Identifying consumers who resist looking for information

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Entities like advertisers and public service agencies encounter consumers who are resistant to searching for information. Resistance to information-search is a latent phenomenon that has received little attention from marketers (Case, 2007; Levy, Webster & Kerin, 1983). This is perhaps due to difficulties associated with finding and identifying those who are resistant to looking; those who don’t search do not leave a detectable mark. These consumers miss out on information that may help them make better consumption decisions. They also remain uninformed about crucial broadcasts like product recalls and warnings (Capon & Lutz, 1979).

Failure to spread important information

Successful communication requires information to be pushed – for example, from a public service agency – and information pull from the intended recipient. In between pushing and pulling, message comprehension is augmented by elements like information congruity, translational symmetry and a common nomenclature between sender and receiver. Commonalities in time, space and transmission medium facilitates reach and ease of access. Asymmetries in these lead to communication failure (Green & Mercer, 2001).

For credence services, consumers tend to worry more when faced with an important decision (Mitra, Reiss and Capella, 1999). For some consumers, more worry is positively associated with information searching activity. For other services, worrying more does not appear to result in more search behaviour.

Consumer apathy towards some types of information may prompt resistance to search. For example, although public service information is perceived as credible, it is also seen as “boring” and “not likely to apply to me”. As such, some consumers find the information unattractive, and don’t spend time and effort in its acquisition. Some consumers may actively resist (push back against) taking the information on-board. This may stem from inability to comprehend the information that is found. The reality is that many consumers are receptive to searching for information and do look for information. However, the information found may be too hard to read, too technical, too simple, too complex or not specific enough for their needs (Brucks, 1985; Punj & Staelin, 1982; Park, Mothersbaugh & Feick, 1995; Urbany, Dickson and Wilkie, 1989). The inability to find suitable information may dissuade consumers from searching further, breeding resistance. For information providers, resistance to searching poses a larger barrier than resistance to comprehending material. After all, there is no information to digest if one does not look.

Current models that predict consumer resistance to information-search deal with resistance as a between-group problem. Some socio-demographic groups like older, poorer and socially disadvantaged consumers are presumed to be more resistant (Bound, Jaeger & Barker 1995; Goldfarb and Prince 2008). These groups are thought to have limited access and ability to operate electronic devices like computers; these tools are necessarily for searching. Of course, this assumes that the majority of information is stored digitally and these devices provide the easiest access to this repository. Thinking of this problem as between-groups limits the solutions to deal with this problem; not all poorer or more-mature consumers have difficulty accessing and using computers or the internet. The existing thinking seeks to define groups that can be ‘treated’ through policy mechanisms. We argue that this is an unrefined ‘shotgun’ approach and that there are better ways for identification. This article seeks to
develop a within-group model able to identify high resistance to information-search (HRIS) individuals. This new model can either screen for resistant people within groups, or can be used without needing to specify groups.

In a buying situation, consumers who are not confident about their product knowledge are more likely to search for information. Typically, they compare subjective against objective product knowledge (Kuhlthau, 1997). Subjective knowledge is what the consumer thinks they know. Objective knowledge represents factual knowledge (Brucks, 1985). HRIS may prevail more in consumers with high levels of subjective knowledge; this makes them feel confident about the purchase. **H1:** Consumers’ confidence level about a purchase is positively associated with resistance to information search.

A product’s personal importance can be used to measure consumers’ involvement with a product (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Consumers are less likely to search for information about an unimportant product, making them more resistant to search. This leads to **H2:** A product’s perceived level of personal importance is negatively associated with resistance to information search.

Consumers who are short of time or have to make a decision quickly may choose not to search for information. Alternatively, they may abbreviate their search (Burdick 1998, Sacchi & Burigo, 2008). In this situation, finding too much information and not having enough time to digest it may cause resistance to more search activity (Blackwell, Engel & Miniard, 2006). Therefore, **H3** is: Consumers’ perceived time pressure to make a decision is negatively associated with resistance to information search.

A consumer’s ability to operate the tools needed for searching (e.g. internet) will likely make them better at searching (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Familiarity with these tools also increases familiarity with how, where, and when to search. As such, consumers who lack these skills or access to search tools are likely more resistant. This leads to **H4:** Consumers’ perceived difficulty to access information is positively associated with resistance to information search. Familiarity and experience with a product is likely to reduce information search. This is because experience typically increases the consumer’s knowledge about the product. Therefore, **H5** is: Consumers’ experience with the product is negatively associated with resistance to information search.

