Product Enthusiasm: Many Questions, a Few Answers

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ABSTRACT - Product enthusiasts represent significant marketplace forces because of their high levels of information seeking, innovativeness, and opinion leadership. Enthusiasm is described and placed within an involvement theory context. A number of additional issues are addressed, including differences among enthusiasts, motivations for product enthusiasm, and influences of the enthusiast on the marketplace. Particular emphasis is placed on enthusiasts' role in the diffusion process.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of low involvement among consumers has certainly attracted considerable research attention (see Bowen and Chaffee 1974; Houston and Rothchild 1978; Robertson 1976; Tyebjee 1979). This attention is not surprising since even casual observation will reveal that consumers do not deeply care about most of the products they own and use. Additional investigation, however, uncovers instances of high product interest and involvement. For example, consider the following statements by a person highly involved with guns:

The thing about shooting, you see, is that if you're serious about it, it tends to be an all-absorbing kind of sport. It's like you're a computer and its filling up all your memory, it's eating up all your thinking time. And after a while, shooting becomes the only thing that's interesting anymore. (Carr and Gardner 1985 p. 36).

Other examples of high product involvement include the personal computer buff who spends hours hooked into on-line bulletin boards and the clothes horse who owns 75 pairs of shoes. A simpler, generic term referring to high levels of product involvement is product enthusiasm.

Enthusiasts are significant for a number of reasons. First, they constitute important market segments. For example, cooking enthusiasts are predicted to spend over $62 billion on gourmet foods and cooking equipment by 1990 (Zenka 1983). Enthusiasts are also important for what they do as well as for how much they buy. These individuals tend to be information seekers, innovators and opinion leaders for the product classes of interest. As a result of these behaviors, enthusiasts play a potentially important role in the transfer of new product technology to other consumers. In exploring product enthusiasm, a number of questions arise including what is the nature of product enthusiasm, are there different types of enthusiasts, and what is the impact of this force in the marketplace. These and other questions are discussed below.

WHAT IS PRODUCT ENTHUSIASM?

Product enthusiasm reflects product involvement at high levels. Thus in defining enthusiasm, it is necessary to define involvement which generally concerns the amount of interest or concern a consumer has with a product at a given time (Mitchell 1979). In considering the nature of involvement, Tyebjee (1978) devised a very succinct approach. He posited that levels of involvement are represented by the amount of time a consumer spends thinking about the product class. Thus, product involvement represents a continuum. Canned corn, scissors, light bulbs and the like have been termed low involvement goods and typically occupy one anchor of the continuum. Such products may be depended upon or used frequently, yet the consumer does not care or think much about the product.

Durable goods such as freezers, office furniture, and cars are commonly termed high involvement products (see Chaffee and McLeod 1973). If one applies Tyebjee's rule, however, similarities between low involvement and high involvement items are often more striking than their differences. For consumers spending little time thinking about light bulbs and the corn, there is an almost permanent state of low involvement.

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For cars, freezers, and furniture, there is likely to be involvement, but only at certain times: when the product fails or a purchase is contemplated. High financial stakes are involved in such cases and most consumers will be concerned about the product class due to the high purchase risks. Outside of these specific situations, however, low involvement tends to dominate. Most of the time, freezers, cars, and furniture do not intrude on consumers' thoughts any more than the canned corn does.

Moving up from low involvement, there is a region characterized by moderate consumer interest. Here, the consumer thinks about the product more frequently and at occasions outside the purchase domain. For example, a person may enjoy taking photographs and using a camera; however, this activity may only occur during travel or special occasions. The person is not an avid camera buff, but has a moderate interest in photographic equipment and may occasionally enjoy talking about the product class with friends or looking at camera magazines.

Product enthusiasm, which is the focus here, refers to the high end of the involvement continuum. Webster's definition of enthusiasm helps provide a portrayal of the concept: “a strong excitement of feeling on behalf of a cause or subject; ardent zeal or interest.” In the case of enthusiasm, the product in question plays an important role in the consumer's life. Product usage may be a hobby for the consumer and a source of pleasure along sensory or aesthetic dimensions. Another gun owner gave an example of the strength of the relationship between an enthusiast and the product:

My gun is practically my best friend. It goes with me from room to room...It's my buddy (Carr and Gardner 0985, p. 98).

