

# To Buy or Not to Buy: That is the Question

By Patrick J. Psaila

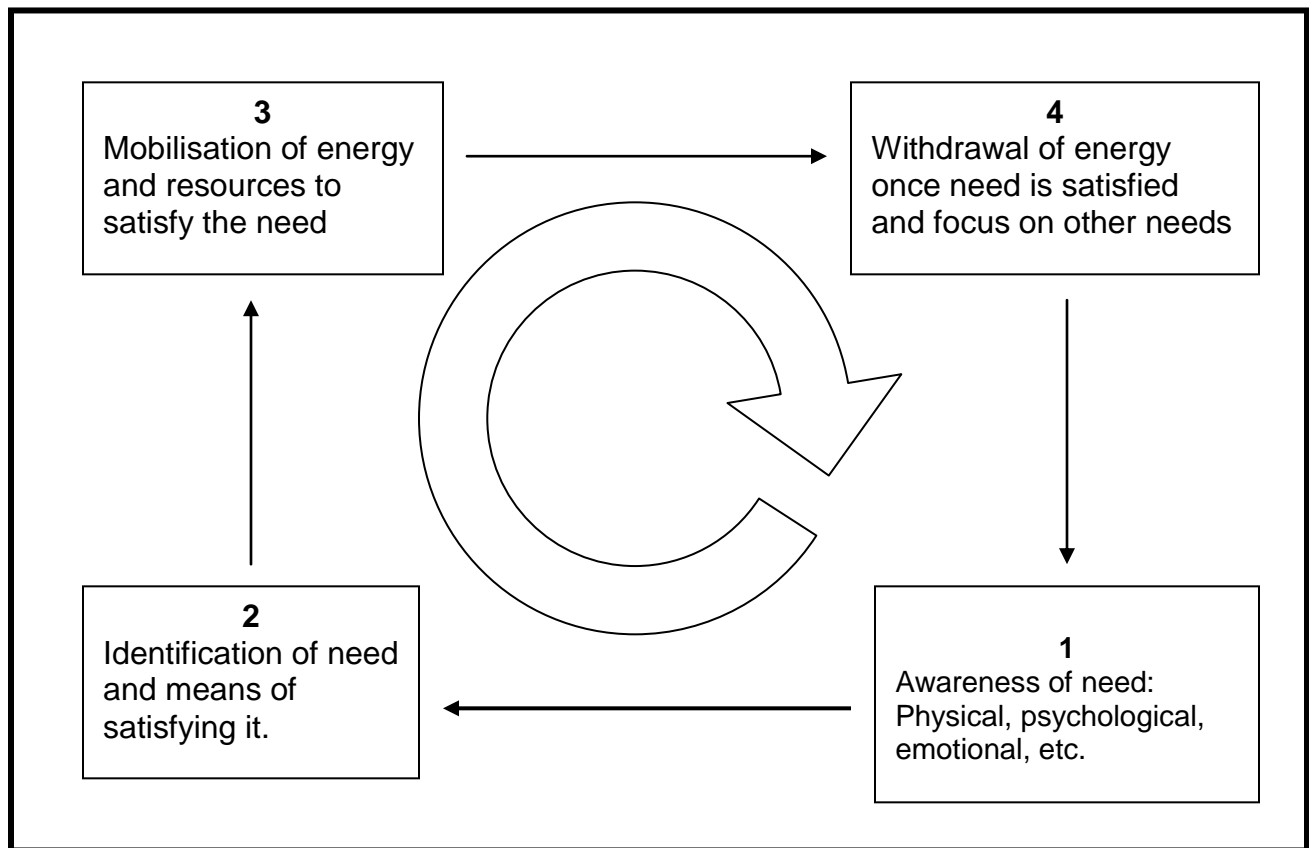
Have you ever wondered what drives you to buy a certain product and not another? What is the decision-making process you engage in when deciding that you want to buy something? How do you come to a decision about which product to buy, where to buy it from and when?

The answers to these questions are part of the psychology of consumer behaviour and many studies have been carried out to explore how people behave when it comes to buying.

