest in the product category. In the total press of their life circumstances and psychological well-being, the product-use situation is one of minor importance. The condition or activity for which the product is relevant is accepted as a routine part of daily life; so long as the product performs its essential function, and presents no special problems, these consumers' wants are satisfied. Brand perceptions may be fairly undifferentiated, except where the marketplace, in response to special consumer wants, has added fea-

tures to a basic product that actively interfere with a low-involvement orientation.

The notion that varying levels of consumer involvement may be found, not just across product categories, but even within a given one, is congruent with marketing research experience and with recent treatment of low-commitment consumer behavior. Marketers may respond to low consumer involvement by inducing brand trial, as Robertson suggests,<sup>9</sup> or through advertising that seeks to create a strong associative link between a brand and the basic condition or activity for which the product is used.

#### 4. Interest Opportunity—Explore

These consumers perceive the product-use situation as one affording an opportunity for fun, novelty, the acquisition of information and expertise. They enter the marketplace for the product ready to explore, disposed to welcome complexity and to be diverted. These consumers have a "buff" orientation for the product in question. The key motivating element here is interest as an end in itself, not as a solution to perceived problems or a way to achieve social rewards.

Some products more than others appear to lend themselves naturally to the development of special versions that respond to the consumer's interest in exploration, knowledge, and diversion—for example, wines, perfumes, and mechanically sophisticated products such as cars and audio equipment. Even the humble dog food category, given a suitable array of nutritionally varied brands, can provide a source of interest to a dog nutrition buff.

#### 5. Sensory Pleasure Opportunity—Enjoy

These consumers perceive the product-use situation as affording the opportunity for enjoyment of sensory pleasure. As with exploratory interest, the perceived opportunity for enjoyment is an end in itself. Sensory pleasure may be derived from the product itself (dishwashing detergent with pleasant scent) or as a consequence of using the product (shining dishes).

It may be useful to consider wines and perfumes again, here, to clarify a distinction between this class and the previous one. The difference lies in the consumer's focus of interest.

In this class, consumers focus on the enjoyment of taste, color, smell, etc., and are likely to cease exploration at the point where they have located a wine or perfume that satisfies their sensory preferences. In the previous class, by contrast, consumers are interested in extending their knowledge and intellectual involvement in the product category, and are likely to continue their exploration in the pursuit of further information and expertise.

It remains to consider the two special classes in Exhibit 3—No. 6 and No. 7. Here, consumers are *already* in the market for the product in question, and their basic perception of the product-use situation is as described in the five classes above. Now, however, an additional motivating element is present.

#### 6. Product-Related Problem—Resolve Conflict

These consumers perceive major disadvantages stemming from the product itself. They want to buy the product, but they want also to avoid a product disadvantage that they perceive. They are in a classic conflict situation, approaching and withdrawing at the same time. They seek a brand that resolves their conflict, and that permits them to use the product and avoid its perceived disadvantage.

Perceptions of the product-use situation, presented previously, describe the criteria that consumers use to select a brand, or brand subset, which is appropriate to their particular wants and against which they evaluate brand performance. If a brand performs poorly, the consumer's basic motivation is unchanged, and brand switching within the selected brand subset is expected. The situation is materially different when a brand is considered unsatisfactory, not because it fails to satisfy consumer wants, but because it possesses an attribute that is perceived to be undesirable. In such cases, at least two motivating elements need to be considered, one or more arising from the pre-marketplace perceptions already described, and another originating in the marketplace. Examples of product-related problems are numerous, and the marketer's response to them has led to the development of special product forms such as buffered aspirin, peroxide-free hair coloring, hypoallergenic toiletries, ecology-safe laundry detergents, decaffeinated coffee, and low cholesterol foods.

In some instances, marketers attempt to make product-related problems salient for the consumer, presumably as a means of strengthening a possible aversion and directing the consumer toward the marketer's brand. As always, however, one person's meat is another's poison. A consumer may agree that a mouthwash or deodorant soap leaves a medicinal smell. It does not necessarily follow that the mouthwash or soap is undesirable for this reason. To some, medicinal smell may connote freshness and cleanliness; to others it may be regarded as intrinsically unpleasant. Further, a cognitive dissonance analysis suggests that to the hard-core devotees of such a brand, the assertion that medicinal smell is a negative may strengthen their attachment, by prompting them to clarify for themselves, and place additional emphasis on, other brand features they like.