**Method**

A masked survey was administered through an Australian real-estate agency to 130 working-aged people in their 20’s. These respondents were looking for a rental property. Respondents thought they were answering questions about their objective knowledge on lodging tenant’s security bonds. We asked a question at the end of the survey to test for demand characteristics, none of the respondents had worked out the true intent of our research. The items and constructs in our survey were developed using a review of the literature and two focus groups. The survey was pilot tested on 30 graduate students who were of similar demographics to sample. Following this, the survey was reworded to increase the clarity of some questions.

We sampled young adults because they are likely to have some experience renting. However, they are also ‘beginner renters’, inexperienced enough so that they have to search for information to complete the necessary paperwork. We also chose this group because they are more likely to be internet savvy. This ability is crucial to our study because information about rental bonds and contracts in Australia is only easily accessible online.

We had 110 useable responses, 57% were male, 69% were 19-25 years old, 49% were university educated. This sample was judged as adequate to test our within-groups model to identify individuals highly-resistant to information-search (HRIS). The survey had 18 questions with 5 point Likert scales. The independent variables tested were the perceived
importance of the search-topic, experience with the product, subjective knowledge on the topic, time pressure for searching and digesting information and consumers’ ability to comprehend the information. The dependent variable was the amount of self-reported effort and time that respondents’ spent looking for a new rental property.

Results

We tested three mediums that are regularly used to search for rental information; internet, real-estate agent and word-of-mouth. To rent successfully, respondents likely perceived that they needed information on rental listings (property) and legal matters. First, we tested to see if those identified as receptive to searching and those who were resistant to searching reported the same levels of information search activity. High-resistance individuals (HRIS) were those who reported expending little effort to search for rental information. Low-resistance individuals (LRIS) reported more information search activity. Our results showed that HRIS used all mediums less.

Next we tested if LRIS perceived the mediums to have different degrees of usefulness. LRIS reported differences in the usefulness of internet (M=3.58 vs. 2.74, p=.004) and word-of-mouth (M=4.38, p=.001) for obtaining information about rental listings and the legal aspects of renting. LRIS also perceived that real estate agents were not significantly different from the other sources as useful information sources. HRIS reported no significant differences between the channels. This may indicate that this group undertook little search activity in the first place.

We chose Multiple Discriminant Analysis (MDA) to test our model, intending to adequately identify and classify HRIS respondents. MDA uses a linear combination of two or more independent variables to predict a single dependent variable in a manner reminiscent of multiple linear-regression. MDA is suitable for this analysis because it can predict HRIS group-membership using responses (Hair et al. 1998). This method can also identify which questions can be used to screen for HRIS, aiding our development of a succinct and easy to use method for identification. Ease of use and ease of application are important because HRIS are unlikely to respond to long and involving surveys.

We sorted our respondents into three high-mid-and low resistance groups. To see if the groups could be compared, we tested for the group’s equality of variance. The group responses were not statistically different. Box’s test indicated that group responses were equal using co-variance matrices (F=3.96, df =52, p=.35). This means that we could proceed with classifying the groups. The first MDA discriminatory function was statistically significant (Wilk’s Lambda=.84, p=.04; Table 1).Function 1 supports H1 and H2. The second function was not significant (p=.48) and was not associated with identification. Therefore H3 and H4 were not supported.

| Table 1: MDA Structure Matrix for resistance to information search |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Function             | 1 | 2 |
| Importance of lodging the rental tenancy bond correctly | .28 | | |
| Subjective knowledge about bond lodgement process (confidence) | .26 | | |
| Difficulty in understanding terms used in bond lodgement | | .67 |
| Difficulty in understanding terms used in rental agreement | | .65 |
| Experienced time pressure in deciding on tenancy | | .62 |
| Difficulty in accessing information about the renting process | | .62 |

Note: * Largest absolute correlation between each variable and any discriminant function, Non-significant loadings are not reported.

