Quick Choices as Targetable Units of the Consumer Decision Process

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QUICK CHOICES AS TARGETABLE UNITS OF THE CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Dividing the consumer's decision process into smaller units enables the design of marketing programs that target one or more of these units. It is proposed here that quick choices—yes-no decisions concerning whether or not to enact an initiating idea—are decision-process units that correspond more closely than previous systems of units to the form of natural decision making. Because these units have a simple common structure, they can be easily conceptualized and used. At the same time, a diversity of types of quick choices can be described, thus enabling the marketer to use a more detailed analysis of the consumer decision process.

At its best, being consumer-oriented involves more than determining which product attributes the consumer values. It involves considering...
the process by which the consumer makes the decision. This decision process rarely occurs entirely at one occasion, but rather develops over some period of time (Dickson & Wilkie 1978; Pratt 1965). The manager who can adapt marketing efforts so as to be able to appeal particularly to each relevant piece of the developing decision will have the edge over competitors who ignore the process aspect of consumer decisions.

The key to successfully adapting to the consumer decision process is to be able to divide it into a set of useful units, and then to design a marketing program that targets the one or more of these units that are likely to be most critical to the outcome of the consumer’s decision. Such “decision-process segmentation” could be considered to be a form of situation segmentation: a particular person may be in several different segments, though not all at the same time. It also shares with situation segmentation the tendency to be a neglected form of market segmentation (Dickson 1982). An ideal system of decision-process segmentation would divide the decision process into units that (1) involve separate mental processes, (2) have the same general form in all types of decisions, and (3) have a general form that is well enough understood so that a marketing program particularly suited to one or more of these units can be designed.

After reviewing several previous systems for segmenting the consumer decision process, this paper proposes that the consumer decision process is comprised of a series of simple yes-no decisions termed quick choices, and that these can serve as useful units for decision-process segmentation. An explicit model of the structure and functioning of a quick choice is described and then evaluated in the context of current decision-process theory and research. In the last section, two general approaches to influencing a quick choice are discussed and examples are presented of how current and potential promotional techniques could be viewed in terms of quick-choice units.

PREVIOUS SYSTEMS FOR SEGMENTING THE CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS

The Hierarchy of Effects

Efforts by marketers to divide the consumer decision process into a set of useful units can be traced back almost 100 years (Barry 1987). Strong (1925) distilled these early units into four stages of the consumer
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decision process: awareness, interest, desire, and action (often referred to by the acronym AIDA). Later termed the “hierarchy of effects” (Palda 1966), this system of decision-process units contained insights that encouraged the salesperson to appeal to the customer in a way that is appropriate for the customer’s current state of mind. For example, viewing the consumer decision process in terms of these units tells the salesperson that there is little point to asking for the order before the customer is feeling some enthusiasm for the product. Thus, it may be appropriate for the salesperson to pay particular attention to the task of stimulating such enthusiasm (Sheldon 1911).

Later, this system of decision-process units that was developed for personal selling was applied to advertising (e.g., Lavidge & Steiner 1961). As with personal selling, these units were used in advertising to guide the design of targeted appeals. In addition, the hierarchy-of-effects units were applied to the task of evaluating advertising results (Colley 1961). For example, with this view of the decision process, an ad campaign that did not result in an immediate sales increase could be considered effective if it was shown to have been successful in bringing customers to the next stage in the hierarchy, say, from awareness to interest.

Recently, the influence of the AIDA units has suffered somewhat of a decline. One cause of this decline is work by Krugman (1965) and Ray et al. (1973) that has questioned whether the order of the hierarchy’s four stages is as constant as previously thought. These authors have pointed out that in some situations consumers may learn about a product first, then act, and only afterwards develop feelings about the product. At other times consumers may act first, then create thoughts and feelings to be consistent with their behavior. Although Krugman, Ray, and others have produced specific hypotheses about when each sequence was likely to occur, their work has diminished the usefulness of the AIDA system of units because it weakened the clear implications concerning how each unit should be influenced in order to cause an eventual sales increase.

If the order of the AIDA units is variable, then what remains of the original hierarchy of effects is the units themselves. But even here, the situation has changed. In order to emphasize the common elements of the variety of hierarchy-of-effects models that had been proposed, more general terms came into use. Awareness came to be referred to as “cognition” and interest and desire as “affect” (e.g., Kotler 1988, 595).
However, what the use of these general terms gives up is the intuitive clarity of the AIDA units and the plausibility that they are independently targetable. Thus, it seems that subsequent work has not enabled marketers to go beyond the original insights behind the hierarchy of effects.

Targetable Units in Recent Decision Models

As the influence of the hierarchy-of-effects view has declined, the most influential conceptions of the consumer decision process that have replaced it do not seem to have been designed to provide independently targetable decision-process units. For example, the decision rules, such as compensatory, lexicographic, etc., are often used to describe consumer decision processes (e.g., Wright 1975). However, these rules seem closer to abstract models of evaluation processes than to a system of units that can be combined to comprise a decision process. The decision-process units implicit in these common decision rules would be something like comparisons of a single feature of a single alternative with that of another alternative or with some standard. Although such units have been considered (Shugan 1980), they have not been thoroughly explored nor have they been widely applied.

Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1968) developed an influential five-stage model of the consumer decision process (the “EKB model”) from the much earlier work of John Dewey (1910). Their stages—problem recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, choice, and postpurchase evaluation—suffer many of the problems of modern hierarchy-of-effects models. The stages will not necessarily occur in the above order (Engel & Blackwell 1982), a single stage may take an almost endless variety of forms (e.g., information search), and it is not even clear that each of these five stages are wholly separate (e.g., information search and alternative evaluation may be thoroughly interleaved). Thus, as a system of decision-process units, the EKB stages appear to be of limited value.

