

# Advancing Consumer Marketing and Human Flourishing

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## Abstract

Based on marketing strategies focusing on the Change Equation and related theories to nurture consumer desire and purchase behaviors and based on human flourishing theory, the authors present a need for examination of conflicting aims and purposes associated with the marketing of dissatisfaction and the advancement of human flourishing.

## Consumer Marketing and Dissatisfaction

Charles Kettering of General Motors Research Labs stated that business needs to create a “dissatisfied consumer” and that the mission is the organized creation of dissatisfaction. Marketers have long been aware of the power of dissatisfaction to change behavior. David Gleicher and Richard Beckhard have both advanced the Change Equation which states that change will be motivated when there is dissatisfaction with the current, a vision, and steps to take towards that vision. Marketers have found the model an effective guide to successful advertising. Basically, advertising should make the target consumer feel dissatisfied with his/her existing state concerning the product or service being marketed. The advertising should then show the vision of “how good things could be” and provide easy ways to get to that ideal vision. Many advertisements attempt to get consumers dissatisfied with an existing product or service, promote a solution, and provide easy access to the solution.

The effectiveness of dissatisfaction in bringing about purchase behaviors can be used to a company’s advantage when trying to sell more. First, companies can plan for improvements in products and product lines. Bringing out the new and improved versions can keep the revenues coming into to the company. This also provides incentive for innovation and continued product development. Second, most companies, including GM, plan for obsolescence. Decisions in their product research and development efforts are influenced by the desire to have products become obsolete. Companies make products that are less durable and enduring so that customers will come back and purchase new (and improved) products. Companies have an incentive to create wealth for their stakeholders by creating new and better products that meet existing needs and newly acquired desires. Third, companies can help to shape the consumers’ attitudes, beliefs and feelings regarding their current level of satisfaction. In so doing, the company can help to motivate consumers to purchase the products/services (vision of something better).

## Human Flourishing

Human flourishing means living “within an optimal range of human of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). It contrasts with pathology but also with languishing (experiencing life as lacking in meaning, hollow, or empty). The experience of an average ratio of positive to negative affect of around 3 seems to be the minimum for people to have the opportunity to “flourish.” Positive emotions widen the array of thoughts, increase generativity, prompt exploration, and create experiential learning opportunities. As such, they have been hypothesized to have evolutionary survival and reproduction benefits (Fredrickson, 1998). Positive affect associated with human flourishing accumulates over time and makes people healthier, more socially integrated, knowledgeable, and resilient (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

The positive affect that leads to human flourishing, is also associated with subjective well-being (SWB). Subjective well-being entails a number of separable components, most of which deal with one's satisfaction with important domains of life and is often times labeled in colloquial terms as "happiness" (Diener, 2000). Thus, one's satisfaction with many aspects of life appears directly associated with one's "happiness."

### Marketing and Human Flourishing

Marketing of dissatisfaction has been effective in motivating purchasing behaviors. So, is there a problem to be addressed here? If there is a legitimate reason to be dissatisfied and the advertised product/service provides the benefits leading to satisfaction, perhaps marketing of dissatisfaction could be a good thing. There are, however, several problems with this argument which suggest that there is a problem to be addressed. First, there may be no legitimate reason for a potential consumer to be dissatisfied with his/her existing state. Marketing often attempts actually "create" dissatisfaction with some component a person's life. Second, the products and services offered often do not actually resolve the satisfaction void. Third, the attempt to influence individuals towards dissatisfaction with some element of their lives often works well, especially with repeated exposures often from a variety of products (or solutions). However, that dissatisfaction may not be addressed via a purchase of the product for any number of reasons including lack of funds, lack of time, and even lack of accessibility. Thus, many more people are made to feel dissatisfied than are able/willing to purchase the supposed "solution."

The ability to purchase and consume the product that is promoted as satisfying a particular need may not actually increase the consumer's satisfaction, utility, or well-being. Scitovsky (1976) and Fromm (1976) have extensively explored the nature of the relationship between the levels of economic prosperity and consumption with human well-being and have concluded that there is a great gap with little actual relationship. Worse yet is the possibility of a slightly inverse relationship (once some basic level of needs are being met).

There is the "hedonic treadmill" (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) issue to examine in the context of dissatisfaction marketing and human flourishing. The basic notion is that as a person increases his/her possessions and accomplishments, it takes relatively more to bring about increases in satisfaction. We adapt back to an equilibrium level of SWB in the face of new levels of possessions or accomplishments. The problem with marketing of dissatisfaction is that it may be causing a resetting of the "equilibrium" levels of happiness – to lower levels. The new and improved products/services may give a person a temporary increase in happiness but in time that happiness adapts back to an equilibrium level. The rise of economic prosperity has brought many significant benefits but it has not been associated with a parallel, or similar, rise in overall well-being (Myers & Diener, 1996; Scitovsky, 1976).