Product ownership should also be considered in elaborating product involvement or enthusiasm. Very low levels of involvement may or may not be associated with product ownership. For example, interest or involvement in the product class of staplers may be low among those who do not own or use staplers as well as among those who do. On the other hand, product ownership is not required for enthusiasm. For example, a nine year old boy may care a great deal about motorcycles and many thousands of people maintain high enduring involvement with sports teams. In both of these cases, the object of the enthusiasm is not possessed or owned, yet high involvement exists.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENTHUSIASTS?

One way to examine whether different types of enthusiasts exist is by focusing on the duration of a particular enthusiasm. In particular, one might distinguish between a constant and rotating enthusiasms. In the first case, involvement with a particular product is maintained at high levels for a long period of time. In the latter case, a consumer may be prone to enthusiasm, but the target changes over time. For example, some consumers are technology buffs, enamored with a series of different products as new types of electronics gear come on the market. For such consumers, enthusiasm may move over time from personal computers, to compact disc players, to video equipment. Here the involvement is based in the general characteristics of high technology products, rather than in the benefits of any one product class. In the case of constant enthusiasm, a product’s benefits are highly valued and considered to be uniquely associated with that one good.

Other differences among enthusiasts may also be speculated upon. While research has not examined the question, it is doubtful that car enthusiasm is fundamentally different from camera or stereo enthusiasm. In these cases, the product is the focal point. However, there may be differences between product-based enthusiasm and activity-based enthusiasm. For example, automobile enthusiasm may have a different character or intensity than a skiing enthusiast's involvement with ski equipment. Enthusiasm for intangible products such as sports teams also may be different than other types of product attachments. The question of enthusiasm types certainly warrants additional study.

WHY BECOME AND REMAIN A PRODUCT ENTHUSIAST?

Product Usage Satisfactions

Based on the work of Csikentmihalyi (1975) and other researchers (Bloch and Bruce 1984; Bryan 1977), several possible motivations for product enthusiasm may be proposed. The first motive reflects the satisfaction derived from product usage. A gun enthusiast described a first shooting experience as follows:

The first time, it was so funny, I never shook so hard in my whole life, about anything. The adrenaline rush is really something (Carr and Gardner 1985, p.8)

It is likely that wine connoisseurs and yachtmen also arrive at their state of enthusiasm at least partially via the experience of product usage satisfactions. In these cases, the attachment to the product seems to be a conditioned response to the pleasure obtained during product usage.

Mastery Needs

Product attachment may additionally result from desires for skill development or competition with an ideal self (Fleishmann 1981). For example, if a person performs well at tennis, this satisfies an achievement need and the consumer may develop an enthusiasm for tennis equipment as well as for the game itself. Similarly, getting a difficult BASIC program to run successfully on a home computer may heighten levels of involvement with computer equipment. Thus, product enthusiasm can occur as a conditioned response to the feelings of mastery. The acquisition of a body of product information also may lead to feelings of mastery. The development of expertise can enhance the self and make the enthusiast feel more in control of his/her environment.

Uniqueness Needs

The role of enthusiasm can augment an individual's feelings of uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1980); that is, being known as an expert or enthusiast for a particular product is one way to feel distinctive and become noticed. For example, being introduced at a party as a wine connoisseur or a classic car collector can stimulate conversation, provide attention, and enhance feelings of superiority. In such cases, the enthusiasm, rather than the product, provides important benefits for the consumer.

Affiliation Needs

Product enthusiasm also seems to occur as a result of needs for companionship: interest in a product class can provide convenient access to groups and a circle of friends. Membership in a computer users' garden, or canoeing club may be more important than the products themselves to many consumers. In addition, many people take on their spouse's involvement as a way to spend time with their otherwise preoccupied partner.

Enthusiasm also occurs as a response to reference group influence. As noted by Tauber (1972):

If group status is associated with one's knowledge of the product category and nature of holdings (e.g., size of record collection), then peer group influence may motivate the person to develop an interest in the product (p.48).
In such cases, the involvement may not be as high because it is less voluntary. Likewise, some product interests seem to result from sex role demands. Examples include fashion involvement for women and automobile involvement for adolescent males.

How Does Product Enthusiasm Affect Technology Transfer?

Although product enthusiasm itself may prove to be an interesting consumer state, its importance to consumer researchers is primarily based in its outcomes that influence the diffusion of new products and new technology. These behaviors include information search, innovativeness, and opinion leadership.