Distributing Choice Throughout the Decision Process

On the other hand, other recent conceptions of the decision process make some intriguing suggestions relevant to the issue of how the decision process should be divided. Wilkie and Dickson (1985) have
proposed that consumer decision making can be viewed as consisting of cycles (at least one group of researchers in managerial decision making have also proposed cycles as units of the decision process [Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret 1976]). In Wilkie and Dickson’s view, the consumer shops a bit, then decides, “What is the next step?,” and then continues to alternately shop and make the what-next decision until an item is selected or the purchase is abandoned or postponed. These shop-then-decide-what-next cycles are plausible units of at least certain types of consumer decisions (e.g., high-involvement decisions), and contrast to the units of the EKB model in an important way. In the EKB model, the actual choice occurs in only one stage. But in Wilkie and Dickson’s view, each unit of the decision process involves some choice; their model suggests that decision making is distributed over the entire course of the decision process.

On the basis of a detailed analysis of several real-life consumer decisions, Bettman (1973; 1971) proposed that consumer decisions could be conceptualized as decision nets. The unit of a decision net was the “binary test,” or question with a yes-or-no answer such as, “Is this product class high risk?” or, “Is the cheapest brand good enough?” Bettman’s view goes much further than Wilkie and Dickson’s in suggesting that choice is distributed through the consumer decision process; in his system, the decision process appears to consist of nothing but a series of choices. Moreover, the fact that these choices can be characterized so simply (by a one-sentence yes-no question) suggests that they may be governed by a small set of principles which could facilitate the development of techniques to influence all such units.

However, it may well be that this simplicity of characterization does not indicate decision-process units of a general and well-understood form. Bettman’s units appear to be based more on a logical analysis of the decisions than attention to the mental processes involved. For example, one of Bettman’s respondents saw eggs in the supermarket and may have said something like, “Here are the eggs.” Bettman’s analysis considered this a binary test in the decision net, characterized by the question, “Is this eggs?” While it is logically necessary that the long, narrow containers are identified as holding eggs, this determination is most likely part of perceptual processing and is rapid and unconscious. Such processes are very different than the relatively slow, conscious, and deliberate processes that are likely to be involved in
binary tests such as, "Is this too much to pay?" The techniques for influencing units that can be as different as perception is from conscious judgment are likely to be so diverse and complex as to result in the units having only limited usefulness as decision-process segments.

THE OBSERVATION OF CRITICAL QUICK CHOICES IN NATURALLY-OCcurring CONSUMER DECISIONS

There appears to be some agreement that if naturally-occurring consumer decisions are carefully observed, it will be noticed that they tend to consist of a sequence of smaller decisions. As mentioned above, Wilkie and Dickson, Bettman, and others have made such an observation. Barbara Hayes-Roth (1982) published a description of her own decision process for the purchase of a set of china and divided it into units such that each consisted of a smaller choice. In analyzing a number of decision-process stories collected from consumers, I have also found that they are naturally describable in terms of units consisting of smaller choices. For example, one consumer described her decision process for the purchase of a camera as follows:

My daughter's birthday was coming up and she had asked for a camera, so I decided to get her one. I was looking through the paper when I saw an ad from K-Mart for the Snappy-S automatic camera for $49.95. I thought this camera would not be too complicated for my daughter to operate, but would still take better pictures than the cheapest box camera. And the price seemed reasonable. But before going down to get it, I asked my brother (who knows a lot about cameras) if that would really be a good camera for Jennifer. He said it would be fine. So next time I was in K-Mart, I asked for it, but the clerk said they were out of stock. He suggested that I buy the Snappy-50 instead. It had a few more features, but cost $20 more. I said that I didn't need those extra features and felt that they were trying to "bait and switch" me. So I went to the store manager and complained. He said all he could do was give me a rain check that would entitle me to the special price on the Snappy-S when it comes in. But I knew I couldn't wait because my daughter's birthday was two days away, so I left. On my way home, I passed a Walgreen's, so I stopped to pick up a few things. While waiting on line, I noticed they had the Snappy-50 on sale. It was $10 more than I had wanted to spend, but it was $10 cheaper than the Snappy-50 I saw at K-Mart, so I decided to get it. I was glad to get that purchase out of the way, and, by the way, Jennifer was thrilled with her present.

This decision process could be analyzed into the following set of smaller choices:
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1. Should I get her a camera?
2. Should I get the one in this ad?
3. Should I ask my brother if this is the right camera to buy?
4. After hearing what my brother said, do I need to get further information?
5. Is now a good time to actually make the purchase?
6. Should I change my plans and buy the Snappy-50?
7. Should I complain?
8. Should I take the raincheck?
9. Should I stop at Walgreen’s?
10. Should I buy the Snappy-50 at Walgreen’s?

These choices are smaller than the whole decision, but necessarily so because they are components of the whole decision. While it is quite plausible that the respondent made each of these choices consciously, one could claim the same for the whole decision. What these component choices share with each other, but not with the whole decision is that they were probably all made quickly (i.e., in less than three seconds). Thus, these components of the consumer decision process will be termed quick choices.