## 7. Satisfaction-Frustration— Restructure the Situation

These consumers, familiar with most or all brands, find none to their satisfaction. They are frustrated consumers, needing to use the product, yet unsatisfied by available brands. The source of consumer dissatisfaction may be an unsolved problem arising from pre-marketplace perceptions, or from the product itself. Possibly, the basic motivation is problem solution—for example, dog owners who believe their dog is overweight. They have tried various diet dog foods, and the results have not been to their liking. Possibly, they are concerned about product-related problems (conflict resolution); for example, they dislike the appearance or smell of dog food, and no brand they have tried overcomes this problem to their satisfaction. So far as these consumers are concerned, the marketer not only needs to uncover the source of the frustration, and address it, but can expect, in some instances, to offer the solution to a skeptical and disenchanting consumer.

The primary motivations of satisfaction-frustration consumers are to be found in the five classes previously described. Satisfaction-frustration is included as a separate class for two reasons: (1) as a reminder to consider explicitly the identification of consumers whose wants are not currently met by available brands; and (2) because the motivational implications of satisfaction-frustration are of considerable interest to the producer. In a situation where a person can see no action (i.e., brand purchase) appropriate to his needs, he may be motivated to make his own creative restructuring of the situation. The reputed use of an electric razor for everyday shaving, and wet shave for special occasions, suggests that adjustable closeness may be a desirable razor attribute. What the frustrated consumer is doing is a valuable source of information for the producer.

### Subtleties & Cross-Currents

Note that in real life motivation classes are not so clear-cut as I have presented them. Considering even the basic five, there may be multiple motivations for a given product. For example, no matter how appealing the scent of a particular laundry detergent, consumers will hardly purchase the product only to enjoy its fragrance (sensory enjoyment); they will also be motivated by the perception of a washing difficulty (problem solution). Or, for a floor cleaning product, a motivating element may be the possibility of unfavorable evaluation by visitors (problem prevention) and, at the same time, the perception of a special floor cleaning problem related to the "scratch-marks made by the consumer's children (problem solution).

Motivations will also vary depending on the multiple uses for which products are bought. Thus, some coffee users may have a minimal involvement so far as their own coffee drinking goes (stable state maintenance); yet, knowing that friends invited to dinner find special enjoyment in the flavor of coffee (sensory enjoyment), they may take this into account in their coffee purchases.

The point is that the framework I present here enables marketers both to better identify the key motivations for particular products and also to understand the many subtleties and cross-currents that lead to multiple brand use and brand switching.

## Pre-Positioning Activities

### Market Segmentation Research

The present formulation for consumer motivation has a number of implications for the qualitative and quantitative phases of market segmentation research. The relatively unstructured format of qualitative individual and group interviews is well suited to uncovering the context of product-use from the consumer's point of view. The motivation classes presented here, in conjunction with a review of environment and person variables, are useful as a means of ensuring that the interview guide covers, systematically, the various kinds and sources of consumer motivation.

Further, the tendency of respondents to play back the product benefit language often used in advertising is effectively countered when qualitative research explicitly focuses on the consumer's use-context. Because product benefits are often motivationally ambiguous, it is preferable to hear consumers talk about the conditions that give rise to their purchase and use of products. For example, it is necessary to clarify whether a particular product attribute is desired for its own sake (exploratory interest or sensory enjoyment), or whether it is the consumer's way of expressing an underlying problem (problem solution). The phrase "makes my mouth feel fresh" may be uttered by consumers who simply enjoy the sensory effects of using mouthwash, or by those who often, or at certain times, feel their mouth needs freshening. Here, and elsewhere, during the qualitative phase, it is important to probe consumers' attributions for the statements they make.

