

It's Not You, It's Me: Shopper Promiscuity in Context





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“Not a lot of marketers know what is going on!” Dr. Jorge Villegas has been teaching college students about marketing, advertising, and consumer behavior for twenty years. It may not seem like a long time; but, to put that timeframe into some context, when Dr. Villegas first started teaching in 1996, Bill Clinton was campaigning for his second term, Princess Di got divorced, DVDs made their first appearance in Japan, and the Internet reached the significant threshold of 10 million users. A lot has happened in just two decades.

Dr. Villegas has taught students during the rise of e-commerce, through the fragmentation of cable television, and shifts in American psyche after September 11th, 2001. Those have been big, meaningful changes that have affected our everyday lives.

Yet, the materials Dr. Villegas was using as teaching tools – academic, well-thought out, peer-reviewed textbooks – were losing their relevance. Now, he fears, they have nothing to offer in this new era.

“It’s so hard these days to teach marketing. Traditional consumer behavior and communication models do not respond to our current reality and there are no academic resources or data to show how marketers work these days.”
– Dr. Jorge Villegas, Associate Professor of Business Administration, College of Business and Management, University of Illinois at Springfield

When his semester begins, Dr. Villegas explains to his students that whole chapters of his textbooks will be of no use to them. Instead, he sources course material from industry publications, books for the general public, and interviews with people working in the field. The terrain is shifting so fast, Dr. Villegas often has to continually supplement and update that material to stay relevant. His foundation for teaching the next generation of marketers has evolved (or devolved) from academia to on-the-fly, business-driven experiments and iterations



Today, we are all learning as we go.

Technology has driven a great deal of the change we see in shopping habits. Certainly, having online retail options, the Internet on your smartphone, and limitless options have all affected how we approach shopping. The problem with Dr. Villegas' textbooks is that they remain focused on technology. In recent years, our industry has been too focused on pay-per-clicks, native advertising, algorithms, geo-targeting, and a billion other ways we can peek into the way shoppers are interacting with marketing technology. That's fine and we need to understand it, but those are ancillary metrics.

At a fundamental level, we are changing the relationship we have to goods and services. When you can get whatever you want, whenever you want, how do your priorities and needs change? When everything seems to be innovating at a rapid pace, what happens to our brand loyalty? When you have all the information you could ever want to make a decision, what information becomes relevant to you?



In previous books

we've talked about the dawn of promiscuous shoppers and how they are reimagining shopping behavior. Promiscuity is not a trend. It is our new normal and will only intensify with technological advancements. But, how do we measure promiscuity? Thinking back to Dr. Villegas' students, we know the models and methods in his textbooks are rapidly approaching irrelevance. Now is the time to reinvent the way we research shopping.

One of the reasons folks hang on to the old models is their simplicity. Beautifully clear geometric funnels, diamonds, flow charts illustrating a linear path from awareness to comprehension to loyalty. Marketers can action against the funnel and researchers can design studies to reveal how to move across the diagram. Research simplified the space and made the mode of play more straightforward, like a board game. When these functions were relevant, it was a good time to be a researcher, but those days are gone.

Unfortunately, we can't simply adapt these models or replace them with other delightfully simple and digestible visuals.





Today's shopper journey is messy and decidedly individual.

Shopping behavior can change dramatically depending on the shopper's mindset and context. If the old model of research and marketing was a board game, the new world is a modern video game, full of freedom, choice, and complexity. There is no map to follow, no path to purchase where shoppers will conveniently fit into data-determined steps. In a board game, you make moves along a very narrow and constrained set of paths, with each player taking their turn and the game proceeding in an orderly manner, just as we once did in marketing. But we've moved from The Game of Life to Minecraft; our world is more open, we have more choices in how we engage with our goals. And just as the board our industry plays on has shifted, so must the strategies we employ to try and enhance the game experience.

All hope is not lost, however. Regardless of category, shopper type, or context, each shopper is influenced by several key factors – who they are, what they need, what matters to them, and how they are going to solve the problem. While the simple strategies of the past have been invalidated, the new field of play brings with it a number of new possible strategies for reaching consumers.

Thinking about our Minecraft player, yes their options are unlimited, but there are factors about their current circumstance that will determine their next steps. Rather than focus on what the character will do, we need to focus on why they are doing it.



Who They Are	What They Need	What Matters to Them	How They Solve The Problem
Shopper Promiscuity	Product Promiscuity	Shopper Priorities	Shopping Context

To get to the real insights, we have to tailor our promiscuity metrics to the category, the brand, the product, and the shopper themselves.



The Shopper's Promiscuity Level:

How curious and experimental is a person in general? Do they like taking risks, trying new things? Are they early adopters? We've measured these issues in research for some time, but now we should be codifying them into any consumer research we do. Understanding a person's general proclivities towards promiscuity is the first step in comprehending our shopper.

This can vary among demographics, with some more willing to take risks and try new things than others. For example, according to a recent article in the Los Angeles Times, "Millennials are not big risk takers" unlike their Generation X predecessors. Some put forth that this may have to do with an upbringing that was protective and emphasized participation over winning. It's important to fashion research and marketing with these kinds of levels in mind for the target audience.





The Product Promiscuity Level:

Some categories lend themselves to more promiscuity than others. One of the most surprising outcomes from our research was that soda drinkers were the most loyal brand purchasers in the grocery store.