Characteristics of Quick Choices

One characteristic of the quick choices that are observed is that, to a large degree, they appear to occur as separate mental processes. If it were the case that each quick choice occurred according to the implementation of a single overall plan, then it could be argued that each quick choice would be part of the same mental process. Rather, it seems that the relations between the quick choices are mainly due to the structure of the environment (e.g., because the respondent decided to complain, a stimulus in her environment caused her to make a quick choice of whether to accept the raincheck) or to the mediation of long-term memory (stored information that she had decided to get her daughter a camera resulted in the K-Mart ad initiating a quick choice). Although the decision process is goal-directed, it appears to be only loosely so; in general, consumer behavior appears governed as much by “drift” as by plans.

A second characteristic is the observation that not all of these quick choices are equally critical to the outcome of the decision process. If we are in the position of the manufacturer concerned with the respondent’s
decision to purchase the Snappy-50, quick choices #1, #2, #3, #4, #6, and #10 are probably more critical than the others. This is so because if the outcome of any of these quick choices had been different, the likelihood of the eventual purchase of the Snappy-50 would have been substantially affected.

A third quick-choice characteristic apparent in this set of examples is that it appears most natural for respondents to express quick choices as questions that have yes-no answers and that concern single decision alternatives. For example, the respondent does not ask, “Should I get camera A or camera B?” but rather, “Should I get the one in the ad?”

A fourth commonly observed aspect of quick choices is that there is usually some identifiable stimulus in either the respondent's mind or the immediate environment that serves as an initiator of the quick choice. For example, recalling Jennifer's birthday request must have initiated quick choice #1, seeing the ad probably initiated quick choice #2, and seeing cameras displayed in K-Mart may have initiated quick choice #5. Although respondents do not explicitly mention the initiating stimulus for most quick choices (e.g., #1 and #5), those are the situations when common sense strongly suggests a likely possibility. Often, when a likely initiating stimulus is not obvious (e.g., #2), the respondent will make explicit mention of one in the story.

A fifth commonly observed aspect of quick choices illustrated by these examples is that the process of answering the yes-no question appears to be determined by the rapid sequence of a small number of conscious thoughts. For example, the outcome of quick choice #2 appeared to result from consideration of the following three thoughts:

1. This camera would not be too complicated for my daughter to operate.
2. It would take better pictures than the cheapest box camera.
3. The price seemed reasonable.

Such an array of thoughts that occur in consciousness at the time of a quick choice will from here on be referred to as choice time thoughts. If we allow the introspection that there is at least a moment when these conscious thoughts act in concert, then they must be occurring within the three-second period during which our mental processes can integrate sequential events (Poppel 1988, 54). Further, our observation
that respondents rarely report more than seven such thoughts fits well with Miller's (1956) evidence that human processing capacity is limited to approximately seven items, or “chunks.”

Model of a Quick Choice

The results of the analysis of the decision-process stories of our respondents can be summarized in a formal definition of a quick choice and five hypotheses concerning the characteristics of these units of the consumer decision process. The definition of a quick choice is as follows:

A quick choice is the resolution of a possible mental or behavioral action that occurs within three seconds and is accompanied by one or more choicetime thoughts.

This definition serves to exclude mental or behavioral actions that are automatic, habitual, or whose enactment is, for whatever reason, accompanied by no conscious deliberation. The five hypothesized quick-choice characteristics are as follows:

1. The mental processes of each quick choice are separate from those of the other quick choices. Interrelations between the component quick choices of a decision are mediated by the environment or long-term memory.
2. Some quick choices are more critical to the outcome of the decision than others.
3. Quick choices usually concern yes-or-no consideration of a single decision alternative.
4. The initiator of a quick choice is a stimulus that is perceived from the environment or an idea that is retrieved from memory. This initiator is a potential mental or behavioral action that will become enacted if the outcome of the quick choice is positive.
5. There are rarely more than seven choicetime thoughts and these are causally related to the outcome of the quick choice.

The key elements of the structure of a quick choice are illustrated in Figure 1. In this viewpoint, quick choices have this same general form in all types of consumer decisions. For example, the quick choices in a high-involvement decision would have the same general form as the
quick choices of a low-involvement consumer decision; the two types of consumer decisions would differ only in the number of quick-choice units they contain. Types of quick choices can be distinguished on the basis of the type of possible action being considered (e.g., decision-control quick choices vs. data-collection quick choices) or on the basis
of the types of choicetime thoughts that are likely to occur during the quick choice (e.g., ego-expressive vs. utilitarian considerations).

If the nature and form of actual quick choices are similar to the model, then the analysis of a consumer decision into its component quick choices would serve as a useful system of decision-process units. In the model, quick-choice units involve separate mental processes, have a common general form, and are well-specified enough to make marketing influence possible. Approaches to influencing a targeted quick choice will be considered in more detail below.

A Taxonomy of Quick Choices

If a quick choice is characterized by the possible action being considered, then there is clearly an unlimited number of particular quick choices. To communicate information about quick choices and to facilitate their use in marketing, a taxonomy of quick choices in the consumer decision process is required. The tentative taxonomy offered here proposes four levels of classification.

The lowest level is the actual question that the consumer asks. Thus, in quick choice #1 in the example, the actual question would be, “Should I get her a camera?” The second level would be the specific quick choice (or quick-choice “species”), which is the action specified in the quick-choice question phrased in more general terms. Thus, quick choice #1 would be considered an instance of the “Buy camera now?” species of quick choice. This is the level of categorization that would probably be most often used by marketing practitioners. The third level of categorization is the generic quick choice (or quick-choice “genus”), which is the specific quick choice without the specification of the time, product, store, person, etc. For example, quick choice #1 would be an instance of the generic quick choice, “Buy this item?” This level of categorization would probably be most useful to more basic, academic, consumer behavior research. Finally, a fourth level of categorization groups the generic-quick choices into several broad quick-choice families based on what they accomplish in the decision process.

