

Thoughts

Reflexion and Analysis for the Indian

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Marketing – Building the consumer's conditioning



Foreword

The dog of Ivan Pavlov is as famous as his master! Without him, the name of this Russian doctor would probably not be associated with the conditioned reflex and the conditioning. The experiment that he has done with his dog and which, among others, made him famous, was to give mash to his dog by sounding a bell. At the sight of food, the dog would begin to salivate. Gradually, through repetition, Pavlov got him used to the bell = mash relationship. After this learning, he would sound the bell without presenting food to the dog. On hearing the sound, the dog began to salivate. It therefore established a conditioning connection between the stimulus and the response of salivation. In more scientific terms, an unconditioned stimulus (the dog's mash) has generated an unconditioned response (the salivation).

A neutral stimulus, when introduced (the bell), associated with an action (the fact of giving mash), becomes a conditioned stimulus that generates, after a while, a conditioned response (the salivation).

So, when a conditioned stimulus acquires the ability to arouse a response that is initially provoked, by reflex, by an unconditioned stimulus, a conditioning said to be 'Pavlovian' or classical occurs.

Studies on classical conditioning have led to the emergence of other theories capable of explaining behaviour and learning, including the one of the said operant conditioning. Burrhus Frederic Skinner invented this notion of operant conditioning, which highlights that the conditioning is not bound to reflex responses of the body, but to the influence of the environment, which positively or negatively reinforces the conditioning. For example, if a rat discovers, by chance, that by activating a lever he will get food, he will seek to activate the lever again.

This new description highlights the concept of learning that will be fundamental to our influencing approach.

The question that naturally arises is to know to what extent these models tested on animals can be applied to human beings in social situations.

The use of classical conditioning to influence consumers

Our daily lives reveal many situations where, without knowing it, we are confronted with classical conditioning. This is the case when we shudder at the sight of snow; when our heart rate accelerates; when we replay a music heard during a first date;

when nausea appears after smelling an alcoholic beverage that has made us vomit during a previous bender; when we cover our ears seeing someone lighting a firecracker; when we lower our eyelids before we open our shutters a sunny summer morning or when the child laughs before the father's hand touches his belly to tickle him.

All of these daily elements are related to the learning of the human being in a particular context. The central idea of this reasoning is that we mostly learn by making associations. Classical conditioning has many applications in advertisement because of the desire to create relations between pleasant sensations and a brand: Aishwarya Rai for L'Oréal, Shah Rukh Khan for TAG Heuer or even Kareena Kapoor for Malabar Gold.

It implements cognitive and affective mechanisms. The formation of beliefs about products and the brand (cognitive mechanism) and the direct affective transfer of emotions felt about the brand (affective mechanism) underlie complementarily the conditioning of the attitude towards the brand.

On one hand, classical conditioning is considered as the learning of a signal. It is, in this case, an associative mechanism, underlined by cognitive processes, which the individual is fully aware of, and which allow us predictions about events.

This will be the case for marketing operations such as discounts, barred prices or even limited offers. But that is not enough!

There must be an affective transfer when facing a brand or a message that influences the attitudes and beliefs regarding the brand in question.

The consequence of creative advertising is that you must show very attractive images, nonverbal elements that are highly appreciated and associate them with products, without necessarily arguing on their performance. To reinforce learning, it is necessary to multiply the associations between these images and the brand to maintain and intensify the positive affect transferred to the brand.

Let's take a concrete example of Apple iPod and the classical conditioning that was used as an influence strategy on the consumers.

Today, if the iPod has become synonymous with quality and innovation, it is because of all the effort that Apple has made so that consumers come to associate this brand with qualifiers as strong as quality, innovation and fine edge technology.

The company has managed to have consumers make associations with this product to an extent that without seeing the brand or the iPod, when you meet someone on the street listening to music, you would know if he has an iPod or not.

Here's how the brand proceeded. Since 2001, all iPods have aesthetically and technologically evolved. The basic model has undergone many changes and many new models have emerged.

A very simple element of the iPod remains however unchanged or almost since the creation of this product. This element may even seem insignificant, yet it is nevertheless a great way for the brand to gain recognition everywhere and at all times. Have you guessed what it is?

With time, consumers have learned to associate small white and grey earphones with the iPod brand. These are the earphones that are sold with each iPod.

This association has been reinforced with the launch of a visual ad campaign featuring a man and a woman whose shadows we only see dancing with a white iPod in their hands and white earphones in their ears to mark the contrast.

In this case, it is proposed to the consumers to make an unconscious association.

Thus, the consumer sees the product that the company wants to sell; he also knows which product it is even if it is not clearly indicated that it is the iPod.

The very strong contrast effect that is used in many advertisements of the brand have made it so that consumers learn that these advertisements, with or without the brand on it, are in reference to the iPod.

It, therefore, seems logical that in the face of marketing operations such as sales, barred prices, the word 'free' or even limited offers, the consumer does not automatically implement reflex actions, and that the emotional dimension plays a fundamental role in classical conditioning.

It is therefore essential to condition the attitude of the consumer by coupling cognition/affection in the use of classical conditioning.

The use of operant conditioning to influence consumers

This type of conditioning stipulates that an organisation learns from the consequences of its behaviour on the environment.

Thus the consequences of our behaviours change their frequency of occurrence in the future. This frequency increases if the consequences are appetitive (called reinforcement) and decreases if the consequences are aversive (called punishment).

In other words, the cause of behaviour is its consequence! Operating conditioning, therefore, refers to the selective effects of consequences on our behaviours. This is a concept parallel to the theory of natural selection of Darwin: at the human scale, behaviours producing the most favourable consequences are selected and 'survive'.

It is a dynamic approach of learning. Consumers tend to seek actions that have positive effects and avoid those that have negative consequences. The individual will therefore learn, in a conscious way, from his past experiences to develop a behaviour that will maximise his satisfaction.

Here, the central concept is of the strengthening of the relation between a situation and a brand: if the consequences of a behaviour are positive, the behaviour of the individual is positively reinforced, and the likelihood that the individual reproduces this behaviour increases. It is this behaviour that leads to the re-purchase of a product. The latter will be enhanced by rewards for the consumer such as loyalty points or gifts. If the reinforcement is relevant in the case of simple behaviours (buying food or drink, for example), it is not enough for complex behaviours (buying a car or a house). The idea is therefore to first strengthen simple behaviours to gradually be able to modify ultimate complex behaviours. This type of approach aims to strengthen brand loyalty. It is called shaping.

For a brand, for example, it will be to encourage consumers to first try the products via a free sample to which we will add a coupon (couponing), giving a substantial discount on a future purchase. During the re-purchase, customers get a second coupon for a third lower discount...and so on.

These techniques are extensively used in supermarkets

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