The perspective of the *situation as perceived*, while readily attained in qualitative research, is often lost in the quantitative phase through the use of questionnaire items phrased as in personality inventories (e.g., "I'm not as confident as I would like to be," or, "The opinion of others is important to me"). Marketing research practitioners have stressed the

need to phrase questionnaire items in terms specifically tailored to the consumer condition or activity under study.<sup>10</sup> The present formulation addresses this issue at the conceptual level. Neither person nor environment variables, in isolation, are the focus of research, but the joint influence of these two factors as reflected in the *situation as perceived*. The resulting questionnaire items resemble, in form, specific attitude statements, rather than personality inventory items.

### Idea-Generation

At present, idea-generation for brand and new product positioning is often left to creative inspiration or technological developments in R&D, or is considered to be dependent on analysis of segmentation research findings. It need not be so. A going-in set of motivation classes makes it possible, systematically, to lay the ground for creative thinking, R&D development, and purposeful segmentation research, by facilitating *preliminary* analysis of positioning feasibility.

Positioning strategies of existing brands can be analyzed in terms of the consumer motivation classes. Illustration and text of print ads, and the video and audio of TV commercials, are content-analyzed to determine the brand's *intended* positioning strategy.<sup>11</sup> A profile can be drawn that shows whether brands are being positioned against specific want classes and, if so, the specific class or classes that the brands are responding to. Such a profile will also reveal whether there are classes of consumer wants that are not currently being responded to, suggesting direction for the generation of new brands and products.

While some of these positioning strategy ideas may be feasible, given the brand's current formulation, others may require changes in physical formulation that entail R&D investigation. They can be screened and accorded tentative priority ranking in the light of existing technological, regulatory, and creative constraints. In this way, the preliminary positioning feasibility analysis poses specific questions for research investigation and ensures that, upon completion of the research, the size, behavioral descriptors, and brand perceptions of candidate target segments are available to aid in the further screening of positioning strategy.

## Positioning Options

I have stated seven classes of situation perception that reduce the variety of individual person-environment interfaces to a manageable number of conceptual categories. When marketers address the question of how to position a brand, including new

products, this framework provides a basis for specifying positioning options.

The term "positioning" may, as noted, include considerations of product formulation variation. But it also, and perhaps more broadly, refers to the content of marketing communications. Even in cases where the possibility for formulation variation is limited, marketers may opt to tailor the content of marketing communications selectively, in order to establish a special association between their brand and one or more aspects of the product-use situation. Unless we wish to deny the legitimacy of intangible as opposed to tangible benefits, it is appropriate to use "positioning" in its more general sense, as referring primarily to the marketer's option to tailor marketing communications in terms of the full range of possible consumer wants. Within this use of the term, then, formulation variation enters as a further consideration, where appropriate to a particular product category.

### Specific vs. Non-Specific

It is probably only a slight oversimplification to say that, in marketing practice today, options for positioning are thought of as a simple two-way choice: specific versus non-specific. However, while the notion of specific positioning is intuitively meaningful, it is highly simplistic. At present, the main basis on which positioning is designated "specific" is the inclusion of specific product claims. However, because of the ambiguity of product benefits, what are considered to be specific positionings on this basis are often motivationally non-specific. In terms of motivation, "specific" positioning may entail an assumption, for nontarget consumers, of less than optimal satisfaction of, or incompatibility with, their wants, with corresponding implications for the positioning's breadth of appeal and market share.

The seven motivation classes provide an analytic base for judging the breadth or specificity of brand positionings. From this perspective, a non-specific positioning is one stated in terms sufficiently general that consumers in most or all of the motivation classes may construe it as compatible with their wants. *Coca-Cola's* "It's the real thing" does not explicitly respond to any one consumer want class, but is equally applicable to all. Choice of such a non-specific theme-line leaves *Coca-Cola* free to direct its positioning to any of the consumer want classes or, should it so desire, to maintain ambiguous positioning throughout. In contrast, *RC Cola's* "What's good enough for other folks ain't good enough for me" is motivationally specific (problem prevention).