A tentative listing of generic quick choices can be seen in the Appendix. It includes 36 generic quick choices categorized into four families. The data for this listing come from two sources. One is the analyses of 23 detailed decision-process stories obtained from consumer interviews. The other is published studies of consumer information search (Beany &
RELATIONS OF QUICK-CHOICE CHARACTERISTICS TO CURRENT THEORY

In this section, each of the five hypothesized characteristics of quick choices will be considered in the context of current research and theory.

Plans vs. Drift in Consumer Behavior

If quick choices are to be useful segments of the consumer decision process, it is necessary to argue that they are likely to be sufficiently independent of each other to be separately targetable. This question brings up the issue of whether consumer behavior is usually controlled by a central plan, or whether the consumer is often "winging it" and responding to the stimuli in his/her immediate environment. If planning predominates, then the quick choices that are made during the execution of the plan are certainly not independent; in fact, if planning predominates, then plans, not quick choices, would be the more useful decision-process units. Quick-choice units are appropriate only to the extent that consumer behavior is not governed by plans, but is "opportunistic" (Hayes-Roth 1982).

While no one denies that plans are sometimes followed, there is evidence that the incidence of planned consumer behavior might be quite limited. A number of studies have found that over half of the purchases made in a wide variety of stores were not planned before the consumer entered the store (Bellenger, Robertson, & Hirschman 1978; Kollat & Willett 1967; Wilkie 1994, p. 520). More important decisions are also likely to be unplanned. Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) reviewed the literature on the consumer's allocation of resources and concluded that fewer than one-third of the consumers surveyed showed any evidence of planning in their decisions of how much money to save or in their decisions of how much money to allocate to various product categories. Park (1982) characterized the home buying decision process as "muddling through." Stewart and Punj (1983) found that one-third of automobile purchasers selected a car that deviated from their original
size preferences and 63 percent selected a car that deviated from their original price constraints.

Consumers also provide evidence for unplanned aspects of decision making even under laboratory conditions, where they might be expected to apply more effort than they normally would to appearing rational and organized. Hayes-Roth and Hayes-Roth (1979) analyzed subjects' verbal protocols as the subjects described how they would progress through a simulated shopping environment. Their data contained more evidence for opportunistic actions than for behavior guided by logical and systematic plans. Payne, Bettman, and Johnson (1993) review a considerable body of laboratory research suggesting that consumers often change strategies and restructure information during a decision process as the earlier components of the process reveal new understandings or preferences.

What Makes Some Quick Choices Critical?

It is probably the case that many, if not most, consumer decisions are comprised of dozens of quick-choice units. Only a very small number of these can be targeted. For a quick-choice analysis to be useful, it must be argued that it is possible that such a small piece of a much larger whole can in fact be critical. In other words, can a single quick choice have a profound effect on the overall decision process?

Observers of human behavior have long marveled at the power of fortuitous circumstances to influence the course of individual lives, and perhaps even the course of history (e.g., Gould 1989, 283-8). Being in the right (wrong) place at the right (wrong) time can have extremely long-term effects. Who has not, at some time, traced important consequences back to tiny precipitating events. A person might reflect, "If I had not gone along with my friend to that party, I never would have met the person I've been married to now for 30 years." Or, "If he hadn't tried to take that short-cut, he never would have gotten into that horrible accident." The point is, such small events reflect the outcome of quick choices, and are illustrations of the power that quick choices could have over larger outcomes.

A quick choice concerning how to choose could not only affect the decision at hand, but it could initiate habits that would also influence subsequent decisions in the product category. If it occurs early in the decision process, a single quick choice about what feature to look
for, how much to spend, or where to shop could easily result in many or even most alternatives getting no consideration at all. And, although it is certainly possible that an alternative eliminated by an early quick choice may return as the result of a later quick choice, the tendency of consumers to toward only limited information search (Olshavsky & Granbois 1979) will cause the negative early quick choice to at very least be able to result in a strong bias against the eliminated alternatives.

Although the criticality of a particular quick choice will depend on both marketing purposes and market research data, there are some generic quick choices that are more likely than others to be critical to the outcome of the decision process. Many of these have been studied extensively, although not explicitly in the context of decision-process segmentation. One such quick choice that has received a great deal of research attention is the Search-this-outlet? quick choice (Hansen & Deutscher 1977-1978; Lindquist 1974-1975). For example, Rich and Portis' (1964) study of the dimensions of the department store image could be considered research on the choicetime thoughts that are likely to occur when the Search-this-outlet? quick choice occurs during clothing purchase decisions.

The Search-further? quick choice is another quick choice that is likely to be critical and has thus been the object of investigation (e.g., Beatty & Smith 1987; Duncan & Olshavsky 1982). Also, Bettman and Sujan's (1987) study of problem framing and Hutchinson and Alba's (1991) study of the acquisition of product-related concepts could be considered to bear on the Judge-this-attribute-important? quick choice. Rosen and Olshavsky's (1987) study of word-of-mouth information is relevant to the Accept-this-suggestion? quick choice, and the many studies on the use of price and other factors to judge quality (e.g., Monroe & Krishnan 1985; Wheatley & Chiu 1977) could be considered research on the Judge-item-acceptable-on-this-attribute? quick choice. Viewing these studies in this way illustrates the power of the quick-choice viewpoint to serve as an integrative framework for apparently disparate research areas and also indicates that research on many of the most important quick choices is already well under way.

