Media guiding consumers across different stages of the purchase process

Voorveld, H.A.M.; Smit, E.G.; Neijens, P.C.; Bronner, F.E.

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Dr. Margaret Morrison
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
MEDIA GUIDING CONSUMERS ACROSS DIFFERENT STAGES OF 
THE PURCHASE PROCESS 

Hilde A.M. Voorveld, Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of 
Amsterdam, the Netherlands 

Edith G. Smit, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands 

Peter C. Neijens, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands 

(Al)Fred E. Bronner ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands 

Abstract 

The media landscape has changed tremendously since the dramatic increase in the media offer, the 
fragmentation of the audience, and the advent of the internet and other interactive media. In line with these 
transitions, the way consumers search and use information to guide their purchase decisions has changed as well. 
Consumers use the internet to buy products and to search for product information, for example through search 
engines, brand websites, applications on their mobile phones, and brand communities (Shankar and Hollinger 
2007). Additionally, consumers’ use of social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter exploded (Block 
and Schultz 2009), and these media are also used to form opinions about products and brands. As a result, using 
the right media mix becomes more and more critical (Rohm and Sultan 2004), Danaher and Rossiter (2011) even 
believe that selecting media “for marketing communications is one of today’s most complex and pressing issues 
for marketing managers”. Therefore, there is an urgent need for insight into the way consumers search and use 
for information across media and combinations of media that are claimed to have influenced their decision 
making. The current study aims at answering the following research question: Which media are used, in what 
stage of the purchase process, for what type of products, and by what type of consumers? 

Earlier attempts to give insight into consumers’ search for and use of information across media in the 
purchase process such as project Apollo, Touch Points or the Simultaneous Media Usage Study (SIMM) 
acknowledged the value of single source data (Gritten 2007). However, these attempts are very complex to 
administer, suffer from respondent burden, focus on purchases in general and do not distinguish between the 
stages of the purchase process. 

We believe that it is useful for media planners and advertisers to know which media are used in various 
phases of the consumer decision making process. This information can guide media planners and advertisers 
when deciding which messages to place in which media. Therefore, we believe that the five phases of the 
purchase process should play an important role in our questionnaire. Besides, we also believe that our 
questionnaire should not focus on purchases in general, but should focus on specific purchases, because we 
believe consumers are unable to correctly report their information search behavior for purchases in general. 

A total of 347 respondents filled in an online questionnaire (46.9 % female, mean age 45.46, SD = 
18.32). After weighing the sample was representative for the Dutch population of 16 years and older considering 
age, sex and education. Fieldwork was conducted by TNS NIPO and took place in July 2011. 

The questionnaire started with asking the respondent to indicate which product they purchased recently 
(last 3 months for high involvement products or the last 30 days for low involvement products). Participants 
were shown two lists, one list with 22 high involvement products, and one list with 23 low involvement 
products. Then, one of the recently bought products or services was randomly selected. Next, participants were 
explained that a purchase process usually has five phases, and that the questionnaire walked them through these 
five stages one by one. For each stage participants had to indicate which media and information sources had been 
important to them, and which medium had been most important. 

Preliminary results of this small-scale application showed that media were most important in the stages 
of the purchase process before the actual purchase was made. Media that were most influential across the total 
purchase process were the Internet, TV and free door-to-door newspapers. Non-advertising media that were 
important were conventional shops and Word of Mouth. Consumers indicated that cinema, mail and outdoor 
advertising were least important in influencing their purchase decision. Only some small differences were found 
between the role of specific media in the various stages of the purchase process. 

The results of this study also have some interesting implications for advertisers and media planners. By 
investigating media usage patterns in different phases of the purchase process, for different types of products, for 
different kinds of consumers, the current study offers insights that are helpful for practitioners in the current 
media landscape. Results can be used to guide the optimal choice of media for advertising campaigns of different 
types of products. For example, campaigns for high involvement products could best rely on Internet advertising,
and online stores, while WOM should also be stimulated. For low involvement products, consumers rely more on conventional stores and traditional media like television and door-to-door newspapers. Therefore, these media should play a central role in campaigns for low involvement products. The Internet was more important for men than for women which can be used when deciding on integrating online media in cross-media campaigns.

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References