

The mind vs. the heart

Let's talk about the so-called considered purchase. Simply defined, it's not when you grab a six-pack of beer or a soap bar off the supermarket shelf, but when you spend some time thinking before you spend money buying – be it your own or your company's funds.

If you take all the research done on how this process works and boil it down to its bare essentials, you end up with a simple four-step model. And, take note, it is a buying, not a selling process, with the buyer approaching the seller and not the other way around.

1. Perceives need
2. Shortlist suppliers
3. Compare offers
4. Selects supplier

It all starts with someone perceiving the need for something. Maybe the family could use a new car. Or the company copier just broke down. Or it is time to move operations to larger quarters. Or whatever.

The next step is to shortlist potential suppliers who could satisfy the need or help solve the problem in question.

Then follows an evaluation and comparison of what the selected companies have to offer. After which the buyer makes his or her final decision on which company gets the order.

Sounds simple and logical? Wait, it gets much more interesting when you look at what drives the process at each of the four steps.

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|----|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Perceives need | Rational |
| 2. | Shortlist suppliers | Irrational |
| 3. | Compare offers | Rational |
| 4. | Selects supplier | Irrational |

The first step is a matter of the mind. It is for the most part a rational realization that something needs to be done. This is also true of corporations, which nonetheless love to postpone new purchases for as long as possible and use the money for other things.

The second step, however, is truly governed by the heart. Nobody contracts every conceivable company that has a product, system or service that could take care of the need. There is just far too much to choose from. So, we make it easy for ourselves and pick a handful to examine more closely. Don't ask why, but several buyer-behavior studies have concluded that most buyers will stop at three. (How many brands did you consider the last time you bought a new car?)

Then we become very rational again, turning the offered solutions inside out, weighing features and benefits against price and delivery time, and so forth. Companies may even set up an evaluation committee or ask the purchasing department to run it all through a computer program of some sort.

And, guess what? At the end of the day, the heart takes over again. From a rational, hard-facts point of view, it is almost impossible today to tell the difference between what one manufacturer has to offer versus another. Or there are far too many complex variables to evaluate to make an unemotional, educated comparison. (Someone has come up with 187 relevant differentiators for personal computers, for example. Phew!) Add to this all the “soft” aspects of the offer: delivery time and installation, user training, financing, corporate stability, and so forth. So chances are great that we simply go with the company or the product we “like” the most.

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|----|---------------------|------------|--------------|
| 1. | Perceives need | Rational | |
| 2. | Shortlist suppliers | Irrational | Brand driven |
| 3. | Compare offers | Rational | |
| 4. | Selects supplier | Irrational | Brand driven |

You have already guessed it. Branding, therefore, is first and foremost a matter of the heart. It helps you get on the shortlist for a chance to bid. And, all things being equal, it tips the scales in your favor when it comes down to decision time.