One-At-A-Time Consideration of Alternatives

The hypothesis that most quick choices concern yes-or-no consideration of a single decision alternative is consistent with Kahneman and
Tversky's (1984) suggestion that human decisions are commonly framed as a consideration of a possibility with the status quo as the alternative. The quick choice may directly concern the purchase of the single decision alternative or may concern such actions as judging an attribute of the alternative acceptable, asking someone about the alternative, or postponing a decision on the alternative. Whatever the potential action, the hypothesis is that quick choices most often concern some aspect of the one-at-a-time consideration of an alternative in the overall decision.

Empirical studies of decision processes have been somewhat mixed on this question. However, most of the studies that have observed substantial consideration of several response alternatives at a time (e.g., evaluating all alternatives on a single attribute) have used laboratory methods where subjects were given an array of information organized into an attribute-by-brand matrix (e.g., Bettman & Park 1980; Biehal & Chakravarti 1986). When real-life decisions are observed in the field, such as those of supermarket shoppers (Park, Iyer, & Smith 1989; Payne & Ragsdale 1978) or of business managers (Peters 1979), the predominance of one-at-a-time consideration of alternatives appears.

If it is the case that in natural situations consumers favor considering alternatives singly as opposed to simultaneously comparing more than one alternative, it is probably because making the tradeoffs necessary for simultaneous comparison involves a greater amount of effort. In laboratory studies, it has been found that subjects are more likely to consider alternatives singly as the number of alternatives involved in the decision (i.e., the effort required) increases (Payne 1976).

The Initiation of a Quick Choice

There are two general approaches to conceptualizing the process by which a perceived stimulus or a recalled idea may initiate a quick choice. The first is the scanner-and-interrupt approach (Bettman 1979; Simon 1967). This view supposes that behavior is controlled by a goal hierarchy, or central plan, but that there is a mechanism that is constantly scanning the environment for conditions that may require changes in current activities. When the scanner does find such a condition, it causes an "interrupt." The result of the interrupt could be an automatic response, or could be the initiation of a quick choice that would result in the person suspending or restructuring the goal hierarchy.
The second view, which could be called the incipient-action approach, has its roots at least as far back as certain early stimulus-response psychologists (e.g., Adams 1916, 282-6). This view holds that every idea that enters awareness is an incipient action that carries some motive force toward developing into an explicit action (much as the stimulus part of a reflex arc provides the motivational force for the response part). A cognitive structure plays the role of filter, allowing ideas that fit with current activities and beliefs to become actions and blocking and absorbing the motive force of the rest. When the filtering function of a cognitive structure is impaired, say by alcoholic intoxication, it is commonly observed that thoughts show a greater likelihood of becoming actions. Children, whose cognitive structures may not be fully developed, tend to behave impulsively or "act out" their thoughts. Consistent with this is the finding that young children are more likely than older children to choose a brand in response to the suggestion of an advertisement (John & Lakshmi-Ratan 1992; Roedder, Sternthal, & Calder 1983).

An incipient action that comes to consciousness may be allowed to pass through the cognitive structure (as with a routine or habitual action) or may be completely blocked by this structure (as with an action rejected by blanket rule). When an idea is neither allowed to pass nor completely blocked, it lodges momentarily in consciousness and initiates a quick choice to resolve its fate. The idea occupying the focus of attention then becomes the yes-no question of the quick choice, and the choicetime thoughts are related ideas that either allow the initiating idea to pass through the cognitive structure or help dissipate the pressure of its motive force. Although there are likely to be many ways that choicetime thoughts can combine to result in a choice, one such means may be as simple as a comparison of the number of thoughts for and the number against the enactment of the initiating idea (Alba & Marmorstein 1987).

An advantage of the incipient-action view of quick-choice initiation is that it makes a clear statement about the relationship between an initiating idea and the particular quick choice which that idea may initiate. The explicit action that is incipient in the initiating idea becomes the subject of the yes-no quick choice which that idea initiates. This action can be a mental activity (e.g., making a judgment or changing a priority) as well as a physical one. The action may involve a decision alternative (e.g., a brand that could be purchased), but it could also involve any element that is dealt with during the decision process (e.g., an ad, a store, or a piece of information).
Because an incipient action that reaches consciousness would be enacted unless blocked, the incipient-action view of quick-choice initiation suggests that judgment and choice would tend to be biased toward elements that are salient in memory or in the environment. Such salience effects have often been found, for example, concerning judgments of causality (Taylor and Fiske 1978), acceptance of advertising claims (Deighton 1984; Deighton & Schindler 1988), and the outcome of low-involvement choice (Nedungadi 1990; Schindler, Berbaum, & Weinheimer 1987). Although such evidence in itself does not rule out the scanner-and-interrupt approach as a means of conceptualizing the initiation of a quick choice, it does support the viability of incorporating the incipient-action viewpoint into the present model.

Choicetime Thoughts as Causal Factors

The fifth hypothesized characteristic of quick choices is that choicetime thoughts are causally related to the outcome of the quick choice, as opposed to being mere concomitants of some other process that determines the outcome. In other words, the hypothesis is that choicetime thoughts mediate the outcome of the quick choice. If they do mediate the quick-choice outcome, then attempts to influence quick choices can focus on the task of influencing the choicetime thoughts. If they are merely concomitants of the choice process, then the influenceability of the quick choice, and thus the usefulness of the quick choices as targetable segments of the decision process, would depend on the development of a theory of what does determine the outcome of the choice.

