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## The Consumer in an Era of Shortages

*When fewer options are available and reasonable,  
the chooser and the choices both undergo change.*

The world economy has been transfigured by shortages of important raw materials and products manufactured from them. Shortages along with spiraling inflation and pollution problems are forcing U.S. consumers and marketers to reevaluate their conception of an affluent economy.

In a recent article, Philip Kotler indicated that the Glorious Age of Abundance has ended and that the return of economic scarcity is upon us.<sup>1</sup> After assessing the likely impact of shortages on marketing programming, Kotler indicates, "periods of shortages are an opportunity to the enterprising firm. The very definition of a shortage is that customers' needs are not being met. To the resourceful firm, this means that new ways must be found to meet these customer needs."<sup>2</sup> Few observers of contemporary marketing would quarrel with this conclusion. Moreover, if new and creative ways must be uncovered to respond to customers, then the enlightened marketer must assess the changed nature of the consumer confronted by scarcities.

Ample evidence indicates that the year 1973 marked the end of continual abundance for Amer-

ica. Expanding demand and inadequate capacity to meet this demand denote the possibility that periodic shortages may persist for some years. Some estimates suggest that a decade or more will pass before the imbalances in supply and demand are corrected.<sup>3</sup> Depletion of natural resources, overconsumption, and a romantic reliance on science and technology to solve our socioeconomic needs and wants have magnified our present problems.

What will happen to the consumer in an era of shortages? Will consumer dissatisfaction in the marketplace heighten? Will customers demand more information and higher product performance from sellers? What does the future hold for planned obsolescence and society's concern for the quality of life? These and other questions need to be considered by marketers interested in responding creatively to the consumer in an era of shortages. While Kotler's recent contribution concentrated on the marketing management considerations that are important today, this article supplements his in its focus on the consumer—the foundation of most fruitful marketing reprogramming efforts.

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### Changing consumption patterns

For the consumer, an era of shortages will obviously necessitate an alteration in consumption patterns. Shortages and an intensified budget squeeze are likely to widen the gap between consumers' expectations for an enhanced life-style and their real incomes.

Shortages may exert enough pressure to change the values, norms, and traditions of people not only to deconsume but also to practice responsible consumption.<sup>4</sup> Society will likely be more prone to adopt the adage: "Why use two when one will do?" Shortages, then, can be expected to heighten society's moral obligation to consume more responsibly and in the process save the nation's and world's limited resources.

Assuming that consumption patterns will change, what specific buying variables will be most prominent? Furthermore, how will the redirected consumer alter each of these variables? The following subsections examine the impact of shortages on the selected buying variables of purchase motives, information, product performance, planned obsolescence, and the quality of life. Figure 1 illustrates each of these variables, its specific characteristics, and its likely adjustment in an era of shortages.

### Purchase motives

In an economy beset with shortages and inflation, the consumer's tendency will be to engage more in a *rational* than an *emotional* purchase decision process. The effect of shortages on consumption patterns is creating problems for the marketer and the consumer. Both disposable and discretionary incomes have been declining in consumer want-satisfaction due to persistent inflation and shortages. The rate of climb in the Consumer Price Index "is still a high wind by historical standards. And if it continues indefinitely at the present pace, it will involve a trauma that the country has never had to live with on a sustained basis in modern times."<sup>5</sup> The effect of shortages and inflation on buying power is therefore becoming highly relevant to consumers.

One way to classify motives is as rational or emotional, depending upon the consumer's involvement in a reasoning process. The distinction is

based on the extent to which objective and measurable product features are the underlying reasons for purchase, as opposed to subjective feelings or opinions.

In an era of shortages, the consumer's interest in rational purchases will be heightened. Rational motives such as economy, high quality, low price, long life, enhancement of earnings, ease of use, and dependability will be stressed. A growing practice of advertising which would help the consumer make rational purchase decisions would be comparative advertising.<sup>6</sup> The consumer directed by rational motives will turn more to this promotional method in order to be able to compare tangible attributes of brands.