Information Search/Product Knowledge

As a result of strong product interest, the enthusiast engages in active and continuous information search pertaining to the product (Bloch and Richins 1983; Corey 1971; Caikesentmihalyi 1975). For instance, the audiophile subscribes to stereo magazines, visits electronics stores frequently, and seeks product information from other stereo buffs. In terms of time expenditures, information seeking may be more significant than product usage for the enthusiast. The yachtsman, for example, may devote considerably more time to reading sailing books and magazines than in sailing itself. This ongoing information hunger underlies the success of special interest magazines such as Gourmet, Road & Track and Cycle. As a further example, consider the field of personal computers where new magazines were introduced at the rate of one per week in 1984 and where the top 25 computer magazines have a combined circulation of 5.9 million (Relling 1984).

Information seeking provides significant satisfactions for the enthusiast. Besides developing expertise, search may substitute for purchase when budgets are tight. Hirschman (1980) suggests that information gathering allows vicarious adoption of new products that the enthusiast would very much like to own, but cannot for one reason or another. For example, car magazines are dominated by road-tests of new cars, many of which are expensive exotics (e.g., Ferraris and Lamborghini costing $75,000 or more). It is reasonable to assume that subscribers are not reading these road-tests to assist in upcoming purchase decisions, but to vicariously own and drive cars that arouse them. An even clearer portrayal of enthusiasts' innovativeness pertaining to information is provided by Infoworld, a weekly personal computer magazine (with an appropriate name), that recently began air shipment to subscribers in response to their demand for the most current product class information.

Along with the active information search noted above, enthusiasts also tend to be vigilant and sensitive for product information to which they are exposed in an accidental manner (Spence and Engle 1970). For example, the car enthusiast is often quick to spot new or unusual vehicles on the road that go unnoticed by others less involved in the product class.

Information seeking, whether through the media, retail visits or personal sources, results in increased product class expertise, a common distinguishing feature of the enthusiast. This specialized knowledge aids product selection, provides negotiating power when in the marketplace (Brucks 1985; Moore and Lehmann 1980), and makes the enthusiast influential among other consumers (Leonard-Barton 1985). The expertise of the enthusiast also enhances the ability to recall and process product information (Johnson and Russo 1984; Suinan 1985). According to Alba (1983), product experts recall more advertising information and more sophisticated and important information than do less knowledgeable consumers. Product enthusiasts are also better able to evaluate new product information because they have superior understanding of how new information relates to their existing knowledge base (Beattie 1982).

Innovativeness

In addition to the vicarious innovativeness possible through information search, there is also a positive relationship between enthusiasm and actualized innovativeness (Baumgarten 1975; Feldman and Armstrong 1975; Tigert, Ring and King 1976). The involvement/innovativeness connection is not surprising because persons with strong product class interest are likely to learn of an innovation soon after it is introduced during the course of ongoing information gathering. Awareness of an innovation is, of course, the minimum prerequisite for adoption of the new product. In addition, the enthusiast's concern with the product class increases performance expectations that may only be met by the latest, most advanced products (Beattie 1982: Fleischmann 1981).

One may also speculate that innovativeness is influenced by a satiation effect on enthusiasm. Since the product class in question provides the enthusiast with satisfaction and excitement, frequent adoption of new product offerings may be necessary to renew the desired product "high." This need for the newest goods may be particularly pronounced in categories where product changes are noticeable and frequent (e.g., fashion goods, high technology goods).

It is not the purpose here to make product enthusiast a new term to describe innovators, however. When enthusiasm is centered on product classes where change is frequent and new product introduction is common, then the enthusiast is likely to be innovative due to high awareness levels, desires for the latest technology and high performance standards. There are cases, however, where product enthusiasm is not associated innovativeness. An antique furniture buff may have a great deal of enthusiasm, but little apparent innovativeness. In looking at innovators, one may find individuals who are highly involved with products, individuals who are involved with newness, and individuals who are involved with both.

Opinion Leadership

Not only are enthusiasts likely to be innovative, but they also tend to disseminate news about the innovations they discover. A number of years ago, Dichter (1966) described how product enthusiasm results in opinion leadership. 

Experience with the product (or service) produces a tension which is not eased by use of the product alone, but must be channeled by way of talk, recommendation, and enthusiasm to restore the balance (provide relief)... In many instances it is talk about the product which confirms for the speaker his ownership and joy in the product, or his discovery of it (p. 148-149).

Since this statement was made, several other researchers have examined the connection between product involvement and opinion leadership (Bloch 1981; Summers 1970; Tigert, Ring and Ring 1976). Corey (1971) reported that opinion leaders are distinguished by their:

...unique involvement with market topics. Compared to nonleaders in a particular topic, opinion leaders read more media about related consumer issues; they are more knowledgeable about related new consumer product developments; they participate more often in related consumer activities; and they derive greater satisfaction from those activities (p. 52).

