

## Theories and strategies for changing consumer attitudes

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**Abstract---**The concept "Attitude" occupies a central place in the understanding of consumer behavior, and plays a key role in decision-making in the field of Marketing. And since the most important characteristic of Consumer Attitudes is that they are acquired, resulting from the learning process, and that they are adapted to the surrounding conditions. We have chosen in this article to deal with a set of theories of change in attitudes which have been the basis for the development of certain strategies used in the field of marketing.

**Keywords---**Consumer Attitudes, Marketing Strategies, Marketing Theory.

### Introduction

Attitudes are considered one of the psychological factors of the consumer and a necessary entry point for understanding their behavior. Many researchers have focused on the relationship that may exist between an individual's attitudes and behaviors, and numerous experiments and studies have been conducted in social psychology and marketing by considering attitudes as a factor through which behavior can be explained or predicted. These studies have shown very strong correlations between these two variables.

With the increasing need for the concept of attitudes as one of the essential elements for understanding the individual's decision-making process, most researchers began to study and propose various definitions of this complex concept, particularly in the field of marketing. Among these definitions, we cite Michael Solomon's, which states that "*an attitude is a predisposition to evaluate an object or a product in a positive or negative manner.*"<sup>1</sup>

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Similarly, Martin Evans et al. define attitudes as “a complex mental state that encompasses individuals’ knowledge, feelings, values, and behaviors in a specific manner.”<sup>2</sup> This definition refers to the three components of attitudes, on which most researchers agree: the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. It also highlights the role of attitudes in shaping consumer behavior, considering them as a predisposition to act in a certain way.

As for Ibrahim Obeidat, he defines attitudes as “an expression of an individual’s internal feelings, reflected in their positive or negative tendencies toward a particular object, which arise from past experiences and the learning that results from them.”<sup>3</sup> From this definition, we can infer that attitudes result from changes in an individual’s knowledge through interaction with their environment, and are therefore acquired and subject to change.

From this standpoint, this article will attempt to address the following problem: **What theories and strategies can marketers rely on to change consumer attitudes when these attitudes are negative?**

To answer this question, we have divided the article into two sections: the first will address the theoretical aspects of attitude change, while the second will examine the different strategies for modifying attitudes.

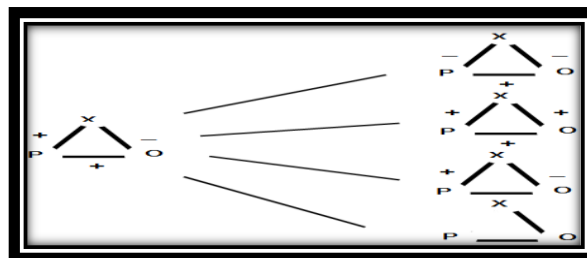
### I. The theoretical aspects of attitude change

The first fact on which social psychologists and marketing scholars agree is that working to shape or reinforce positive attitudes among consumers is easier than working to change them. Although attitudes may indeed change over time, they are also described as learned and acquired. For this reason, it is useful to study the theoretical aspects of attitude change in order to determine whether these theories can be applied in practice. In this regard, this section will address several theories and models that have attempted to explain the process of attitude change and that are relevant to the field of marketing.

#### 1. Balance Theory

This theory, proposed by the American psychologist Fritz Heider in 1946, is based on the one-dimensional model (attitude = affective component). According to his theory, interpersonal relationships and the feelings that arise between individuals and objects can be modeled in the form of a triadic relationship comprising three elements: the person (P), the attitude object (O), and another entity related to the attitude object (X).<sup>4</sup> The aim of this triadic relationship is to predict the person’s feeling (or attitude) toward the attitude object (O) using the observable relationships between the person (P) and the related entity (X), and between the latter and the attitude object.

This triad, which determines the attitude, may be positive or negative. The theory posits that individuals strive to maintain consistency among the three elements (the individual P, the object of the attitude O, and the related entity X), such that the relationships are balanced. Otherwise, the triad becomes unbalanced, creating a state of tension. Consequently, the individual will attempt, in one way or another, to restore balance by modifying one of the relationships within the triad, as illustrated in the following figure :<sup>5</sup>



**Figure No. (1):** The different solutions for restoring the balance of the tripartite relationship (Michael Solomon et al, op-cit, P 214.)

From the figure, it appears that, in attempting to restore balance, the individual may alter the relationship between himself and the element associated with the attitude object, modify the relationship between himself and the attitude object, accept the relationship between the attitude object and its associated element, or even completely abandon both the attitude object and the associated element.

