



# Has e-marketing come of age? Modeling historical influences on post-adoption era Internet consumer behaviors

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## ABSTRACT

E-marketing evolved from a comparatively isolated group of “dot-com” firms to a mainstream marketing channel activity. This progress has also influenced customers and their “e-behavior” in the process. This study reviews the literature from information systems and marketing and uses meta-analysis to synthesize key findings. Three important insights emerged. From this exercise, a framework was developed integrating both perspectives, Marketing and IS empirical and conceptual literatures, enhancing the understanding of the customer “e-behavior” process by which attitudes, perceptions and evaluations interact to influence purchasing intentions. The analysis suggests also that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, the primary constructs of the technology acceptance model (TAM), continue to influence purchasing intentions in the post-adoption online context. Thus, the multi-disciplinary nature of online purchasing behavior was demonstrated, underscoring a need for both cross-disciplinary research and a more integrative and collaborative strategy for decision-makers and managers.

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“For all the hoopla ... surrounding the Internet, finding your way onto the information superhighway remains surprisingly difficult. And the sluggish performance ... may leave you wondering what the excitement is about.” – Business Week, 1995

## 1. Introduction

Since leaping into the national consciousness in the mid-1990s, the Internet has walked a tightrope between hype versus reality, frustration versus promise, and potential versus pipe-dream. In its early years, the Internet captured the popular imagination but remained solidly in the realm of those technophiles who possessed the ability to understand and navigate this brave new world. As *Business Week* pointed out, in 1995 the Internet was no place for the neophyte, requiring high levels of technological savvy and patience to navigate with slow, unstable connections (Wildstrom, 1995).

But as technology improved Internet usability, acceptance grew exponentially. Early e-retailers blazing the way were “dot-coms”, discrete entities unfettered by brick-and-mortar stores. Internet marketers were viewed as part of the e-commerce world, distinct from their Old Economy brethren. However, just as Internet usage

spread from Silicon Valley to Main Street, Internet marketing was absorbed into marketing’s mainstream.

Academic study of the Internet follows a similar pattern. In the early 1990s, information systems (IS) articles on Internet topics began to appear in publications such as *MIS Quarterly*, *Information Systems Research*, *Information & Management*, *Information Technology and Management* and others. Studies examine technological aspects of the Internet, including user adoption, vendor attributes, Web site design, platform performance and stability.

In the mid-1990s, leading marketing journals also began publishing prescient, forward-looking articles about the Internet’s transformational potential as a driver of marketing activities. Among the first are Hoffman and Novak’s (1996) “hypermedia computer-mediated” communication model, Alba and Lynch’s (1997) work on incentives to go online and Burke’s (1997) predictions about the future of online consumer marketing. A revolution is predicted in marketing thought and strategy (Sharma and Sheth, 2004), and analogies are drawn between the potential of the Internet and the impact of the printing press and democratic governance (Dickson, 2000).

For these foundational marketing theorists, the sky is the limit for the Internet’s future impact. Many fellow academicians apparently agree, and scores of articles address various aspects of the Internet. While the pioneers generally proposed conceptual models for studying the Internet and discuss its marketing potential, such topics quickly gave way to more diverse research streams addressing mainstream topics such as pricing, strategy, financial/legal issues or channels, with articles appearing routinely in leading marketing

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journals. Several journals dedicated exclusively to e-commerce and Internet marketing emerged, including *The Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, *Electronic Commerce Research*, and the *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*.

The IS literature concurrently conducted research on issues of interest to marketers, such as purchasing behavior, channel preferences or customer satisfaction. All the while, the IS literature represents a parallel stream from which marketers can and do pluck a wealth of information regarding Internet marketing.

## 2. Research objectives

Customer acceptance and usage of the Internet has grown tremendously in recent years, and so has its strategic application. The Internet has emerged as a critical channel across marketing arenas, offering cost efficiencies, expanded geographic scope and new opportunities for targeting or understanding customers. Understanding how, when or why consumers choose to transact online is as important now as it has ever been. And that importance will likely grow over time. Indeed, Internet marketing efforts may well have already “come of age.” For most B2C firms, Internet marketing capabilities have passed the point where they represent mere *nice-to-haves*. Instead, such capabilities now represent absolute *musts*.