In my analytical framework, then, "specific" refers to a positioning which contains elements that

### EXHIBIT 4 Nontarget Relevance & Compatibility of Positionings for Basic Motivation Classes

Motivation Class \ Brand Positioning	Problem Solution	Problem Prevention	Stable State Maintenance	Exploratory Interest	Sensory Enjoyment
1. Problem Solution	TARGET	May be Incompatible	Irrelevant	May be Construed As Relevant	May be Construed As Relevant
2. Problem Prevention	Irrelevant*	TARGET	Irrelevant	May be Construed As Relevant	May be Construed As Relevant
3. Stable State Maintenance	Irrelevant*	May be Incompatible	TARGET	Irrelevant*	Irrelevant*
4. Exploratory Interest	Incompatible	Incompatible	Irrelevant	TARGET	Irrelevant
5. Sensory Enjoyment	Incompatible	Incompatible	Irrelevant	Irrelevant	TARGET*

\* Depending on the degree of product formulation variation, the positioning may be incompatible.

classify it as responding explicitly to at least one of the consumer motivation classes. It must be remembered though, that even such positionings in fact vary in terms of their breadth of appeal; some are more specific than others. Degree of specificity is judged by considering the relevance and compatibility of candidate positionings as they would be viewed by consumers with perceptions of the product-use situation different from those of the target group. The outcome of such analysis, in individual cases, depends on a variety of considerations, including the nature of already established consumer brand perceptions, the extent to which formulation variation exists in the product category of interest, and the creative ingenuity with which the positioning is executed.

However, it is possible to state a number of general indications for nontarget relevance and compatibility of brand positionings. Thus, reading down, the column entries in Exhibit 4 show likely nontarget relevance and compatibility of positioning directed to each of the five basic motivation classes. "Incompatible" means that the brand's positioning runs the risk of repelling nontarget consumers. "Irrelevant" means that the positioning, while unlikely to repel nontarget consumers, is not optimally tailored for their special wants. "May be construed as relevant" means that the positioning leaves it open for nontarget consumers to construe it as appropriate to their wants.

#### Positionings Responsive to Classes 1-5

Of Classes 1 through 5, problem solution tends to be

the most specific positioning; sensory enjoyment the least specific. The greater the degree to which the positioning is incompatible for the nontarget classes, the higher the degree of specificity. "Incompatible" virtually excludes a nontarget class from the appeal for the product. At the other extreme, "may be construed as relevant" indicates that the positioning may in fact have some appeal for the particular nontarget class.

For example, window cleaner advertising that depicts the unpleasant chore of washing dirty windows and suggests only that the brand will help with that task has the problem solution class as its target. But it is irrelevant to those who are concerned with social approval of the way their windows look (problem prevention), and to those who think of window washing as a routine of minor concern (stable state maintenance). And it is completely incompatible for those who are interested in trying out different techniques of window washing (exploratory interest) or who find the task a pleasurable experience (sensory enjoyment).

At the other extreme, advertising for a window cleaner that focuses on the sensory enjoyment afforded by sparkling windows, with a pleasant garden seen through the window (sensory enjoyment), does nothing to prevent the brand from being perceived as relevant to consumer perceptions of window cleaning as unpleasant (problem solution) or related to social approval concerns (problem prevention). But note that exploratory interest and sensory enjoyment positionings, while potentially inclusive of problem solution and problem prevention classes,



risk exposing the brand's franchise to encroachment from brands positioned explicitly to respond to problem orientations. The severity of risk is likely greater where the possibility exists for formulation variation appropriate to special problems.

### Positionings Responsive to Classes 6-7

Among specific positionings, conflict resolution and frustration satisfaction may be minimally restrictive in terms of breadth of appeal. At least two motivating elements are present in each case. When the positioning mentions one only, it leaves the other open to the consumer's construction.

As noted, conflict resolution positionings respond to consumer perceptions of a product-related problem, by stressing absence of the aversive characteristic. In this case, consumers are not in the market only to avoid a product problem; another motivating element necessarily exists to prompt product purchase in the first place. An aspirin positioning built solely on the claim, "gentle to the stomach," leaves ambiguous the consumer's reason for taking aspirin—for example, whether for severe pain (problem solution), to feel relaxed in a social situation (problem prevention), or for occasional minor headaches (stable state maintenance).