Consumer behaviour is very much linked to needs. As human beings we constantly go through need satisfaction cycles. Some of these cycles are short and easy to complete while others are long-term and engage us in shorter cycles within a larger cycle. Imagine you are going shopping to Valletta on a bright sunny day. As you drive there you see rain clouds gathering over the horizon. Immediately you say to yourself, "I hope it doesn't rain, I have no umbrella". At this point you have become aware of a potential need. You park your car and by now the sky has changed from a blue to dark grey. As you walk towards your destination you begin to feel tiny drops of rain. Your entire focus now is "how do I avoid getting wet?" or how do I get an umbrella?. Your senses and indeed your entire thinking are now geared towards the need to remain dry. Your eyes scan the environment for a solution as they locate a shop that sells umbrellas. You mobilise your energy and resources towards walking into the shop and buying the umbrella, perhaps irrespective of the price and quality of the umbrella. With the umbrella in hand, you are no longer concerned about getting wet. It begins to drizzle, you open your new umbrella and say to yourself, "thank God there was that shop". Your energy and focus can now turn to something else: the rest of your shopping. This is an example of a completed cycle. An example of a long term-term version of need satisfaction cycle is taking and completing a four-year degree course to develop your career. Within this cycle there are numerous mini-cycles such as completion of credits and assignments, moving up from one year

to the next. Once again we see the awareness of a need i.e. to get a qualification towards a career; the mobilisation of energy and resources to satisfy the need i.e. working through the course; the achievement and satisfaction of the need, i.e. completion of the course; the withdrawal of energy from satisfying that need to focus on other needs. Similar to the former needs cycle, this need cycle also brings with it certain consumer needs that enable us to fulfil the ultimate aim of completing the course. In this case this may involve purchasing books, computers, stationery, photocopies, etc. The diagram below illustrates how the cycle works. One needs to appreciate that there are various types and levels of need such as basic physical needs like food, water and security and higher order needs such as love, affection, belonging and fulfilment.

### The Need/Satisfaction Cycle



Consumer behaviour is very much focused on the fulfilment of need. In fact, many marketing and advertising campaigns are devoted to creating needs in us that we may be unaware of or else they may tap into other psychological needs. In response, many people find ways of justifying why they want something by finding reasons why they need it. For example, wanting to always have the latest mobile phone can be justified by the need for its improved technology when the real need would be to keep up the image/status boost that the mobile phone provides. Even in such cases though, the ultimate decision to buy the phone is need driven, whether we just want it for social status or because we can't get by without the technology it offers. This can be said for clothes, cars, houses, watches, shoes, furniture, lifestyle etc. Marketing and advertising experts are fully aware of the psychology of consumer behaviour and do their best to exploit it. In other words, they create needs in us by suggesting various ways of how our life could be so much better if we bought their products. A common strategy used in advertising is presenting two situations, one with the product and the other without. The one with the product shows circumstances that the advertiser presumes the target audience would like to be in, and vice versa for the situation without the product. For example, you have two groups of people: the first is beautiful, fit, happy, fun-loving and active; the second is unattractive, out-of-shape, miserable, and apathetic. The first uses the product; the second does not. The underlying premise is that the product is an integral part of making you a member of the first group. Since most people would rather be in group one, and the product is a part of being in the first group, then people should buy the product.... and they do! The advertiser in this case has associated the need to feel attractive and fun-loving with the product, even though the product itself may have nothing to do with it. For example an energy drink would have nothing to do with feeling attractive and having fun!

So what can buyers do to make sure that they do not fall for the common consumer traps?

- First of all decide what you really need, and why you need it.

- Decide how much you are willing to stretch your budget.
- Be ready to shop around and compare like with like. Be aware of the need/satisfaction cycle you are trying to complete.
- Watch out for gimmick deals that offer you a number of freebies for an inflated price or for higher than normal tariffs or monthly rates. What need are these deals trying to satisfy and/or elicit in you?
- Be aware of the effect of emotions in buying and selling. Some people use shopping to compensate for the lack of other deeper needs such as the need for love and affection. This “retail therapy” is very dangerous and can get you to buy things that are absolutely useless and give little more than a temporary mood boost. Also research has shown that when people are in a happy carefree mood, typically when they are on holiday, they tend to spend more and be less discerning about what they buy. The reason is simple. The effect of positive emotions on our brain is to let down its guard and see everything in a positive light. This too can lead to shopping decisions that are later regretted.
- Be assertive and do not allow products or offers to be pushed at you. Just say “no thank you” without feeling the need to justify your answer with a reason.
- If you feel the urge to buy something you are not sure of but feel very enthusiastic about, take some time out to cool off and think about it rationally. This strategy can save you a lot of mistakes.....and money!

Buying and selling involves a relationship between consumers and sellers. So, what about the sellers? Time and time again research has shown that honesty is ultimately the best policy. Long term business depends on returning clients and a good reputation. Give customers an honest picture of your product or service even if it means losing a few customers occasionally. Trust is a key issue when it comes to buying, especially when the customer is going to spend a lot of money. If a customer feels deceived they will never come back and they will tell as many people as they can. In these difficult

times it may be tempting to sell hard and try to “trick” customers into buying. This may work in the very short term but tends to backfire and return to haunt your business in the long term.

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