

DETERMINING THE SALIENCE OF RELEVANT REFERENTS

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Abstract

How the elicitation question wording suggested by Fishbein for determining relevant referents affects the set of relevant referents and how these sets differ in predicting Fishbein's subjective norm were examined. Elicitation question wording affected the types of and frequency with which referents were elicited. No differences in the ability of these sets to predict the subjective norm were found.

Introduction

The nature of the elicitation procedure suggested by Fishbein for determining salient referents has many implications for users of Fishbein's extended model. Methodologically, marketers need situational flexibility so that salient referents aren't excluded and non-salient ones aren't included. Strategically, knowing relevant referents indicates whose opinions can have an effect on behavior. Conceptually, the aggregation of these relevant referent's opinions determines the perception of the desires of the "generalized other," i.e., the subjective norm (SN). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to determine (1) the extent to which different elicitation questions result in different sets of relevant referents and, (2) the set that is the best predictor of SN.

Method

A study was conducted in two phases. The initial phase of the research involved composing a questionnaire to determine "important others" for buying sunglasses, automobiles, T.V.'s, and raincoats.

The following questions were selected because they represented operationalizations that would logically follow from the conceptual framework behind the normative component (Fishbein, personal communication). (1) SKINF: From what sources would you seek information about (product name)? (2) AGR: What sources would you want to agree with your buying (product name)? (3) OP: Whose opinions about buying (product name) would you value? (4) FE: Who do you think would have feelings about whether you should or should not buy (product name)? Each respondent reacted to each question and each product only once. A content analysis was performed, and the most frequently mentioned referents for each of the products and for each of the questions were recorded. A total of 350 valid surveys were collected.

The results of the Phase 1 elicitation survey were used to construct the Phase 2 questionnaire. The purpose of Phase 2 was to determine whether the different wordings used in Phase 1 yielded sets of referents that varied in their ability to predict SN. Seven place bi-polar scales were used to determine normative beliefs, motivation to comply, and the subjective norm.

Results

There were definite wording effects. For all four products, Kendall's W was not significant. This means that the frequency with which a referent was mentioned, and hence according to Fishbein its "importance" rank, varied according to the elicitation question asked.

The methodological implications are that the marketer has little flexibility in the way he can ask elicitation questions because the strategy used to increase the normative desirability of his product will vary as a function of the question asked. For example, an auto marketer's strategy would be affected by the elicitation question wording. Had he asked SKINF, the fact the car was well received by consumer guides would be stressed. Had any of the other questions been asked, the ad's main focus would be on the spouse.

The conceptual question of which elicitation question gives the best set of relevant referents can be answered by looking at the $SN-\Sigma NB_i MC_i$ correlations. Using Fisher's Z transformation to test for significant differences among the correlations, it was found that for a given product category, none were significantly different. It appears that these different $\Sigma NB_i MC_i$'s are accounting for different parts of the variance in SN. The correlations, while significant at $p < .01$ they ranged from .254 to .654.

While none of the elicitation questions yielded a set of referents that did a significantly superior job of predicting SN, an examination of the average correlation coefficients for the various wordings suggest that AGR's and OP's set of referents may be "best" at predicting SN. Unfortunately, the strategies based on the two wordings are quite different, irrespective of product category.

Discussion

This study has not discovered the "best" way of eliciting relevant referents. It has, however, pointed out the strategic ramifications of the problem and, hopefully, will encourage further research on the issue.