A positioning explicitly responsive to consumer frustration with available brands may omit reference to the motivation that has not been satisfied and may, on this account, be open to a variety of constructions. A brand of fruit drink that claims "like none you've ever tasted" may well be responding to dissatisfaction with existing brands, but leaves unstated the consumer's reason for buying and using fruit drink in the first place—for example, whether for thirst (problem solution), to show good mothering (problem prevention), as an item routinely kept on hand (stable state maintenance), for interest and variety (exploratory interest), or for good taste (sensory enjoyment). More substantial responses to consumer frustration include positionings that challenge existing brands with a superiority claim tied to formulation change, or that are targeted against hitherto neglected want classes, or that involve new product development. In these cases, the positioning is likely to be directed explicitly to one of the other motivation classes.

### More Than One Explicit Target

The question arises: To what extent is it possible to position explicitly against more than one consumer want class? As an example of multiple explicit positioning, consider the mother-daughter dialogue in a cottage cheese commercial. The daughter offers her mother a health-food of questionable good flavor, and expects that her mother is going to reject it in

favor of "something artificial" (problem solution). In fact, mother is just about to enjoy this "natural and delicious brand" (sensory enjoyment), *Breakstone*, which comes in six varieties (exploratory interest). And, the daughter can't wait to tell her friends her mother is a health-food freak (problem prevention). This short dialogue taps a wide variety of consumer perceptions, from belief-thwarting prevalence of highly processed food, through sensory enjoyment, to exploratory interest and social concerns.

Multiple explicit positioning offers a means of attempting to circumvent the reduced breadth of appeal attendant on explicit positioning against one motivation class. Communication clarity and credibility set the limits to the effectiveness of this positioning option and, in individual cases, may be evaluated through research and compared systematically with other options already described.

## Dynamic Considerations

The marketing concept is unambiguous in its focus on consumer wants as the producer's point of departure. At the core of marketing thinking and practice, this insistence on the direction of influence, from consumer to producer, is sharply at variance with a view of marketing as manipulator of consumer wants. Within an operating framework where the marketer's task is to respond to consumer wants, the primary focus for marketing strategy is the consumer's perception of brands. As marketers are aware, establishing or modifying brand image is accomplished more readily than increasing market share. A key decision for marketers is their selection of one subset, from among the range of tangible and intangible product characteristics, to build into a brand and to communicate to consumers, knowing that consumers make their purchase choices in the context of their perceptions of the product-use situation and of other available brands.

Crawford has noted that many commentators mention the absence of meaningful product differences as the predominant reason for new product failure.<sup>12</sup> *Meaningful difference*, rather than product differentiation for its own sake, seems to be the key; and the criterion of meaningfulness is consumer want satisfaction.

### Marketing Coordination

One cannot fail to appreciate the creative ingenuity with which marketing communicators have grappled with the complexity and variety of consumer wants, and at the same time note the inadequacy of the conceptual tools available to guide marketing's direction and evaluation of the entire process of consumer want identification and satisfaction. My present theoretical framework will, doubtless, be modified with

increasing understanding of consumer wants and responses to marketing action. It has been presented as illustrative of the broad outline of an integrating framework for a variety of marketing and consumer behavior concepts, as well as for various facets of marketing's coordination of the firm's resources and specialized activities in response to consumer wants.

A statement of consumer motivations, in a form applicable to any good or service, provides the basis for systematic want identification, and positioning idea-generation. A statement of alternative positioning options provides the basis for marketing's guidance of advertising, on the one hand, and of R&D product development, on the other; and it facilitates the ability of research to evaluate marketing communications and to suggest conceptually-based modifications.

### Social Responsibility

The marketing concept has been criticized on grounds of unresponsiveness to societal concerns, and its replacement by social accountability has been

suggested.<sup>13</sup> When the idea underlying the marketing concept is articulated through a broad range of consumer wants, it becomes apparent that the marketing concept is not intrinsically unresponsive to societal concerns. To the contrary, it is to be expected that issues of public concern will manifest themselves and influence marketing management through the usual process of consumer research. To the extent that there exists consumer concern, for example, over the adverse ecological impact of detergents, it is communicated to marketing management as perceptions of product-related problems.

It is not to be expected that we will lightly forsake the essentially democratic values underlying the marketing concept. "Don't sell what you happen to make; make what the consumer wants," should still be an acceptable marketing philosophy so long as consumers—along with the institutions in society that stand as protectors of the present generation and as surrogates for the generations of the future—have the opportunity to influence marketing management.