Researchers have long noted that consumers rely on opinion leaders for purchase information: only recently, however, has the extent of such reliance been noted (Hirschman and Wallendorf 1982; Leonard-Barton 1985; Price and Feick 1985). Because enthusiasts enjoy talking to others about the source of their enthusiasm, they are readily identifiable, and potential buyers may seek them out to borrow needed product information rather than conducting an extensive search from scratch. One could argue that the low levels of purchase search found in many studies are the result of consumers' efficient consultations with enthusiasts rather than reflecting a lack of motivation or effort.
Product enthusiasts are considered here to be significant forces in the marketplace, particularly in the case of new product acceptance. This point begs the question of how enthusiasm can be harnessed to benefit providers of new products. In this vein, it is useful to consider ways in which marketing strategy can be tailored to enthusiast segments. It should be noted, however, that enthusiasm is not relevant to all product classes.

**Enthusiast Products**

While consumers can become enthusiasts for nearly any sort of good, certain product classes seem to generate a disproportionate number of aficionados. Complex products and hedonic products are two product categories that generate relatively high levels of enthusiasm. For most consumers, a high level of product complexity is undesirable. Complexity increases buyer uncertainty and risks of disappointing product performance after purchase. In examining enthusiasts, however, one may find that these consumers are attracted rather than repelled by product complexity. In fact, product classes offering complexity and variety are among the most likely to attract enthusiasts (Fennell 1978). Such products offer considerable potential for knowledge acquisition and dissemination as well as for sensory stimulation. Since product enthusiasm implies a hobby-like interest in the product, more complex products would seem to hold the consumer's interest longer.

It is also expected that complex, high performance brands within a product class will be most appealing to the enthusiast. For example, the camera buff is likely to prefer Nikon's or Canon's 35mm models, with their many settings and accessories, over Kodak's Instamatic. While product complexity can be indicative of superior performance, complexity in and of itself may be a more important characteristic. This is particularly likely in product classes such as compact disc players or sports equipment where objective product performance is difficult to assess. For enthusiasts, complexity may be a surrogate indicator of quality much as price is used by many consumers. Product planners should also note that product complexity can be introduced to relatively simple products. Audio cassette manufacturers, for example, have successfully called attention to brand differences and complexity in a product class which at first glance appears quite basic.

Traditional theories of new product diffusion may have to be modified in the context of product enthusiasm. These theories posit a negative relationship between product complexity and new product acceptance, assuming that complex innovations puzzle consumers and forestall adoption (Derow 1982; Rogers and Shoemaker 1971). It might be a significant mistake, however, to direct research departments to design the simplest new products possible when the target market is comprised of a significant number of enthusiasts. The complexity of an innovation can in fact be the heart of its appeal to enthusiasts. For example, in 1984 the largest selling new video game for personal computers is a flight simulator that entails dozens of control functions and a thick manual of operations (Infoworld 1984).

Recreational or hedonic products are also likely targets of enthusiasm, provided that their usage is also varied, pleasurable, or stimulating (Csikentmihalyi 1975; Neulinger 1974). For example, a tennis buff may be highly involved with nearly every type of tennis gear except tennis balls because of the simplicity and uniformity of the product across brands. In sum, products having a recreational component that also offer novelty and complexity are strong candidates for product enthusiasm.

**Product Development**

To successfully reach enthusiasts and take advantage of their influence, marketers must be prepared to innovate and improve their products or risk market share losses. Adidas and Puma, once strong competitors in the American running shoe market, lost considerable share in the late 1970's when they failed to keep pace with the technological advances offered by competing firms. On the other hand, enthusiasts' willingness to try a new brand if it promises superior performance helped a small firm, New Balance, move from obscurity to a strong competitive position in the running shoe industry (Merwin 1981). Brand name apparently does not offer a great deal of protection when serving enthusiasts. This is because enthusiasts' advanced knowledge of products and product attributes puts them in a good position to spot technological advances even in unfamiliar brands.

**Other Strategic Issues**

In encouraging enthusiast adoption, pricing issues become salient as well. In some instances, enthusiast demand is inelastic. As noted by Kotler ('80), some buyers stand ready to pay a higher price than others because the product has high present value to them. The present value of new products to enthusiasts may be very high, being based on access to the latest product features and possible self-enhancement resulting from the scarcity of the product (Snyder and Fromkin 1980).

