Timing of messages key to successful product launch, researchers say

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Innovators take note: If you're thinking of launching a revolutionary new product, plan a two-phased marketing strategy that first emphasizes the product's benefits and later focuses on the practical aspects of using it. That's the most effective means of getting consumers to buy a new product, according to a recent article co-authored by researchers at the Freeman School.

"Managing Consumer Uncertainty in the Adoption of New Products: Temporal Distance and Mental Simulations," by marketing professors Mita and Harish Sujan, assistant marketing professor Manish Kacker, and Raquel Castano, a marketing professor at Instituto Tecnologico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, gathers the results of several studies conducted by the authors on issues related to the adoption of new products. The article appeared in the June 2008 issue of Journal of Marketing Research.

"Consumers have different concerns when they first hear about a new product compared to the time when they consider buying it," says Mita Sujan. "The key to a successful marketing plan is to shift the message to target these separate concerns."

According to the researchers, two types of uncertainties dominate consumer thinking regarding new products. If the buying decision is in the distant future, consumers are concerned primarily with benefit-related uncertainties, such as how the product will perform or what others will think of it. If the buying decision is in the near future, consumers are more concerned with cost-related uncertainties, such as how long it will take to learn how to use or how much it will cost.

The most effective marketing strategies for launching new products feature two distinct communication strategies. For new products to be launched in the distant future, the strategy should emphasize the "why" of adoption, for example its use of better technology. For new products to be launched in the near future, the strategy should emphasize the "how to" of adoption, for example tips on operating the

product. According to the researchers, synchronizing communication strategies with the timeline leading up to the new product's launch results in higher purchase rates and, significantly, increased satisfaction with the product after adoption.

The researchers also found that the benefits of a temporally synchronized communication strategy are greatest for highly innovative products such as the iPhone.

These findings have public policy implications as well. If a policymaker wishes to generate popular acceptance of a new initiative, the research suggests that initial communications should emphasize the "why" of the policy change, for example its expected beneficial outcomes. As the date of the policy implementation draws near, communications should shift to emphasize the "how to" of the policy change, or the practical aspects of dealing with the new policy.

Whether you're introducing a new wireless device or changing the way city occupational licenses are issued, Mita Sujan says a two-phased communication strategy is the key to improving the public's adoption.