We used function coefficients from the standardized canonical discriminate statistic to assess the importance of predictor variables; the higher the coefficient, the more important the
predictor. Respondents’ perceptions about the ‘importance of lodging the rental tenancy bond correctly’ (perceived importance) and their level of ‘subjective knowledge about the bond lodgement process’ (confidence) were the independent variables with the highest coefficient values.

| Table 2: MDA Classification results for high, moderate and low resistance groups |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                 | High (n=8)     | Moderate (n=3) | Low (n=11)     | Total          |
| High            | 72.7%          | 0 (0)          | 27.3% (n=3)    | 100% (n=11)    |
| Moderate        | 42.1 (24)      | 27.3 (3)       | 27.3 (3)       | 100% (n=11)    |
| Low             | 26.7 (8)       | 14 (8)         | 43.9 (25)      | 100% (n=57)    |

Note: percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding

Next we constructed a classification matrix to see whether our model could predict HRIS. Table 2 shows that the model performs well to identify and correctly classify HRIS respondents. It performs poorly when predicting low and moderate resistance to information search. For these groups, the model fails to exceed the Maximum Chance Criterion. This is where prediction is 25% better than the chance of allocation into a group (see Table 3).

Despite a specification using a large LRIS sample (by a factor of three) that was likely to bias against correct identification of HRIS, the model performed well at identifying HRIS. This suggests that the respondents’ level of confidence, as measured by their level of perceived subjective knowledge and the perceived importance of correctly lodging their rental tenancy bond, are suitable for identifying individuals with high resistance to searching for information.

| Table 3: Classification against significance criteria |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Resistance      | High           | Moderate       | Low resistance | Overall         |
| Actual          | 15.7%          | 13.9%          | 70.3%          | 33.4%           |
| MDA             | 72.7%          | 27.3%          | 43.9%          | 48.0%           |
| Improvement ^2   | 57%            | 13.4%          | -26.4%         | 44%             |

Note: ^1 (17/108)^1 + (15/108)^1 + (76/108)^1 = 33.4. ^2 significant if 125% above chance

**Experience**

We performed a bi-variate correlation to test for the number of times a respondent had rented (renting experience) and their success at correctly lodging tenants security bonds. There was a strong significant correlation (Coefficient =.86, p=.04) between experience and correct bond lodgement (first timer = 55% success rate, second time and more = 84% success rate). This suggests that respondents relied on experience rather than information search as a source of learning about bond lodgement. Learning through experience is not necessarily the most efficient way to acquire knowledge about tenancy bond contracts. This learning method may lead to bond mis-lodgement or violating the terms of a rental contract. The level of experience in renting was positively but not significantly correlated with the amount of information search activity (Coefficient =.08, p =.43). This finding does not support H5.

**Conclusion and Limitations**

This article presents and tests a model that can identify individuals who are highly resistant to searching for information. It is a new way of thinking about this problem that uses a within-groups design. This design addresses the limitations of more traditional methods that
rely on between-groups design to identify resistance to information-search. These older methods use socio-demographic and geographic segregators that result in inaccurate ‘shotgun’ type policy instruments to deal with distributing information to hard to reach groups. Our method is able to treat the population as one group. This significantly simplifies identification of resistant individuals. Our model appears to be good at identifying high-resistance individuals, but not those who are less resistant to information-search. This lends specificity to our model.

Individuals who are resistant to searching for information may not have problems in their ability to get or use information. Rather, they do not get the information because of apathy. For example, although younger people are comfortable with and have access to electronic search tools (internet, social network and ‘push media’ like twitter), not all young people take the initiative to look for information on these media.

This study’s respondents resisted searching for information because they perceived a purchase as unimportant. This was despite reporting being not confident about their knowledge on the product being purchased.

Experience with the product strongly influenced respondents’ level of subjective product-knowledge. While there was a steep learning curve, the amount of additional learning appeared to diminish significantly after the first purchase experience; there were no significant differences between those who rented two times and those who had rented five times. Between two and five times, experience did not significantly change the amount of search activity. This suggests that experience does not affect attitude towards searching for information. However, the results of this study are limited to renting and may not be generalizable to other products like insurance and banking. We have tested an ‘occasional’ or ‘rare’ type of transaction. The dynamics of resistance may differ for products that are bought more regularly.

A product’s consumers and those who perceive that they know a lot about a product tend resist searching for information to facilitate its purchase. This doesn’t represent a problem for big brands or for well-known policies. However, it represents a significant barrier for smaller brands and less-sought-after information (e.g., product warnings and recalls or changes to policies). Resistance to searching for information updates may mean that the consumer loses out. Smaller brands need consumers to ‘search’ for them and are unlikely to enter the consumers’ ‘brand field’ without active search by consumers. As such, smaller brands tend to benefit the most from being able to identify potential customers who resist searching for them. These findings provide the initial step, that of identification, needed to design strategies to reach search-resistant consumers.
References