### ENDNOTES

1. N. S. Endler and D. Magnusson, "Toward an Interactional Psychology of Personality," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 83, (September 1976), pp. 956-74.
2. A. W. Wicker, "Attitudes versus Actions: The Relationship of Verbal and Overt Behavioral Responses to Attitude Objects," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 25, (Autumn 1969), pp. 41-78.
3. R. H. Moos, "Systems for the Assessment and Classification of Human Environments: An Overview," in R. H. Moos and P. M. Insel, eds., *Issues in Social Ecology: Human Milieus* (Palo Alto, California: National Book Press, 1974).
4. R. G. Barker and A. W. Wicker, "Commentaries on Belk, 'Situational Variables and Consumer Behavior,'" *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2, (December 1975), pp. 165-67; R. W. Belk, "Situational Variables and Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2, (December 1975), pp. 157-64; N. S. Endler and D. Magnusson, same as reference 2 above; P. K. Kakkar and R. J. Luiz, "Toward a Taxonomy of Consumption Situations," Working Paper Series, Los Angeles: University of California, Center for Marketing Studies, (March 1975); J. A. Russell and A. Mehrabian, "Environmental Variables in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 3, (June 1976), pp. 62-63.
5. See, for example, S. B. Sells, "Dimensions of Stimulus Situations which Account for Behavior Variance," in S. B. Sells, ed. *Stimulus Determinants of Behavior* (New York: Ronald Press, 1963).
6. For a review of person variables see W. J. McGuire, "Some Internal Psychological Factors Influencing Consumer Choice," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 2, (March 1976), pp. 302-19.
7. The seven motivation classes are modeled on the experimental arrangements for studying motivation and learning in the psychology laboratory, cf. G. Fennell, "Motivation Research Revisited," *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 15, (June 1975), pp. 23-28. Classes 4 and 5, here, were treated together as #5, in the earlier paper; Class 6, here, corresponds to the previous #4; Class 7 is new. Class 5 is based on the experimental use of nonnutritive, taste-appealing, substances such as saccharin, and of cues for sexual activity, and Class 7 is based on the experimental study of frustration. See, for example, C. N. Cofer and M. H. Appley, *Motivation: Theory and Research* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1964).
8. In the interest of simplicity, the issue of family member influence on the purchasing agent's brand choice is not considered here. The seven perceptions of the product-use situation represent alternative personal perspectives of a buyer-user. Many consumer purchases involve products bought for the sole use of other family members, or for shared use by the buyer and others. In addition to direct and indirect influence on the purchasing agent by other family members, the special case of empathy is noted. In the present view, empathy entails a buyer's intuiting the user's perception of the product-use situation, and acting as though the user's perception were one's own.
9. T. S. Robertson, "Low Commitment Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 16, (April 1976), pp. 19-24.
10. See, for example, N. K. Dhalla and W. H. Mahatoo, "Expanding the Scope of Segmentation Research," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40 No. 2, (April 1976), pp. 34-41; J. Pernica, "The Second Generation of Market Segmentation Studies: An Audit of Buying Motivations," and R. Ziff, "The Role of Psychographics in the Development of Advertising Strategy," in W. D. Wells, ed. *Life Style and Psychographics* (Chicago: American Marketing Association 1974); S. Young, "Psychographics: Are They Relevant to Marketing?" (paper presented at AMA Third Attitude Research Conference, Mexico City, 1970).
11. Marketers rightly inveigh against desk analysis of advertising claims as a substitute for determining consumers' reactions through research. The objection is grounded in the psychological reality that any communication is subject to the personal and sometimes idiosyncratic interpretation of the recipient. At the same time, positioning statements may legitimately be analyzed to determine brand management's intended positioning strategy. It becomes, then, a matter for research to check the extent to which consumers' interpretations reflect the positioning as intended.
12. C. Merle Crawford, "Marketing Research and the New Product Failure Rate," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 41 No. 2, (April 1977), pp. 51-61, at page 52.
13. See J. R. Maggard, "Positioning Revisited," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40 No. 1, (January 1976), pp. 65-66, for a summary of some of these views.