Related to the hedonic treadmill is the concept of positional consumption (Hirsch, 1977). Hirsch (1977) suggests that a great deal of consumer purchasing behavior is based on desires primarily associated with positioning the consumer in a favorable way relative to other consumers. The challenge with this is that everyone ends up expending more resources and ends up in the same position relative to the other consumers. No additional satisfaction or well-being is derived from the improved positional advantage when the other consumers also engage in the consumptive behavior. Hirsch points out this trouble and refers to this problem as the "social limits to growth." In past years many who had the economic means to do so purchased larger vehicles, partially because it would provide a safety advantage in the event of a collision with another vehicle. As more and more consumers purchased the larger vehicles, the safety benefits associated with driving a large vehicle were diminished. Furthermore, for those unable or unwilling to purchase the larger vehicles, the safety situation was worsened.

Also, consider for a moment the more general argument that has been set forth by some that the moral imperative to consume has replaced the work ethic as a defining feature of modern consumer societies (Baudrillard, 1970; Baumann, 1998; Jackson, Jager, & Stagl, 2004). Is it possible for a person to be in some way immoral, at least non-patriotic, if he/she is not consuming enough? Is there a message that we should be dissatisfied if we have a relatively lower level of consumption, in general, than others?

There are research findings that infer the possible negative effects of dissatisfaction marketing on human flourishing. While this can occur in many different domains of life, we will provide examples from the domain of "attractiveness." Satisfaction with one's perceived own attractiveness as well as with the attractiveness of loved one's is one such life domain component for which there is extant empirical research. When men are exposed to multiple images of attractive women models, they subsequently rate their commitment to their regular partner as

lower, compared with men showed pictures of average looking women (Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989; Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994). They also found similar, parallel results for women exposed to images of dominant, high-status men. Self concepts were found to be affected by repeated exposures to idealized images such that women exposed to images of very attractive women rate themselves as less attractive. Men and women experienced decreases in self-esteem when shown many images of women of high levels of attractiveness (for women) and of dominant, influential men (for men) (Gutierrez, Kenrick, & Partch, 1999). Creating body dissatisfaction is routinely the goal of advertisers in the food industry. They have been effective and the result is an increasing number of women who “loath” their body, experience body weight and shape dissatisfaction, and develop eating disorders (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999). Both men and women are barraged with messages setting and legitimizing norms of dissatisfaction with body weight, body size, body shape, body hair, baldness, color of eyes, color of skin, and other elements of our bodies.

Does all this marketing of dissatisfaction serve to recalibrate the equilibrium level of subjective well-being? In addition to evidence that people are less satisfied with their own attractiveness (one domain of subjective well-being), there is also evidence of broader effects. Depression affects about twice as many women as men and is one of the most common forms of psychological problems for modern humans. As Buss (2000) explains, rates of depression are increasing in modern life, according to some evidence (Ness & Williams, 1994). Finally, in economically developed countries where marketing has become pervasive, the incident of depression appears to be higher (Ness & Williams, 1994). Buss (2000) explains that the conditions of modern living seem designed to interfere with human happiness. His analysis and conclusion are based on long term changes in the environment in which people live, but it is noteworthy that they do not include any consideration of marketing efforts towards purposely inducing feelings of dissatisfaction.

Are we on an hedonic treadmill, and worse yet, one in which the equilibrium happiness point is being reset to incrementally lower levels? Are there ways to advance consumer marketing effectiveness while also advancing human flourishing within the environments of pervasive advertising? Research is needed to find ways to resolve the inherent conflicts between the incentives to use dissatisfaction marketing and efforts to enhance human flourishing.

#### Solutions and Future Research

We can suggest directions for future research that may serve to reduce the conflicts that currently exist. First, from a company’s perspective, it might make sense to examine alternative marketing strategies and look for those that have effectiveness without creating dissatisfaction. This will not be an easy endeavor. One of the “evolutionary tragedies of happiness” (Buss, 2000) is the asymmetry in affective experience associated with losses and gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) such that it is more disagreeable to loss something than it is agreeable to gain something of an equal extent. We want to avoid the loss more than we want to get an equivalent gain. This may transfer to marketing such that we are motivated to purchase so as to avoid something negative more than we are motivated to purchase to get an additional positive. However, equally effective advertisements may be possible. Humorous advertisements capture the attention of many and may be able to be channeled into purchase behaviors. Additionally, consider the recent Dove soap marketing campaign in which normal women were shown using the product, in contrast the usual very attractive people used for such advertisements. The advertisements created great public relations, far beyond the reach of the advertisements themselves. Unilever reported that the Dove brand has experienced double-digit growth after the introduction of the advertising campaign (Hazely, 2005). Second, from the consumer’s perspective, it might make sense to devise and follow strategies to minimize our exposure to dissatisfaction marketing. A great deal of this comes from magazine and television advertising. Technology has made it easier to disseminate advertising messages. Technology may also make it easier for us to eliminate or reduce our exposure to the advertisements. Tivo, for example, can edit out the commercials in recorded television programming. Another example is junk email. Emails directed at selling products used to fill inboxes to a much greater extent than they do since the introduction of filtering technology that removes suspected spam before it is even placed in one’s inbox. Non-dissatisfaction marketing techniques and others may help to resolve some of the conflict.

#### Conclusion

Considering the goals of marketing strategies focusing on creating consumer dissatisfaction and human flourishing theory, the authors predict a need for research aimed at resolving the inherent conflicts such that we can see the advancement of consumer marketing and of the overall subjective well-being of people.

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