Broadly, there are three lines of evidence that support a causal role for choicetime thoughts, and one line of evidence that appears to contradict such a role. The first line of evidence in favor of a causal role for choicetime thoughts is the literature on a consumer's “cognitive responses” to advertising (Greenwald 1968; Wright 1980). In the quick-choice framework, the cognitive responses to an ad can be considered choicetime thoughts to the quick choice(s) that are elicited by the ad (e.g., the ad might elicit the Believe-this-information? or the Search-further? quick choices). Measures of persuasiveness of the ad or acceptance of the ad's message could be considered measures of the outcomes of these ad-elicted quick choices.

Over the years, cognitive response research has been able to amass a fair amount of evidence for the mediating role of cognitive responses in
the acceptance of the advertised message. Correlational studies have shown that the number of negative and positive cognitive responses is strongly related to whether or not a consumer shows evidence of being persuaded by the ad (e.g., Hastak & Olson 1989; Olson, Toy, & Dover 1982; Wright 1973). Also, factors that directly affect the occurrence of either negative or positive cognitive responses (such as distraction or low source credibility among those initially favoring a message) have been shown to have corresponding effects on the degree of acceptance of the ad's message (Petty & Brock 1981; Sternthal, Dholakia, & Leavitt 1978).

The second line of evidence for the causal role of choicetime thoughts is the demonstration that evoked information can be more important than "standing attitudes" in the control of behavior. This phenomenon can be illustrated by some examples from everyday life. An overweight person might strongly believe that eating sweets is bad for him and yet still say "yes" when the waiter asks if he would like dessert. A church-goer who sincerely believes in all the "love thy neighbor" structures might still choose to spread malicious gossip. A young woman might express fervently her priorities in choosing a husband and then become engaged to a man who has none of these qualities. The beliefs and priorities that comprise the standing attitudes seem often to be overruled by considerations that are evoked by the specific situations. In the example of the overweight man, thoughts representing his standing knowledge of the undesirable consequences of having dessert are not evoked into his consciousness at the moment the quick choice concerning the dessert must be made. Apparently, the thoughts that are evoked lead to a different choice outcome (see Weinberg 1981, 124).

Systematic research on this issue of attitude-behavior consistency is difficult since, as one would imagine from the examples above, respondents will tend to be more consistent when they know they are being observed. However, even so, research has found that agreement between consumer attitudes and behavior is limited (Smith & Swinyard 1983; Wicker 1969). Moreover, even agreement between the same person's attitude or preference when measured in different situations is limited (Fischhoff, Slovic, Lichtenstein 1980).

Inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior or between attitudes measured in differing situations are consistent with the possibility that choicetime thoughts evoked by the immediate environment play a causal role in the outcome of quick choices, but are not in themselves strong evidence. However, research on the effects of information acces-
sibility on quick choices provides some more direct support (e.g., Berger & Mitchell 1989; Fazio, Powell, & Williams 1989; Kisielius & Sternthal 1984; Srull & Wyer 1979). In the typical accessibility study, a manipulation is used that would not in itself be expected to affect a judgment (or a quick choice) but that would make certain words or ideas (i.e., choicetime thoughts) more likely to be evoked into consciousness. For example, Hoch (1984) asked subjects to report first either the reasons for or the reasons against buying a VCR. The reasons reported first would be rehearsed longer and thus would be expected to be more likely to be evoked during a later quick choice than the reasons reported second. As predicted, in a subsequent quick choice, the subjects who first reported the reasons for buying the VCR were more likely to judge that they were going to buy one in the next year than the subjects who first reported the reasons against buying one.

The third line of evidence for the causal role of choicetime thoughts is the demonstration that the superficial structure of a question or problem can strongly affect the response even if the objective values in the question or problem are held constant (Kahneman & Tversky 1984; Levin & Gaeth 1988; Maheswaran & Myers-Levy 1990; Thaler 1985). In a classic example of such a framing effect, doctors were found to be more likely to choose a treatment when that treatment was described as resulting in one-third of the people being saved than when it was described as resulting in two-thirds of the people dying (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). The objective outcome is the same in both cases. Yet, far more doctors chose the treatment when its description had the more appealing superficial structure. Since such wording differences cause no change in substantive meaning but are likely to have a marked effect on the choicetime thoughts that are evoked, these framing effects could be considered evidence for the causal role of choicetime thoughts on the outcome of a quick choice.

The line of evidence against the idea that choicetime thoughts play a causal role in the outcome of a quick choice is summarized in Nisbett and Wilson (1977a). Their argument was based on studies such as the warm-cold college teacher experiment (Nisbett & Wilson 1977b). In this experiment, subjects were shown a tape of a purported candidate for a college teaching position who acted warm in one version of the tape and cold in the other. The subjects who saw him acting warm reported that they liked him, and when asked why, said it was because of his accent and mustache. But the subjects who saw him acting cold
did not like him, and when asked why, they also said it was because of his accent and mustache. Nisbett and Wilson concluded that the reasons that the subjects reported (which could be considered to be among their choicetime thoughts for the judgment) could not have been the causal factors in the outcome of the judgment because the same reasons here were associated with opposite judgments.

A problem with this evidence is the assumption that the objective stimuli (the accent and mustache) are identical with the subjects' mental representations of these stimuli. In the context of warm behavior, the man's accent could be perceived as "cute" and therefore be a reason to like him. While, in the context of cold behavior, the same objective accent may be perceived as "seedy" and therefore be a reason to not like him. But in both cases, the subjects may report the reason as "because of his accent." Thus, this experiment may not be evidence against the causal nature of choicetime thoughts, but only a demonstration that the encoding of a stimulus can depend on the context (the familiar point of Gestalt psychology [e.g., Koffka 1935]), and that measurement of choicetime thoughts should be sensitive to the possibility that the same words can refer to different meanings.