Balance theory is useful in explaining the reliance on celebrities in advertising campaigns to influence consumers' attitudes toward products. When the three relationships are not fully positive, marketing can create a positive association between the influential element and the product by suggesting the existence of a positive relationship between the product and a famous personality. Conversely, attitudes toward a given product may become negative if individuals beloved by the public criticize it. This is the case in anti-drug advertising campaigns supported by athletes and celebrities.

However, it should be noted that creating an association between a product and a celebrity can be risky if public opinion toward the latter shifts negatively, or if the celebrity casts doubt on the relationship between themselves and the product, as happened when Michael Jackson launched an advertisement for Pepsi and later stated that he never consumed soft drinks.<sup>6</sup> One of the weaknesses of this theory is that it focuses only on the equivalence of the three relationships, neglecting the strength of the relationship and the subject of the attitude; moreover, many brands have more than one attribute and can be associated with multiple outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Behaviorist Theory

The behaviorist theory is considered one of the fundamental frameworks for studying the relationship between an individual's beliefs about a product's attributes and their overall attitude toward it.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the overall attitude toward an object refers to the sum of all evaluative responses (the set of beliefs) associated with it, resulting from the specific attributes of the attitude object. For example, when evaluating a car, the defining attributes may include safety, comfort, price, and fuel efficiency. These attributes vary from one person to another depending on their beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Fishbein's behaviorist theory is particularly noteworthy because it goes beyond the limits of balance theory by assuming that:<sup>10</sup>

- The individual is no longer guided solely by the need for consistency;
- There may be more than one attribute and more than one belief regarding the attitude object;
- The relationship between the attitude object and its attributes is no longer limited to a simple positive (+) or negative (-) association, but also takes into account its strength.

In addition to these reasons that contributed to the widespread adoption of the behaviorist theory, its author had a valuable insight by linking it to the Gabriel model, which made it more practical; moreover, it is also considered a measurement-oriented theory.

The algebraic model of Fishbein, also called the "multi-attribute model," is as follows:<sup>11</sup>

**A<sub>o</sub>**: the attitude toward the attitude object O (in the broad sense);  
**b<sub>i</sub>**: the belief that the attitude object O possesses attribute i;  
**e<sub>i</sub>**: the evaluation of attribute i.

$$A_o = \sum_{i=1}^n b_i e_i$$

This equation indicates that the overall consumer attitude toward a product equals the sum of their attitudes toward each of its attributes.<sup>12</sup> However, the problem with this model arises when comparing consumers' attitudes toward two products from the same category but differing in characteristics. This may lead to differences in specific attributes, making comparison impossible due to these discrepancies, which in turn affects the overall evaluation of attitudes toward both products. For example, banking services can be provided either through physical branches or via ATMs.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

L. Festinger, a psychologist and the author of cognitive dissonance theory in 1957, posited that every individual strives for balance among the different elements of an attitude (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) during the decision-making process (principle of consistency). When this balance is disrupted, these elements conflict, causing the individual to experience discomfort. This state is called cognitive dissonance, which the individual seeks to reduce.<sup>14</sup> They do so by changing their thoughts and attitudes, thereby justifying their behavior (for example, convincing themselves that they made a good purchase).<sup>15</sup>

The theory particularly focuses on attitudes in which two cognitive elements conflict with each other. A cognitive element may be a person's belief about themselves, their behavior, or their opinion regarding their environment. For instance, the two cognitive elements "I know that cigarettes cause cancer" and "I smoke cigarettes" are contradictory. This psychological conflict creates discomfort, motivating the smoker to reduce it (dissonance reduction) either by eliminating, adding, or changing elements. For example, one might quit smoking (elimination), recall a great-aunt who lived to 90 despite smoking (addition), or question the research linking smoking to cancer (change).<sup>16</sup>

Festinger's ideas have been applied to address issues in the pre-decision stage. Cognitive dissonance can occur at this stage when the consumer receives information (product attributes, advertisements, innovative products, product line extensions, co-branded products, etc.) that contradicts their established perceptions. This type of dissonance is called "informational cognitive dissonance" and is crucial for understanding consumer confusion during pre-purchase stages, as exposure to perceived inconsistent information may negatively affect purchase intentions.<sup>17</sup> Cognitive dissonance theory also helps explain why product evaluations increase after purchase—post-purchase dissonance occurs as consumers seek support for their purchase decisions by finding convincing reasons to like what they bought. Therefore, marketers should provide additional reinforcements to help build positive brand attitudes.<sup>18</sup> Based on this, Runyon suggested several important strategies to reduce post-purchase dissonance:<sup>19</sup>

- Providing additional information and suggestions for product care through advertising;
- Offering guarantees to reduce post-purchase uncertainty;
- Emphasizing good service and following up on complaints;
- Advertising product quality and performance to ensure satisfaction post-purchase;
- Following up after purchase through direct communication to ensure consumers understand how to use the product.

