Search regret: Antecedents and consequences

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Abstract

Consumer search behavior has received considerable research attention in marketing. An area that has not been studied, however, is unsuccessful consumer search and the outcomes of such. This study proposes the concept of "search regret," a postsearch dissonance that results from an unsuccessful prepurchase search. A pilot study is conducted to verify the existence of the search regret construct and to identify its potential antecedents and consequences. A conceptual model is then presented and tested. Based on the results, implications for retailers as well as suggestions for future research relating to search regret are discussed.
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Marketers seek ways to help consumers advance through the consumer decision making process. Knowing how consumers recognize consumption problems, search for information, choose among alternatives, make purchases, and engage in post-purchase behaviors are activities of inherent interest to marketers (Schmidt and Spreng 1996). One specific phase of this process that has received considerable attention is post-purchase regret (cf. Inman and Zeelenberg 2002; Simonson 1992; Tsiros and Mittal 2000; Zeelenberg and Pieters 1999). It is defined as a "negatively, cognitively determined emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our present situation would have been better had we acted differently," (Zeelenberg et al. 1996, p. 6). Simonson (1992) notes it is a sense of disappointment or sadness due to a choice made or not made. Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999, 2004) stress it is experienced after the wrong choice is made and is a result of bad decisions and disconfirmed expectancies. They also show it can result in store blame, switching behaviors, dissatisfaction and negative word of mouth.

What happens, however, if a consumer seeking a particular product is not able to find the product and the purchase decision is never made? This phenomenon has been documented in the marketing literature (Arnold et al. 2005; Kelley et al. 1993), and consistent with Weiner's (1985) general model of attribution, should produce regret. Yet, it has received little attention. As such, the primary goal of this research is to propose and examine the construct of search regret, which we define as a post-search dissonance that results from an unsuccessful pre-purchase search during which the consumer is unable to locate the product and purchases nothing or is forced to purchase a substitute. In prior work, regret is examined as the dissonance resulting from comparing an acquired product to one that "could have been" acquired. That is, regret and the "what ifs" ensue in the post-acquisition stage. Here, we examine if regret can occur *prior to* the product acquisition. We do not suggest search regret is an entirely different construct, but that the failure to acquire a product can create a regretful search

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experience, making the examination of this regret at earlier stages in the decision-making process important.

The current study is an initial attempt to increase our understanding of search regret and identify its antecedents and consequences. First, a pilot study, which was employed to determine the nature of the search regret construct and to identify its antecedents and consequences, is described. We then present and test a model of search regret, discuss the results and managerial implications, and offer suggestions for future research to further address search regret issues.

Pilot study

The goals of this pilot study were to explore whether consumers experience search regret and to discover if any antecedents or consequences are associated with it. To tap these potential factors, we employed the critical incidence method (cf. Bitner et al. 1990). Respondents were asked to think about a recent situation in which they needed to purchase a product or service, and, after searching, they were unsuccessful in acquiring it. Exploratory interviews were conducted over a two-week period of time by a total of 63 trained undergraduate students who recruited, conducted, and transcribed an interview with one nonstudent subject.

Each interviewer was provided with an interview guide and very specific written instructions concerning how to conduct interviews. To ensure that a rich discussion ensued during these short interviews, interviewers were trained to keep the interviews unstructured and informal but to pose extensive follow-up questions throughout the interview. Approximately 25 percent of the respondents were contacted to ensure the validity of the interviews. No problems were detected. The sample was 55 percent female, and ages ranged from 22 to 65.

Two trained graduate students participated in a two-phase coding procedure. They were provided with the transcribed interviews and coded the text according to content analysis procedures, a data-driven technique to assess the emerging themes from narrative text (cf. Spiggle 1994). First, the coders, unaware of the relevant literature, independently analyzed all interviews to identify the reoccurring comments concerning respondents' regretful search experiences, after practicing on five randomly selected interviews. Next, the coders re-examined the short interviews to identify the frequency of theme occurrence across respondents. The coders discussed any disagreements and reached resolutions for all incidents. The themes, along with their definitions, examples, and frequency of occurrence are shown in Table 1.

As shown in the top portion of Table 1, search regret represented a common theme found in all of the depth interviews and constitutes the first meta-theme. Numerous subjects claimed that they regretted the decision to undertake the unsuccessful search. This discovery offers some evidence for the existence of this prepurchase (postsearch) dissonance.

Subjects also identified various factors that seemed to generate search regret leading to the second meta-theme of antecedents to search regret. For example, 92 percent of the respondents stated they experienced negative emotions *during* the search, and 70 percent of them stressed the effort they expended during the search. They also experienced regret when they searched in atypical ways. Lastly, the informants also noted consequences of search regret, including types of blame, which emerged as a third meta-theme. These negative reactions are characterized as passive coping strategies in that the statements imply a need to identify fault for closure. Almost half of the subjects blamed themselves, the store, and the obscurity of the product, but other factors including seasonal stock-outs also emerged.

While several informants appeared to deal with the search regret by assigning blame, others focused on ways to improve their searches by behaving differently in the future. Subjects mentioned they would try new places and contact expert sources. Thus, both passive and active strategies of dealing with the regretful search emerged from the pilot study, indicating subjects deal with the dissonance in a variety of ways. The findings of the pilot study are shown in Fig. 1, which summarizes the antecedents and consequences of search regret. The following section proposes hypotheses relating to Fig. 1.

Hypotheses

Search effort

The first antecedent is termed "Search Effort," which reflects the respondent's tendency to feel regret when the search process was particularly difficult. This conceptualization is similar to other work addressing effort (Kivetz and Simonson 2003). Efforts can pose both favorable and unfavorable outcomes for retailers, although a limited amount of work concerning its effect in the retailing environment has been examined. Considering equity theory (see Walster et al. 1978), we would expect consumers to compare their inputs (efforts) and outcomes (successful searches) relative to those of others. Loyalty program research indicates consumers exert additional efforts when they perceive a personal advantage (the effort is easier for them than it is for others) and/or higher rewards (Kivetz and Simonson 2003), and recycling work also shows favorable responses to increased effort requirements (Hopper and Nielsen 1991).

It is important to note that these generally positive reactions to higher effort are likely due to the reward exchanged for the effort. For example, in the case of recycling, the exchange is viewed as equitable based on the social norms in altruism. Consumers believe additional effort is expected for the good of society (Scharwtz 1977), and the outcome is the knowledge that others are benefited. Arguably, because the particular context of interest in this study is of an *unsuccessful* search, a situation much different from these recycling and loyalty programs is