The issue of the causality of choicetime thoughts is certainly not settled by this evidence, but the weight of the evidence does seem to lie in favor of their causal importance. Note that what is being argued here is not that unconscious processes have no effects on choice outcome. Rather, it is that the vast effects of unconscious processes on choice are mediated by a small number of conscious thoughts (see Figure 1). An advantage of this view is that it suggests that one means of influencing a quick choice would be to focus on influencing the thoughts that are evoked at choicetime.

TARGETING A CRITICAL QUICK CHOICE

To apply the quick-choice viewpoint, a marketer would begin by identifying a quick choice in the consumer's decision process that is likely to be critical to the outcome of the consumer's decision. Obviously, what is considered the decision outcome would depend on the position of the marketer. A retailer might specify the store decision as the outcome of interest. A manufacturer in a competitive category might specify the brand decision. The manufacturer of a leading brand in a category might be most concerned with the product type or product category decision.
Research to determine critical quick choices would most likely involve the analysis of detailed decision-process protocols obtained from recent purchasers (see O'Shaughnessy [1987] for numerous illustrations of the use of protocol methods to analyze natural decision processes). Comparison of recent buyers’ protocols with those of consumers who have recently purchased an alternative brand (or chosen an alternative outlet or product type) could be a useful method for discovering the relative criticality of the various quick choices that comprise the decision of interest. Also, a logical analysis of the consumer decision of interest, similar to those used the buygrid analysis of industrial marketing (Robinson, Faris, & Wind 1967, 13-14), could provide a useful framework for identifying critical quick choices from consumer decision protocol data.

Once a critical quick choice is identified, the model presented here of the quick-choice structure can provide guidance in designing strategies to influence this decision-process unit. The model tells us that there are two approaches to influencing a quick choice: (1) influencing the choicetime thoughts, or (2) influencing the initiating idea. If research shows that, when it occurs, the targeted quick choice is associated with mostly positive choicetime thoughts, then strategies designed to cause the quick choice to occur more often (the second approach) should be emphasized. On the other hand, if the targeted quick choice is associated with mostly negative choicetime thoughts, then the emphasis should be on strategies for improving the thoughts that are evoked by the initiating idea (the first approach). Although many marketing situations may require a combination of the two approaches, it is useful to be able to separately conceptualize each of these two influence mechanisms.

Influencing Choicetime Thoughts

In a personal selling situation, a salesperson has the opportunity to monitor the customer's choicetime thoughts by asking a question that simulates a quick choice. For example, a salesperson may ask a customer's opinion of a brand (to simulate a Buy-this-item? quick choice), an attribute (to simulate a Judge-this-attribute-important? quick choice), or an attribute level (to simulate a Judge-attribute-level-different-than-referent? quick choice). A skilled salesperson will attend carefully to the customer's words and can influence the negative choicetime thoughts by answering the objections in terms that are
similar to those in which the negative choicetime thoughts are expressed (Moine 1982).

In products that do not involve personal selling, the packaging or a point-of-purchase display can exert this influence. For example, in developing the Reach toothbrush, Johnson and Johnson carefully studied the cognitive responses of consumers to the large array of toothbrush brands typically present on retailers’ shelves. They found that the name “Reach” and the package clearly showing the unique shape of the product were effective in creating positive set of thoughts during the Buy-this-brand? quick choice (Davis 1978).

Because the consumer often will not be attending to advertising at the time a critical quick choice is occurring, the influence of targeted choicetime thoughts often must occur through “marketing action at a distance.” The quick-choice viewpoint specifies what this action should be—an effect on the thoughts that are most immediately evoked in response to the critical Quick choice’s initiating idea. Thus, advertising strategy should focus on communicating relevant information in a way that will lead it become strongly associated with the likely initiating idea.

For example, a recent Ford advertising campaign appears to have focused on strengthening the link in the consumer’s mind between “Ford” and “quality” by repeated assertions of Ford’s new emphasis on quality. This campaign would be quite appropriate if a Search-this-item? quick choice were critical for Ford and if negative consumer thoughts about Ford’s quality often led the outcome of the choice to be negative. However, if Ford models were considered by most consumers, but then failed when the idea of quality initiated a Judge-item-acceptable-on-this-attribute? quick choice, then advertising the mere assertion of quality may not be sufficient. In that case, a more appropriate advertising goal might be to cause thoughts comprising evidence of quality to be evoked when the question of Ford’s quality arises.

The likelihood that advertising information will be recalled at choicetime can be increased by coordinating package design with the theme of an advertising campaign. For example, by putting Mikey’s picture on the box of Life cereal or by showing the Energizer Bunny on the package of Energizer batteries, the marketer was able to increase the likelihood that the advertised claim would be evoked at the time of the Buy-this-item? quick choice. This occurs because an ad designed to strengthen the link in long-term memory between a brand name and a
thought representing a favorable level of an important attribute will also tend to strengthen the links between the favorable attribute thought and salient executional elements of the ad. Placing these executional elements in the choicetime environment along with the brand name enables these elements to become additional cues for recall and thus increases the chances that the favorable thought will be evoked at choicetime (Keller 1987; 1991).

Influencing Initiating Ideas

A targeted quick choice can also be influenced by increasing the likelihood that the initiating idea of interest will be evoked into the consumer's consciousness. This can be done either by increasing the salience of the idea in the consumer's environment or by increasing the likelihood that it will be recalled in the relevant marketing situation.