It is also possible that enthusiasts are relatively insensitive to price hikes. Once a desired performance level is achieved, it is doubtful whether price increases will cause an enthusiast to accept lower performance standards (Fleishmann 1981). In cases where performance gains are perceived as substantial at a concomitant price increase, the enthusiast also appears willing to make the additional outlay. State of the art running shoes now cost $80 to also as compared to $50 or less a few years ago; nevertheless the avid running enthusiast has absorbed the price increase to remain at the leading edge of technology (Runner's World 1984).

New product developers are likely to find the task of reaching enthusiasts with promotional messages to be a relatively easy one. As noted earlier, product enthusiasts are distinguished from other consumers by their hunger for product information. Thus, messages targeted at an enthusiast audience are more likely to be attended to and can have higher information content than that aimed at general audiences (Beatle 1982; Teybje 1979).

In considering the importance of the enthusiast in the marketplace, the following statistic provides a summary example. A study by Car and Driver (1978) magazine found that 78% of its enthusiast readership gave automotive advice an average of 19 times a year. It is reasonable to assume similar rates of information transfer with other types of enthusiasts and other product classes.

**CAN ENTHUSIASM BE HARNESS?**

Because of its impact in the marketplace, encouraging product enthusiasm can be a legitimate marketing objective. Chevrolet dealers sponsor Corvette clubs and Lotus Development, a major software producer, supports both a magazine and an on-line users group for personal computer enthusiasts. These activities reinforce existing enthusiasts and provide resources and support for relative newcomers to the product involvement.

Note that pricing also plays a part in creating new enthusiasts in a product category. Obviously, the higher the initial outlay to become a product user, the smaller the number of participating enthusiasts. There are certainly fewer sailboat enthusiasts than movie or car stereo buffs. This conclusion results from the trialability attribute in determining adoption (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971). If a product is affordable and product usage proves especially enjoyable, enthusiasm can grow. Later, such enthusiasm elicits information seeking and increased expertise. This expertise may in turn raise performance demands and motivate the purchase of more advanced and expensive versions of the product in question. Simple power tools may be replaced by a woodworking shop, the aluminum tennis racket with a graphite model, and the video game machine with a home computer.
CONCLUSIONS

There are certainly other important questions regarding product enthusiasm that warrant research attention. Perhaps the most intriguing is the ways in which enthusiasm develops in a consumer. While some consumers become highly involved with a product as an adult for reasons noted above, others appear to develop significant product interests and attachments early in life. Therefore, concepts such as consumer socialization and family influence play a part in furthering the concepts of involvement and enthusiasm. For example, many car enthusiasts point to the origins of their interest in childhood, the building of car models or the racing of slot cars or go-karts. Clothing, gun, and sports enthusiasm also are likely to start in childhood. Speculating further, the extent to which enthusiasm begets enthusiasm bears investigation. It would be interesting to determine the proportion of product enthusiasts who have parents with the same interests.

Along with specific product enthusiasms, the issue of involvement proneness and its development are of interest. Some people seem to need an enthusiasm of some type, with the product choice being of less significance. Again the role of parental and peer group influence could be linked to this more generic question.

Taking the notion of enthusiasm to its highest extension may also provide important research directions, but more for sociologists or public policy makers than for marketers. At highest levels, product enthusiasm might be considered product obsession where the product is essentially all that the individual thinks about. Examples might include the somewhat mild case of a teenaged boy who thinks so much about his car, and cars in general, that his grades suffer, all the way to the bulimic who is preoccupied with food, and the drug addict who is obsessed with finding the next fix. In general, the study of high consumer involvement and product enthusiasm is one where there are many questions and many options.

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most common questions. Practice, practice, and practice some more. Qualities? Enthusiasm and passion are key, not just for financial markets, but for S&T and the firm in general. If this is the job of your dreams, then psyche yourself up about the possibility of reaching your goal â€“ if you canâ€™t easily do this, then is S&T right for you? During my interviews I was constantly smiling, and my interviewers always mentioned my enthusiasm in their comments to me. The answers to the walk me through your resume question seem more tailored towards trading. What would a good response be for 4 â€“ 5 of that question for someone looking to go into sales? Thanks. Telesales interview questions and answers. 1. Why do you want to work in telesales? If you are new to this career you can expect this question early on. This is where your preparation comes into play.  You should answer that you should know the product well enough to be able to answer most questions about it. You should also be a good listener and be able to read a personâ€™s mood and intention. You also need to be patient and not allow rejection to get you down. 4. What donâ€™t you like about sales? This can be a very difficult question to answer. If you have no experience, say that your enthusiasm and desire to learn from a great team will help the team to become more effective. Common telesales interview questions. Why do you want work in sales?