



Showing a tree to sell the forest: The impact of attribute- and alternative-based information presentation on consumers' choices



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ABSTRACT

Consumers can be provided with information in either an attribute- or an alternative-based way. We consider the literature on information presentation through the theoretical lenses of the Construal Level Theory. We propose and find that providing product-related information in an attribute- rather than an alternative-based way shifts choices. The attribute-based pattern leads to high construal levels and choices driven by desirability-related, high-level attributes (e.g., design). But when the same information is acquired following the alternative-based pattern, it leads to low construal levels and choices driven by feasibility-related, low-level attributes (e.g., price). As a consequence, choice shares for products whose strength lies in convenience and other feasibility-related features are boosted by the presentation of alternative-based information. Conversely, choice shares for products whose strength lies in design and other desirability-related features are increased by the presentation of attribute-based information. We further find that consumers acquiring information in an alternative-based way envision consumption much closer in the future than those acquiring information in an attribute-based way. Finally, we find that attribute-based information leads to more clicking.

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1. Introduction

Imagine buying a ticket for a flight to your favorite holiday location. Like many people nowadays, you go to the Internet to seek information about ticket prices, flight-cancellation insurance, and other considerations. You might find a website that shows the different available flights one after the next, like the pages of a book. Or you might find a website that shows you the same flights simultaneously but lists them according to certain characteristics (departure time, price, seating, etc.).

More formally, these two options represent an alternative- vs. an attribute-based information presentation. People who are searching for information can in fact experience two different patterns of information presentation: one operates attribute by attribute; the other, product by product (Chernev, 2003; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1988). In a nutshell, alternative-based models postulate that consumers compute an overall utility measure for each option and then make pairwise comparisons across the available options. Attribute-based models, on the other hand, postulate that consumers weight the

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value of each attribute across all the available options, focus on the attributes that are not identical between competing options, and then rank the attributes in decreasing order of importance.

Consumers are increasingly searching for information before making purchases (Jepsen, 2007; Moon, 2004). Accordingly, many retailers now provide consumers with the opportunity to obtain information about a product or a service by learning from other consumers' reviews and recommendations in the form of word-of-mouth (Bickart & Schindler, 2001), as well as tools for comparing products or services in an assortment, as such comparisons are usually considered a key driver of purchase intention. Thus, it is common to find in the practice examples of attribute- or alternative- based information presentation. A typical example of attribute-based information presentation is the printed catalog, the structure of which forces consumers to analyze products sequentially. Many websites, on the other hand, provide a plethora of tools to help individuals gather information attribute by attribute, for instance, tools that group products by price (Jepsen, 2007; Moon, 2004). To present information based on attributes rather than alternatives is not a constraint of the communication channel or the product category, but a strategic choice on the retailer's part. For instance, on the Internet, retailers can work either one way or the other: the Rolex website provides information about watches using an alternative-based scheme, whereas the Amazon.com website uses an attribute-based scheme to present product information on watches. It therefore becomes a relevant research question whether such different mechanisms lead to differences in the choices consumers make.

Nonetheless, empirical research on the effect of information-acquisition strategies on consumers' choices is scarce. In literature that spans nearly half a century, several articles have addressed the issue of information-acquisition strategies theoretically, debating whence those patterns come, at the expense of understanding where they lead to. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has addressed information acquisition as an independent variable that affects choice. We feel that the time has come to investigate empirically the effects of alternative- vs. attribute-based information acquisition on choice.

In this research, we aim to demonstrate empirically that the pattern used to present information does affect consumers' choice shares for the products in the assortment. In doing so, we are the first to document that the effect of information acquisition transcends variations in individuals' mental representations and can translate to economically relevant behaviors. In particular, building on the Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003) we propose and show in two studies that the two different information-presentation strategies trigger a reversal of preferences: choice in the attribute-based condition is driven by desirability-related features, and by feasibility-related features otherwise. Study 1 is purposely exploratory and aims to set the boundaries of our investigation. In Study 1 we manipulate the information-presentation strategy and the product attributes, showing a consequent reversal of preferences. We deepen the scope of the analysis in Study 2, ruling out alternative explanations for the results observed in Study 1 and relaxing some of the constraints due to Study 1's design. Specifically, in Study 2 we investigate the consequences for choice when respondents are allowed to click on the available information, controlling for actual differences in construal levels, and adding a control group to serve as a baseline to assess the actual size of the effects. Finally, in Study 3 we add a measure of construal level as a dependent measure, to show unambiguously that CLT is responsible for the effects reported in Study 1 and Study 2.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Information presentation

The literature on information presentation distinguishes among attribute- and alternative-based strategies (Chernev, 2003; Payne et al., 1988), and the great majority of the theoretical models developed on information-acquisition strategies in the extant literature fall into either the former or the latter category. For instance, the *additive* model (Tversky, 1969) postulates that consumers compute an overall utility measure associated with each product as the sum of attribute utilities. Analogously, the *majority of confirming dimensions* model (Russo & Doshier, 1983) assumes that consumers base their choices on pairwise comparisons across all the available options, whereas the *satisficing rule* model advances that consumers make alternative-based comparisons with a cut-off point that determines a satisficing choice (Simon, 1955).

On the contrary, the *expectancy-value* model (Fishbein, 1963) suggests that consumers engage in attribute-based evaluations when they choose from a set of options by weighting the value of each attribute across the available options with the subjective belief strength. Other attribute-based models have been proposed in the literature suggesting that consumers use a *lexicographic rule* to rank the attributes in decreasing importance order, and compare the products accordingly until a preferred option is identified (Tversky, 1969). Similarly, according to the *additive difference* and the *elimination by aspect* models (Tversky, 1969), consumers make attribute-based comparisons by confronting each attribute level across competing products in order to identify the best option by eliminating one option at a time from the choice set.

While the single models differ on some aspects, they share the idea that consumers can acquire information either attribute by attribute, or product by product. These models also have in common that information acquisition is a dependent variable, and they overall consider information acquisition as a consequence of how the assortment is arranged. Specifically, the information-acquisition pattern is a consequence of the choice task (Bettman, 1979); of the number of options (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998); and of the degree of preference articulation (Chernev, 2003). However, we posit that the information-acquisition strategy could be an antecedent of choice, and different ways of presenting information to consumers could lead to different choices from the same assortment.

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