The influence of initiating ideas by advertising usually occurs through an effect on recall. For example, Xerox' recent ad campaign to position itself as “The Document Company” rather than as just a maker of photocopiers was designed to target the Search-this-item? quick choice. Xerox' goal was to increase the likelihood that the idea of contacting Xerox would come to mind during the customer's search for printers, scanners, or any of Xerox' other noncopier products (Goldman 1994).

In addition, for situations where advertising is part of the choicetime environment, advertisements can influence initiating ideas without affecting recall. For example, when purchasing moving services, consumers are likely to begin by looking through Yellow Pages ads. Thus, Allied Van Lines and the other moving companies often consider a large and attention-getting Yellow Pages ad at least as important as media advertising for increasing the likelihood that consumers make a Search-this-item? quick choice for their company (Henderson 1985).

Although advertising or any other form of promotion can be used to influence initiating ideas, it seems that sales promotions are particularly suited for this task. A Presidents' Day Sale by a department store or a contest by a direct mail marketer (such as that conducted by the Publisher's Clearing House) will often initiate a Search-this-outlet? quick choice. The appearance of cents-off coupons in Sunday newspaper inserts tend to elicit Buy-this-item? quick choices in consumers, and, if clipped, may continue to influence initiating ideas for the promoted brand right up to the point of purchase (Ward & Davis...
1978). Frequent flyer programs and promotions such as Nissan's offer of $100 to consumers who test drive a Nissan and then purchase a competing brand (Breese 1990) initiate a Search-this-item? quick choice for the sponsoring companies. The distribution of free samples, such as Surf detergent's extensive sampling effort (Kotler 1988, 648), can effectively evoke in consumers a Use-this-item? quick choice. And, MCI's highly successful Friends and Family promotion, which gave discounts to MCI customers if they identified friends and family members who were also MCI customers (Sellers 1994), effectively stimulated word-of-mouth communication about MCI's service by initiating Ask-person-this? quick choices.

In the quick-choice viewpoint, the initiating idea is enacted unless it is blocked. This suggests that marketing techniques that influence initiating ideas are a surer and perhaps more powerful means of targeting a quick choice than attempting to influence choicetime thoughts. In fact, the recent growth of the use of sales promotion techniques (Blattberg & Neslin 1990, 15) may, to some degree, be related to the particular ability of sales promotions to influence initiating ideas. However, although virtually any of the three dozen quick choices listed in the Appendix could be targeted by a sales promotion, it appears that most current sales promotions target only a small subset of the potentially critical quick choices. The MCI Friends and Family promotion illustrates the potential benefits of considering the full range of quick choices in the consumer decision process when designing marketing programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Marketers have long recognized the value of dividing the consumer's decision process into smaller units. It enables the seller to communicate with the consumer more effectively, because it guides marketing efforts to speak to the consumer at important points in the decision process and in terms that are meaningful to the consumer at those points in time. It is proposed here that quick choices—yes-no decisions on whether or not to enact an initiating idea—are decision-process units that correspond more closely than previous units to the form of natural decision making. Because these units have a simple common structure, they can be easily conceptualized and used. At the same time, a diversity of types of quick choices can be described, thus encouraging the marketer toward the use of a more detailed analysis of the consumer decision process.
Theoretically, the quick-choice viewpoint specifies how consumer decision-making may be distributed over the entire course of the decision process. It further suggests that there are two types of consumer motivation. The first is the intrinsic motive force carried by the idea of a possible action when it is evoked into consciousness. The second is represented by the choicetime thoughts that allow or prevent the initiating idea from being enacted. These choicetime thoughts represent motives in the traditional sense of the word—the "reasons" that a consumer might give as to why he or she did, or did not do, a certain action.

It is hoped that this proposal will serve to stimulate basic research on the quick-choice viewpoint and, in general, encourage research efforts toward the goal of developing useful and realistic decision-process units. Such research would inevitably contribute to our understanding of the consumer decision process and could facilitate the marketing of goods and services that truly reflect the needs and wants of the consumer.

**APPENDIX: TENTATIVE TAXONOMY OF QUICK CHOICES (QCS) IN THE CONSUMER DECISION PROCESS**

*A QC expressed in a consumer's question can be classified as to QC species, genus, and family:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of categorization</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QC question</td>
<td>Should we go to Sears today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific QC</td>
<td>Go to this store today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic QC</td>
<td>Search this outlet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QC family</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Key to terms used to characterize generic QCs:*

- **Item:** specific item (good or service), feature of an item, brand, manufacturer, product type, product category
- **Outlet:** store, catalog, video shopping
- **Report** (passive information source): advertisement, brochure, news report
- **Person** (interactive information source): family member, friend, service provider, repairperson, salesperson
- **Search:** examine, look at, listen to, go to, shop at
List of generic QC's by family:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QC family</th>
<th>Generic QC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision-control QC's</td>
<td>Buy this item?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Buy at this outlet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start search now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search further?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider item further?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wait this long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postpone decision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change priority?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judge item best so far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use this decision strategy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make this offer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accept this offer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use this payment method?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-collection QC's</td>
<td>Search this item?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search this attribute?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search this outlet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search this report?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search for a report here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask person this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell person this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask person for help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accept person's offer to help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use this search method?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delegate search?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-evaluation QC's</td>
<td>Believe this information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accept this suggestion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judge this attribute important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judge item acceptable on this attribute?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judge attribute level different than referent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set this as acceptable attribute level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item-usage QC's</td>
<td>Use this item?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Complain about this item?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return this item?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quick Choices as Targetable Units of the Consumer Decision Process

Repair this item?
Replace this item?
Dispose of this item?

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