### 4. Cognitive Learning Theory

Cognitive learning theory assumes that individuals process information they receive in a logical and rational manner.<sup>20</sup> According to this theory, consumers, especially regarding important and complex decisions, form their attitudes as a result of deliberate mental processes. They actively seek out and process information to arrive at a suitable attitude based on the information available to them. However, individuals have limited capacity, so they select a specific quantity or type of information to build their attitude. Therefore, marketers should focus on highlighting the essential and most important features of their products and brands to help consumers develop positive attitudes toward these products.<sup>21</sup>

### 5. Social Judgment Theory

According to Social Judgment Theory, developed by M. Sherif and Hovland in 1961,<sup>22</sup> members of a particular group develop and adopt a variety of practices, habits, traditions, and norms that define the zones of acceptance for attitudes and behaviors deemed acceptable or unacceptable among them across various issues of concern. These shared practices and definitions, with their strong evaluative components, constitute the group's standards, i.e., collective attitudes.

To measure individual and group attitudes toward a specific subject, the theory proposes creating a questionnaire containing a comprehensive set of possible statements about the subject. Respondents are asked to indicate which statements they find acceptable, unacceptable, or neutral (neither acceptable nor rejected). From individual responses, group-level responses can be inferred, reflecting the collective attitudes' zones of acceptance, rejection, and neutrality.

Predictions of Social Judgment Theory suggest that the maximum likelihood of behavioral change occurs for attitudes falling within the neutral zone, whereas attitudes in the acceptance zone are likely to prompt respondents to compare them with group attitudes, and those in the rejection zone are perceived as furthest from the group's collective attitudes<sup>23</sup>. In this context, Kurt Lewin demonstrated that marketers can easily change attitudes using reference groups and opinion leaders, and that altering the attitude of an individual member can lead to a change in the group's attitude.<sup>24</sup>

### 6. Self-Perception Theory

Self-Perception Theory, introduced by Daryl J. Bem in 1967, is one of the theories explaining attitude formation as an alternative to cognitive dissonance theory. It posits that when attitudes toward a specific subject are not yet formed, they can be developed by observing one's own behavior—that is, behavior determines attitudes.<sup>25</sup>

This implies that individuals infer their own attitudes by observing their behavior, much like we assume we know others' attitudes by observing their actions. According to this theory, a consumer should develop a positive attitude toward a product if they purchase or use it (assuming the choice is made freely), as they have an intrinsic motive to feel satisfied with their decisions. Consequently, purchasing a product can lead to the formation of a positive attitude toward it after the fact: why buy it if they do not like it?<sup>26</sup>

The starting point of Self-Perception Theory is that people do not know themselves well. For example, a person may be unsure whether they enjoy reading. The theory describes how individuals discover new traits about themselves; essentially, they infer information about themselves from past behavior (Did I read in the past?) and contextual factors (Were there opportunities to read books?). Whether a reward is present or not can influence how people evaluate their past behavior. Without a reward, past reading may be interpreted as a positive attitude toward it; conversely, with a reward, one may infer they read for the reward rather than for pleasure.<sup>27</sup>

### 7. Fazio & Zanna's Theory

This theory focuses on the concept of attitude strength, suggesting that the strength of an attitude varies depending on how it is formed. Attitudes resulting from personal experience are stronger in their influence than those formed based on external information or indirect experience transmitted between individuals.

These elements are identified as the primary sources of consumer attitudes in general. The foundational component is the cognitive component, which encompasses all available information about a product or brand. Personal experience is considered the most reliable source of this information, forming the basis for the second component—emotional responses—which arise after receiving information,

ultimately guiding specific behaviors. Information derived from personal experience is more difficult to change due to its credibility compared to other sources.<sup>28</sup>

## 8. Functional Theory

According to Katz's Functional Theory of Attitudes, it is possible to change a person's attitudes by providing information aligned with the function that the attitude serves. For example, a logical approach is more effective when the attitude is linked to a utilitarian function, whereas symbolic approaches are more suitable for attitudes serving the value-expressive .<sup>29</sup> function. Marketers can also alter consumers' purchase motives by changing the fundamental functions and services offered by a brand upon acquisition, taking into account the benefits and advantages these products provide that are absent in alternative options within the purchase environment.<sup>30</sup>

After briefly reviewing some theories related to the formation and change of attitudes, which marketers can leverage to influence consumer attitudes toward their products, the next section will address **strategies for changing attitudes**, which represent practical applications of these theories in real-world marketing contexts.

