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## Information design: how marketers 'construct' consumer preferences

30 APRIL 2015 ⌚ 4 MIN READ



## Adrian Camilleri, lecturer in marketing at RMIT University, writes that information is to marketers as walls are to architects.

Master architects shape the experience of all who interact with their realised designs through the arrangement of walls and the location of spaces. Marketers are also architects.



Rather than designing the arrangement of walls, marketers design the arrangement of information. Rather than helping to construct a building, marketers help to construct a consumer's choice.

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### Design your information

Information design refers to all of the small decisions a marketer makes in presenting product information to the consumer. Consider a restaurant menu: while the chef decides the menu items, it is the marketer who decides how to design the menu itself. The range of design decisions is broad; from how to order and group the menu items to the size and colour of the menu item font. Good information design is important because it is the direct medium by which marketers communicate with consumers. Moreover, these design decisions matter, as demonstrated by a simple experiment.

Researchers based at the University of Los Angeles invited a number of consumers to select foods from a menu. Some people were presented with a menu in which the foods were grouped in terms of 'fruits', 'vegetables' and 'cookies and crackers' whereas others were presented with a menu in which the same foods were grouped in terms of 'fruits and vegetables',

## Design

**In April and May 2015, *Marketing* is obsessed with all things 'Design', from packaging design to design thinking to designer brands.**

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'cookies' and 'crackers'. The researchers found that the consumers were much more likely to select fruits and vegetables when presented with the first type of menu than the second type of menu. Why? It turns out that people prefer to spread their preferences across the available categories. As a result, simply rearranging the categories – redesigning the 'choice architecture' – influences consumer preferences.

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## Design available choices

Effective choice architecture often presents information in a format that is easily processed. Generally, this requires an understanding of the goals that people are attempting to achieve, as well as an understanding of their processing limitations. Imagine that you are at the grocery store and in the market for some Coke. The range of possible options is staggering: bottle or can? A two-litre bottle or a bundle of two one-litre bottles?

In this situation, you probably have a goal of purchasing the cheapest product available, but struggle to calculate which option is cheapest. The solution? Present price in terms of a single, standardised unit that is common across products of the same type (e.g. price per litre). Indeed, this is the concept of unit pricing, which became a mandatory industry code for Australian grocers in a 2010 Act. Unit pricing enables consumers to quickly compare products of different sizes and brands in order to work out which one offers the best value.

Converting one piece of information into another, such as moving from 'price' to 'price per litre', is what I call making an information 'translation'. Different translations are closely related to each other, but each may highlight a unique aspect of the same attribute. Imagine that you are browsing Mazda's website contemplating what your next car might be. You're probably considering many factors and one of them is fuel economy. In Australia, fuel economy is expressed in terms of litres per 100 kilometres. Like the average Australian driver, you drive 100 kilometres every few days, and you don't directly care about the volume of fuel required to drive this relatively short distance. The fuel economy information is difficult to make use of and so you ignore it. After all, is the difference between the Mazda2's '5.5L/100km' and the Mazda6's '6.6L/100km' relevant?

Research that I have led shows that fuel economy can be made relevant by some simple information

redesign. It turns out that consumers' preference for a fuel-efficient vehicle increases when fuel economy is expressed as the cost of fuel over 100,000 kilometres. This cost metric feeds directly into consumers' cost-minimisation goal. Moreover, the large scale is helpful because it better aligns with the average driver's lifetime vehicle usage. At present, only the US and New Zealand provide estimated fuel cost information on fuel economy labels. Forward-thinking policy-makers and managers concerned with promoting efficiency and reducing carbon emissions would do well to present relevant metrics on expanded scales.

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## Put it in context

People often assume that the mere presentation of information will be sufficient for consumers to act. For example, larger chains of standard food outlets in New South Wales must now display energy information in kilojoules (kJ) for their standard items on menu boards. The US Food and Drug Administration in the US has proposed similar guidelines with calories. The aim of these policies is to provide consumers with relevant information at the point of purchase, with the hope that this information will lead consumers to make healthier food choices.

Imagine that you are at McDonald's deciding between a classic Big Mac and a McChicken. You notice the energy difference – 2060 kJ versus 1710 kJ – but of course this information is meaningless without context. What does a difference of 350 kJ mean? Indeed, examination of choice behaviour following the introduction of calorie information on menus reveals an unimpressively small decrease in the average number of calories consumed.

Other research suggests that alternative information designs are more helpful for consumers trying to make meaning out of calorie information. For example, one study found that people selected a meal with fewest calories when the menu items with calorie information were ordered from low to high and colour coded to signify poorer and better food choices. More generally, the multiple traffic light system – red, yellow, green – on food labels has most consistently helped consumers identify healthier products. Marketers have the power to help construct consumers' preferences through information design. The examples above reveal three general principles that marketers can take away.

First, information should be relevant. This principle aligns well with the attitude of modernist architectural design that 'form follows function'. In most cases, this involves understanding what the consumers' goals are and then providing information that directly relates to those goals. For example, fuel economy labels in the US now include a Greenhouse Gas Rating, a score out of 10, which my colleagues and I have shown increases the tendency of pro-environmental consumers to prefer fuel-efficient vehicles.

Second, information should be simple to process. The concept of minimalist architecture is to strip everything down to its essential quality. For information design, this generally involves 'doing the maths' for people and providing information that is useful in its presented form without need for further analysis. For example, online travel company Hipmunk orders flight search results by an 'agony' score, which is a combination of price, number of stops and duration.

Third, different information formats should be experimented with. In many cases, it is impossible to accurately predict how consumers will respond to redesigned information and so the only sensible thing to do is conduct an experiment and find out. As expressed by US neo-futuristic architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, "There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes."

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