

# Evolving Consumer Tastes

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Much as the man evolved from monkeys, the marketers are working hard to evolve modern men out of primitive and conservative men. With regard to dressing habits man has graduated to pants and slacks from dhoti and kurtas. Women are evolving at the jet pace from the use of ordinary make-up items like talc powder and kum-kum to lip-sticks, body lotions, facial moisturizers and what not. Our food habits too have got changed, thanks to the handy-work of marketers and advertisers. My grand mother used to make pickles and vadam (an older version of Fryams) at home. To-day my wife would not believe that such things can be made at home and goes on buying Priya pickles, Maggie ketch-up and Fryams every month.

As the marketers bring new products and new innovations into the market, it is not that the entire set of potential buyers queue up and buy the product. It takes time to get accepted by the consumers. Fertilisers, High yielding varieties, Pesticides and a number of farm inputs took a long time for the adoption by the farmers. Even today there are a number of farmers who refuse to change over to these new methods of farming. Hence the process of acceptance is of great importance to the marketers to effectively plan for their introduction and managing of new products.

An innovation refers to any good, service, or idea that is perceived by someone as new. The idea may have a long history, but it is an innovation to the person who sees it as new. Innovation takes time to spread through the social system. The diffusion process is defined as the spread of a new idea from its source of innovation or creation to its ultimate users or adopters. The adoption process, on the other hand, focuses on the mental process through which an individual passes from first hearing about an innovation to final adoption. Adoption is the decision of an individual to become a regular user of a product.

People differ markedly in their readiness to try new products. In each product area there are 'consumption pioneers' and early adopters. Some women are the first to adopt new clothing fashions or new appliances; some doctors are the first to prescribe new medicines; and some farmers are the first to adopt new farming methods. And other individuals adopt new products much later.

People can be classified into adopter categories such as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late adopters and laggards. After a slow start, an increasing number of people adopt the innovation, the number reaches a peak, and then it diminishes as fewer non adopters remain.

My own experience with bell-bottom pants when I was doing my engineering studies in Coimbatore during early 70s could make an interesting case. After one summer vacation, a hand-full of students hailing from Bombay, returned back wearing bell-bottom pants. The very sight was funny and the rest of us ganged up and ridiculed the Bombayites to such an extent that they had to shelve their new found fashion pants. Then came the winter holidays and a large number of Madras students returned with their version of bell-bottom pants which had lesser width at the bottom than the ones brought by Bombay students. Very soon a majority of the students followed the Madras and Bombay fashion by either stitching new pants or converting the used pants by fixing extra cloth to the leg portion. Still we had about 15 - 20% students mainly from rural areas who would not change for a long time. The fact is that by the time they changed, the fashion had changed to parallels.

Innovators are venturesome; they are willing to try new ideas at some risk. Early adopters are guided by respect; they are opinion leaders in their community and adopt new ideas early but carefully. The early majority are deliberate; they adopt new ideas before the average person, although they are rarely leaders. The late adopters are skeptical; they adopt an innovation only after a majority of people have tried it. Finally, laggards are tradition bound; they are suspicious of changes, mix with other tradition-bound people, and adopt the innovation only because it has now taken on a measure of tradition itself.

This adopter classification has been used successfully by companies to lift consumers to higher levels in the usage of new and sophisticated products. For example, they would identify the innovators and early adopters and give them free samples of their product and then publicize the positive benefits as expressed by them to catch the other potential users. Identifying early adopters is nevertheless an easy task. No one has demonstrated the existence of general personality trait called innovativeness. Individuals tend to be innovators in certain areas and laggards in others.

The marketer's challenge is to identify the characteristics of likely early adopters in its product area. For example, studies show that innovative farmers are likely to be better educated and more efficient than non innovative farmers. Innovative housewives are more gregarious and usually higher in social status than non innovative housewives.

It should be remembered that not all new product offerings get accepted through this adoption process. Certain products get rejected outright if they do not fit into the consumers' stage of evolution. Hindustan lever met with failure when they introduced dried peas in the early 60s. But to-day we have the market evolved to the level of accepting gulab-jamun mix, iddly mix, vada mix and the like. When the coffee market in South India is still dominated by ground coffee, it may be difficult to upgrade the market to instant coffee; leave alone the attempts by Nescafe to promote cold coffee. When people still consider buying of chocolates for their children as a taboo, companies are trying to elevate adults to consume chocolates themselves.

Cooking oil is something that is perceived to affect the taste of the food to a great extent. People in the north and east use mustard oil, people from west and south use groundnut oil and in Kerala coconut oil is used for cooking while some Tamils use gingelly oil as cooking medium. A person from south never could relish something made of mustard oil nor the concept of coconut oil as cooking medium may never appeal to people from north. In this kind of a tradition bound market, marketers have successfully evolved a set of consumers to the level of using sunflower oil or Safflower oil by citing health reasons. Soon we may have low fat or no fat oils for cooking.

In the case of washing materials, consumers have evolved from the use of washing soaps to detergent cakes and then on to detergent powders. Ariel is trying to evolve consumers to the level of micro-systems and are educating the customers to do away with detergent cakes they used for hard dirt on clothes and the 'blues' used for further whitening.

Marketers have been extremely successful in promoting some of the consumer durables like TV, fridge, mixer- grinders and pressure cookers. The evolution is moving in the direction of washing machines, micro-wave ovens and dish-washers. The advertising used for these products heighten the aspiration levels of the people which drives or motivates the people to garner money by some means to buy these products.

The most harmful of the evolutions are done in the case of cigarettes. Cigarette marketers have always aimed at the youth with promises of freedom, better life-style and graduation to adulthood and so on. There are attempts to promote cigarette smoking among women by promises of elevating them to the level of liberated women. The problem with evolution is that the ones that cannot change through adjustments and mutations as purported by marketers, get side tracked. Darwin's theory of 'survival of the fittest' has been nicely exploited by marketers to promote their products.