## II. Strategies for Attitude Change

Despite their complexity, difficulty, and high cost, strategies for attitude change are extremely important in the field of marketing. If a consumer holds a negative attitude toward a product, or has a positive attitude toward competing products, the challenge for marketers is to identify the key factors influencing these attitudes and to implement one of the change strategies to make them as positive as possible. A marketer can select an appropriate strategy either by altering the motivational functions of attitudes, modifying their components, applying a multi-attribute model, or through persuasion. These strategies represent practical applications of the aforementioned theories.

### 1. Strategies for Changing the Motivational Functions of Attitudes

Among attitude change strategies is the alteration of their motivational functions, which relies on modifying motives, resulting in behavioral change, which in turn leads to a confirmed change in attitude. Generally, this strategy operates by altering the four functions a product (as the attitude object) can serve, as follows:<sup>31</sup>

- **Changing attitudes through the utilitarian function:** This involves promoting products as providing new benefits or services not previously associated with them, in addition to emphasizing a competitive advantage not found in rival products.
- **Changing attitudes through the ego-defensive function:** The stronger the attitude serving self-defense, the less susceptible it is to external influence. For instance, if a consumer has a negative attitude toward purchasing a home on installment because it does not match their status, the marketer attempts to change this attitude by highlighting the benefits of this purchasing method, such as convenience and security, thereby appealing to self-defense.
- **Changing attitudes through the value-expressive function:** Often, when attitudes are formed by a group of consumers toward new products, they express these attitudes through positive behaviors. Influence is achieved through offerings aligned with these positive attitudes.
- **Changing attitudes through the knowledge function:** This function helps organize and categorize information, facilitating the consumer's task of gathering information about the product of interest, and thereby can sometimes aid in changing attitudes.

### 2. Strategies for Changing Attitudes by Modifying One of Its Components

Based on the principle of consistency and cognitive dissonance theory, attitude change strategies can focus on one component: beliefs, feelings, intentions, or a combination of these three, which will inevitably lead to a change in the overall attitude. This can be detailed as follows:

### a. Changing the cognitive component

A common and effective method for changing attitudes is to focus on the cognitive component. The theory asserts that altering the cognitive component leads to changes in the affective and behavioral components. Four main marketing strategies are used to change the cognitive structure of consumer attitudes: changing current beliefs, adding new beliefs, shifting the importance of beliefs, or changing beliefs about the ideal product. These strategies are explained as follows:<sup>32</sup>

- **Changing beliefs:** This strategy involves modifying beliefs about the brand's performance on one or more attributes by providing facts or data. According to the consistency principle, beliefs tend to be coherent; thus, changing one belief may lead to adjustments in others to maintain consistency.
- **Shifting the importance of beliefs:** Consumers often consider some product attributes more important than others. Marketers therefore aim to persuade consumers that the attributes of their brand, which hold a relative advantage, are the most significant.
- **Adding beliefs:** This involves introducing new beliefs to the consumer's existing beliefs. For example, IBM introduced the "shock absorption" feature to protect laptops from sudden impacts. This technological innovation adds additional value that consumers incorporate into their evaluation of the product.
- **Changing beliefs about the ideal product:** The final strategy for changing the cognitive component involves altering perceptions of the ideal product. For instance, perceptions may be influenced by a company's extensive use of recycled materials or reduced packaging, signaling environmentally friendly production practices.

Additionally, the cognitive component can be influenced by **changing beliefs about competing products**, such as through comparative advertising, particularly if the market overestimates certain attributes of competitors' products.<sup>33</sup>

### b. Changing the affective component (i.e., feelings toward the product)

In this case, the firm seeks to influence consumers' liking of its products without directly affecting beliefs or behavior. If successful, increasing desire for the product enhances positive beliefs, which may lead to purchase behavior when the product is needed. Three main methods are used to directly influence the affective component: classical conditioning, affecting the advertisement itself, and the mere-exposure effect.