Consequently, this study is driven by three objectives. They are to:

- Provide comprehensive reviews of studies of online consumer behaviors published in leading marketing and IS journals during the past decade.
- Quantitatively synthesize and evaluate these new historical findings to secure theoretical and practical insights into how *post-adoption* online consumer behaviors might be studied more effectively in the future.
- Combine marketing and IS insights into a unifying Internet marketing framework; i.e., a model capable of explaining with greater clarity the influence of various interdisciplinary concepts on the behavioral intentions of consumers who shop online.

### 2.1. Practical and theoretical significance of this research

These objectives are timely for several reasons. First, evidence suggests Internet usage and online purchasing behaviors have each reached a post-adoption stage at which a new framework is appropriate. Online sales were expected to top \$116 billion during 2007 – in anyone's ledger, a material number. But sector studies also suggest the growth rate for consumer Internet adoption has already peaked (Richtel and Tedeschi, 2007). As such, behavioral models used previously to predict online consumer behavior – models largely based on technology acceptance and diffusion of innovation theories – may no longer adequately capture Internet consumer behaviors.

Secondly, with stable, easily usable and accessible Web sites merely the ‘price of admission’ to the Internet marketing environment, technology-related issues may be fading into the Internet background. Today, all but the most luddite consumer shops online. The focus of Internet research, therefore, should shift from the Web site to the Web customer. Marketing academics should become the primary drivers of such study. The objectives driving this research are both complementary to and consistent with these trends.

### 2.2. Description of study

This study synthesizes the existing marketing and IS literatures to develop an empirically-based consensus about the nature and influence of vital consumer-related antecedents to consumers' Internet behaviors. Specifically, this study systematically reviews and analyzes the literature on Web site behavioral intentions to

extract the constructs most relevant to Internet-based marketing research and practice. The following questions emerge:

- In the context of Internet purchasing behaviors, what consumer attributes exercise the strongest effect on consumer behavioral intention?
- What marketing-related insights about Internet purchasing behaviors may be gleaned from the information systems literature?
- What is an appropriate conceptual model for studying Internet purchasing behavior in this, a purportedly, *post-Internet-adoption* era?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Establishing a baseline of knowledge

Between 1996 and 2007, “A+” level marketing journals published 72 articles on various subjects related to the Internet. Of these, 25 are in the domain of online consumer behavior. These issues include information-seeking, decision-making, privacy and trust and even the effects of avatars – or computer-generated graphic representations of human characters. A detailed review that summarizes authors, titles, journals and key findings is available upon request.

The remaining 57 top-tier marketing articles are classified into one of five additional categories: (Internet-related) marketing strategy, financial/legal, pricing, distribution or word-of-mouth behaviors.

### 3.2. Developing the population of relevant articles

To integrate the extant literature, a two-pronged approach was used. First, a review of marketing literature (excluding the A+ level journals) – as well as management and interdisciplinary journals – was conducted. This search uncovered numerous additional studies relevant to this meta-analysis. Seven articles were used from publications such as *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Managing Service Quality*, *Organizational Science*, *Psychology & Marketing* and *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*. One unpublished study, in press at *Electronic Commerce Research*, was also included.

Second, an exhaustive search was conducted of the IS literature, identifying the remaining studies included in the meta-analysis. For inclusion, IS articles had to meet all of the following criteria:

- Published between 1996 and 2007;
- Contain empirical data generated from a online survey or experiment;
- Specify online behavioral intentions (e.g. loyalty or purchasing) as a dependent measure;
- Include at least one marketing-oriented predictor construct.

### 3.3. Additional refinement and execution

The literature review included 112 articles. Of these, 25 met all criteria and were ultimately included in the quantitative analysis. Each of these 25 studies is based on one of the following theories:

- *Theory of reasoned action (TRA)*. Conceptualizes behavior as being driven by behavioral intentions, which are functions of the subject's attitude toward a behavior and the subjective norms surrounding that behavior. Attitude toward the behavior encompasses the actor's positive and/or negative feelings about performing the behavior, while subjective norms are defined as the subject's perceptions of how others feel about the action to be performed (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).
- *Theory of planned behavior (TPB)*, a variant of TRA, adds behavioral control to attitude and subjective norms as antecedents to behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). Behavioral control is defined as the perceived difficulty of performing a behavior, lying on a

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