FIGURE 1

#### THE IMPACT OF SHORTAGES ON SELECTED BUYING VARIABLES

<i>Buying variables</i>	<i>Specific characteristics</i>	<i>Level of consumer interest</i>
Purchase motives	Rational	Heightened
	Emotional	Lessened
Information	Consumer education	Heightened
	Advertising	Heightened
	Packaging	Heightened
	Labeling	Heightened
Product performance	Quality	Heightened
	Safety	Heightened
Planned obsolescence	Functional	Heightened
	Material	Lessened
	Style	Lessened
Quality of life	Pollution	Lessened

The consumer will also show an increased interest in claims that have been substantiated. Companies will claim differential advantages that would appeal to the rational buying motives of the consumer who is trying to cope with dwindling disposable income.

On the other hand, emotional motives such as the desire to be different, to emulate, to conform; the desire for comfort or pleasure; and the desire for prestige will be downgraded by the consumer in a period of shortages. The consumer will be more concerned with, for example, durability of the product and service after sale than with style. Young consumers, particularly those with a college education, will not easily be induced into buying through advertising that fails to present measurable product features.

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**"Concern about deceptive advertising and inaccurate labeling is likely to become less amorphous."**

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Ronald Nevans argues that U.S. society is undergoing a noticeable cultural change; that we are experiencing a revolution against the overcommercialized and overhardware oriented culture which characterized the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Emotional buying apparently will decline, while time spent on information gathering before buying will increase.

### *Information*

In an era of shortages, the increased desire to economize and consume responsibly will undoubtedly heighten the consumer's need for useful information, and this need will occupy a much greater proportion of each buyer's attention. Rising aspiration levels for the kind of information that enhances wise purchase decisions will further necessitate improvements in *consumer education programs, advertising, packaging, and labeling.*

The need to develop effective consumer education programs will become more pronounced as individuals are motivated to search for information on how to obtain and use available product information, how to compare prices, the availability of substitute products, their rights as consumers, the means available for redress, and where and how to register complaints. Independent consumer information sources will increasingly be relied upon due to their relatively unbiased perspectives when compared to most commercial sources.

Furthermore, consumers are likely to voice additional concern with improvements in privately controlled marketing information. Concern about deceptive advertising and inaccurate labeling is likely to become less amorphous. This will occur with the development of harsher consumer attitudes toward what is and what is not deceptive advertising, greater consumer demand for corrective advertising, and increased need for accurate labeling information.

Beyond obviously false advertising, perceptions about what should be categorized as deception vary. However, the consumer's interpretation is likely to expand and encompass unsubstantiated claims, stated or implied, of product differences. It is a frequent practice for advertisers to distinguish their product from those of competitors by stressing implicitly unique qualities which, in fact, all brands share. A classic example is the aspirin advertisement that discusses the brand's pain relieving quality without noting that all aspirin-based brands have similar effects.

The Federal Trade Commission's inspection of advertising has too often been cursory, singling out only a limited number of advertisements for investigation and usually only those containing the most obvious abuses. The voice of the consumer in an era of shortages will probably force more rigorous substantiation of advertising claims, particularly those falsely implying product differences. Recent evidence indicates that the FTC may well support such consumer demands.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, what is now considered acceptable puffery in advertising will probably receive much closer scrutiny in the future. Subjective statements of opinion concerning product quality using such terms as "greatest" and "best" often cloud consumer information flows when competitors are making the same kind of statements. Even though puffery creates consumer doubt and loss of confidence in all advertising, consumers have traditionally regarded it as normal and have had high levels of tolerance for it. However, with an increased need for useful and reliable information in an era of shortages, consumers' tolerance for puffery may sag as they increasingly identify it as misleading advertising. Moreover, if the era of shortages worsens, consumers will probably even reject what the Fed-

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**"The clamor for quality will undoubtedly increase."**

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eral Trade Commission considers acceptable puffery.

As a result of shortages and more stringent budget constraints, it is anticipated that consumers will also become more interested in accurate labeling. The individual's desire to evaluate alternative goods more effectively will become an economic necessity. Consequently, the benefits of such programs as open dating, nutritional labeling,<sup>9</sup> and unit pricing will acquire much greater meaning for the consumer public.

### *Product performance*

Enhanced interest in obtaining the optimum value for expenditures will magnify concern with product performance. However, some of the major difficulties associated with this factor stem from its dependence on the availability of information. That is, the *quality* and *safety* offered to the consumer depend on the demand for these features, and this in turn often depends on how well informed consumers are.