Ninety-five percent of soda drinkers bought their preferred brand regardless of promotions or at-shelf marketing. In contrast, frozen meals had only 36 percent brand loyalty since most shoppers were driven by promotions (10 for \$10 being a real kicker) or trying new flavors. So, as marketers and researchers, we need to be aware of the general promiscuity of the product category. It isn't just about the shopper.





Shopper Priorities:

Another factor influencing promiscuity is the shopper's priorities for that particular purchase.

Let's take buying children's clothes. Priorities for this purchase can vary greatly depending on parent concerns, the child's personality, school requirements and much more.

Some parents may be looking for the cheapest item, others may be looking for uniforms and yet others might be looking for the latest fashion to boost a child's self-confidence. Constraints like timing and budget also play a role, as well as the shopper's emotional state – a stressed, exhausted, frustrated shopper will make different decisions than a relaxed, curious, comfortable shopper.

Understanding their parameters around the shopping experience will reveal motives for their behavior.





Shopping Context:

This is by far the most overlooked area that can influence shopper promiscuity. The first three items we discussed were about the shopper themselves. A fourth and very critical factor is the actual shopping experience – whether online or in-person. We all know experiences can vary at the same store – a staffing shortage leads to long lines and frustrated customers. We’ve all seen that one frustrated guy step out of line and grumble as he puts his unpurchased items on the end cap. An online retailer can have a slow moving check-out process that annoys the shopper. According to the Baymard Institute’s E-Commerce Checkout Usability Study, 69.23% of online shoppers abandon their shopping cart. These high rates likely have to do with context, and overall experience which ultimately can alter what people buy.





What do we do with the data?

If all of this sounds alarming, it doesn't have to be. Using many of the same techniques and methodologies we've always relied on as researchers, we can begin to tackle these tough new problems. But first, we need to reorient our thinking about our categories and customers in a few key ways:

It's about customers, not brands. You'll notice that none of the above bullet points mention brand – there's a reason: it's less relevant than you think to many of your customers. Of course customers still have brand preferences and loyalty. We aren't saying it is entirely dead. If your brand sells breakfast cereal, you probably have a segment of your purchasers who automatically buy your product every time they walk down the aisle regardless of marketing or price. But, we are saying that group is shrinking for you and your competition.

Brand needs to be a part of the conversation, but not the focus of the conversation. If you follow the exploration areas above, you can then ask consumers what brands align with their needs and priorities. But, most research starts with brand first. “Which of the following brands would you consider?” This creates a vague hypothetical situation that may have little relevance to how they actually shop. This question also biases respondents to think about their “best” selves and larger brands.

If you're asking me about snack food, I might say Pirate's Booty or Baked Lay's because it makes me feel better about myself to demonstrate I choose slightly healthier options. But, a thorough examination of my trash over the last three months would tell you a very different story. By talking to consumers about why they make their choices and then connecting those choices to brands, we can get to the truth.



Let the data lead the story.

Traditional researchers will give their client a data-heavy report with all sub-groups charted and headlines on every page that essentially charts all the data in the study. Better companies will organize this data into more story-oriented structures.

Neither is the right approach. Yes, clients need data quickly, but we can't default to template, cookie-cutter work to get the data out the door and close the study. Using this kind of approach is like a detective who believes he already has his suspect and interprets the data to support his conclusion. Evidence that doesn't fit his narrative is ignored or explained away.

Some good rules of thumb for today's researcher include:

Make client-agency relationship management a priority:

Make time for workshopping with the client, data strategy sessions and planning. Change can be difficult and getting to the heart of the insights requires all hands on deck.

Ignore the noise:

Ideally, clients understand they shouldn't put every single question they have into a survey. The design of the survey has to be efficient and focused. Not only does this help the respondent experience and generate better data, but it also eliminates the dead-ends and rabbit holes that can plague analysis.

Any product category is a complex space that can't be adequately understood in a single study. But, the goal is not to get a complete picture. We must design the research to be focused on specific needs and issues.

Let the data drive the conclusions:

Make analysis more of a recursive than linear process. Analysis needs to be dynamic and fluid, using data to create the stories that will influence decisions.



Research must represent the consumer reality:

The study design needs to be rooted in the consumer experience. If the research is feeding brand narcissism and only asking about brand opinions, it will be irrelevant to your end-user. A client can do a lot more with data around purchase triggers than they can with knowing their brand is considered 10% more “genuine” than the competition.

Get the most out of your insights:

If you approach data by just populating each question into a chart and running expected sub-groups, you’ll get the surface information, but miss the great insights. Data should be packaged and presented in a way that provides the end-user with clear, concise, and actionable information. Analysis must be about insights – not just about what numbers are significantly different.

Additionally, we have to keep that focus in the analysis stage. This doesn’t mean we need to be those detectives who ignore evidence which doesn’t fit their hypothesis. We don’t want to reject or neglect data to minimize our work. But, smart analysts will know when data might be an interesting foot-note rather than a lead story. Allowing the report to be crafted and fine-tuned to the study objectives, rather than a data dump, will help clients get more quickly to the solutions and stay focused on implementation.



The future of marketing is changing so quickly;
it is hard to get a handle on best practices.

One certainty is that Dr. Villegas and his
colleagues will face a challenge every time
they craft a syllabus – and so will we.



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