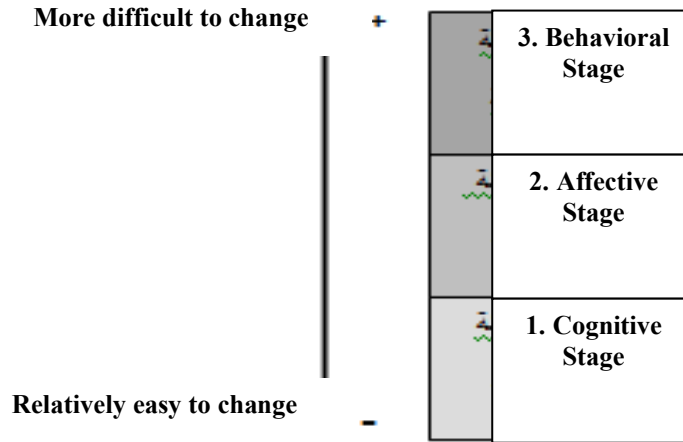
- **Classical conditioning:** This involves consistently pairing the product with a stimulus favored by the target audience, such as images or music. Over time, positive associations with the stimulus transfer to the product.
- **Attitude toward the advertisement or website:** Liking an advertisement or website generally increases liking of the product. For example, websites rich in sensory content that appeal to multiple senses are more positively perceived than less engaging sites.
- **Mere exposure:** Although debated, evidence suggests that repeated exposure to a product can increase preference. Repeated presentations of the product can make attitudes more positive, as familiarity tends to generate liking, so reminder advertisements may increase liking and eventual purchase without changing the initial cognitive structure.<sup>34</sup>

### c. Changing the behavioral component

The hierarchical influence model shows that behavior can directly affect emotion and cognition, or both simultaneously. Consumers may repeatedly try new or low-cost products without prior knowledge or influence, primarily to gather information (e.g., "Do I like this brand?") rather than to satisfy an immediate need. The marketer's main task is to encourage purchase or consumption to ensure that trial is actual. Coupons, free samples, point-of-sale displays, and price discounts are common methods to stimulate trial behavior, as behavior often leads to strong positive attitudes toward the brand.<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting that resistance to attitude change can be analyzed at the component level: it is easier to change beliefs (cognitive stage) than feelings (affective stage), and easier to change feelings than

behavior (behavioral stage). Advertising is effective in the first two stages (cognitive and affective), while direct marketing is most effective and easiest at the behavioral stage.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure No. (2): Resistance of Attitudes to Change**  
(*Jacques Lendrevie & Julien Levy, op. cit., p. 130*)

### 3. Strategy for Changing Attitudes Based on Balance Theory

A firm can change consumer attitudes using balance theory by highlighting the relationship between its products and a reference group, event, or cause. Recently, environmental concerns have become a major factor; for example, a consumer with environmental responsibility may change their opinion about a company upon discovering that it employs green production methods.<sup>37</sup>

### 4. Strategy for Changing Attitudes Based on Social Judgment Theory

This strategy involves persuasion through the modification of values, habits, and beliefs. It is based on Rokitch's theory, which focuses on inducing change in an individual's personal value structure as a means to achieve the desired persuasion. The core idea of this theory is that an individual's behavior stems from the values they hold and express; these values serve as a reference for regulating behavioral actions.

Persuasion, according to Rokitch, relies on what he called **comparative feedback**. In this approach, individuals undergo a "values test," which provides them with accurate information about the values they hold in comparison to those held by others. If the individual realizes that some of their values conflict with their self-perception, they experience dissatisfaction with themselves. Since these values encompass behavioral tendencies and attitudes, changes in values lead to changes in attitudes and, consequently, behavior.<sup>38</sup>

### 5. Strategy for Changing Attitudes through Persuasion

Marketing efforts generally aim to persuade consumers, which can be defined as an attempt to change attitudes and behaviors.<sup>39</sup> Numerous studies have addressed the explanation of attitude change through persuasion. One notable study by Hofland et al. proposed a model composed of three elements:<sup>40</sup>

#### a. Inputs

These consist of numerous factors grouped into three subcategories:

- Factors related to the source of persuasive communication (the persuader), such as technical expertise, credibility, social status, etc.;
- Factors related to the advertisement itself, including content, nature of the message, paradoxes, and inconsistencies in the message;

- Factors related to the person being persuaded, such as their readiness to be convinced, circumstances, educational level, and self-esteem.

### **b. Mediating Cognitive Processes**

These involve mental activities that enhance an individual's receptiveness to persuasive messages, including attention, comprehension, understanding, and inclination toward the message content.

### **c. Outputs**

These represent the expected result of the persuasive process. According to this model, the persuasive effect (the expected outcome) manifests as a change in attitude, which may involve a change in opinion, perception, or feeling.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be inferred that, in order for a marketer to change consumers' negative attitudes toward the products offered in the market, they must have a thorough understanding of the range of theories addressing the possibility of modifying consumer attitudes that are relevant to marketing, such as balance theory, cognitive dissonance theory, self-perception theory, among others. The marketer can then implement one of the change strategies (which constitute practical applications of the aforementioned theories) to make attitudes as positive as possible. The appropriate strategy may be chosen by altering the motivational functions of attitudes, modifying their components, applying a multi-attribute model, or employing persuasive techniques.

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