The clamor for quality will undoubtedly increase, but the consumer's ability to distinguish different levels of quality may not. To make astute purchases, consumers must be able to compare their needs with the offerings in the market. Unfortunately, the amount of technical knowledge needed to evaluate many products is formidable. Even if they possess some background information, consumers are unlikely to have the testing and performance data necessary to make astute decisions. Thus, the technical complexity of products has reduced the number of knowledgeable consumers.

Future consumer activity in this area may focus on aids such as Consumer Product Safety Commission regulations requiring that products undergo performance tests before being placed on the market and that test results be disseminated to consumers. Additional efforts may be directed toward bridging the gap between actual product performance and what the consumer has been led to expect from the product. Performance testing and the

availability of the resulting data will help alleviate this problem, but much of the solution lies in the improvement of other information sources.

### *Planned obsolescence*

The life of a product is partially predestined by three major types of planned obsolescence: *functional*, *material*, and *style*. In functional obsolescence, the manufacturer purposely holds back certain important features of a product for later inclusion in a similar product so as to make its predecessor obsolete. Such a method encourages early replacement of the product.<sup>10</sup> During this era of shortages, the rate of functional obsolescence will increase if the change in the product contributes to economic savings. A self-service gasoline station is a descriptive, although unintended, example of how economic shortages encourage functional obsolescence. As the supply of gasoline dwindled and its price soared, self-service stations increased their patronage and number. Although self-service stations detract from convenience and comfort, they are attractive to the budget conscious motorist.

With material obsolescence, the manufacturer includes in the product parts made of materials sensitive to early wear, corrosion, rot, and so forth. Thus the product malfunctions prematurely, and replacement or repair is unnecessarily accelerated. Due to the consumer's eroded real income and shortages, the rate of material obsolescence is forecasted to decrease, in that the public, backed by consumer advocates and government, will seek more quality and durability in products.

Finally, in style obsolescence, the manufacturer manipulates and alters the buyers' perception of what is stylish with the intention of making them dissatisfied with the current product. Of the three kinds of planned obsolescence, shortages will likely affect style obsolescence the most. Consumers with hampered real incomes will be less swayed by cosmetic changes. In terms of importance in influencing purchase decisions, product style will become relatively less important compared to the use aspects of a product. For example, in purchasing a car, the major concern will be with transportation and economy rather than social-symbolic attributes.

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**"It will be difficult to maintain the concern of the early 1970s for environmental matters."**

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Shortages are also likely to lead to a narrowing of product lines. Recent issues of *Sales Management* and *Business Week* indicate that many firms are eliminating items with slow turnover and planning to restrict the size and color alternatives available to customers.<sup>11</sup>

### Quality of life

If economic trends develop as predicted, it is foreseen that concern with the quality of life will receive much less consumer attention. Concerns of a more immediate nature, such as ways to stretch the budget, will occupy the consumer's interest, and it will be difficult to maintain the concern of the early 1970s for environmental matters.

Public interest in improving the quality of life was stimulated during affluent times when individuals could afford to concentrate on situations beyond their personal concerns. However, as the individual's socioeconomic situation becomes jeopardized, attention becomes more self-centered, focusing to a great extent on his or her own consumption problems.

Issues involving ingredients of certain products (detergents), packaging techniques (soft drink con-

tainers), and manufacturing processes which create environmental pollution will undoubtedly be of less importance to the average consumer, particularly if improvements in these areas involve higher consumer prices and/or opportunity costs. For instance, since the fuel shortage, consumers' views toward antipollution devices in automobiles have been self-centered. Many consumers have become less concerned with the devices' ability to control pollution and more concerned with their impact on mileage. Even though the degradation of the physical environment has contributed to the depletion of resources and consequently has been appreciably responsible for the consumer's plight, this rationale will lose its importance for the consumer.

### Conclusion

Preshortage prognosticators of postindustrial society claimed that people would turn away from economic betterment. According to these authorities, major emphasis would instead be put on less tangible aspects of existence, such as the quality of life, the environment, and the family.<sup>12</sup> However, in view of our recent experience with shortages it could be argued that the populace's more basic needs actually may become relatively more important. Because of shortages, society may have to put less emphasis on self-actualization and turn its attention toward satisfying its more fundamental needs. Such an economy suggests a substantial change in the nature of the consumer and a need for reprogrammed marketing efforts.

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6. Anthony C. Chevins, "A Case for Comparative Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 4 (Spring 1975): 31.
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