Chapter XVI

Turning Web Surfers into Loyal Customers: Cognitive Lock-In Through Interface Design and Web Site Usability

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on how Web site elements (e.g., interface design, tools provided, usability, information, etc.) can influence customer satisfaction and prevent switching behaviors, acting as positive switching costs. Some switching barriers can be seen as more positive in their nature and others as more negative. Then, psychologically, customers remain loyal to a supplier either because they want to or they have to. Following this approach, the aim of this chapter, therefore, is to highlight the strategic role that positive switching costs, stemming from a well-designed Web site, play both in traditional sectors and in the expanding networked environment. Furthermore, we develop an empirical customer switching cost framework in an effort to improve understanding and management of this phenomenon.
Introduction

Does “Look-and-Feel” Really Lack? A Glance to the Shopping Experience in a Digital Economy

E-commerce is growing rapidly and has penetrated almost all industries. Given its enormous potential, the number of electronic stores has increased at an unprecedented rate during the last five years. Theory seems to support the prediction that online shopping will keep rising in the future, as online search engines and various intelligent agents can dramatically reduce search costs associated with purchase decisions (Alba et al., 1997; Bakos, 1997; Brondoni, 2002a, 2002b; Maggioni, 2000). However, online shopping lacks “look-and-feel” (Figueiredo, 2000) and hence evaluation of product attributes for firms online can be still difficult. Indeed, while in off-line commerce it is often the salesperson that influences the buyer’s trust in the seller (Doney & Cannon, 1997) thus inducing loyal behaviors, in the Internet context it is the Web site that should do that (Lohse & Spiller, 1998; Del Giudice & del Giudice, 2003). That’s why nowadays the assessment of the effectiveness of e-commerce Web sites is of critical importance to online retailers. As e-commerce begins to mature, the ability to retain customers is the only way an e-business can survive (Agrawal & Karahanna, 2000; Agrawal et al., 2001; Chen & Hitt, 2002). Apparently the quality of the online customer experience that effectively-designed Web sites create not only has a positive effect on the economic performance of a firm, but also possesses the potential to create a unique and sustainable competitive advantage for Internet-based sellers, by turning Web crawlers into loyal customers (Rajgopal et al., 2001). In fact, since quality service is something customers generally expect vendors to provide (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1996), high quality service through interface design and Web site usability should arguably build customer loyalty, as a recent study with customers of online vendors indicates (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). Overall, Web sites’ design elements influence perceptions of Web site complexity, and perceived complexity, in turn, has a direct influence on communication efficiency and effectiveness and, thus, on purchase intentions.

Wanting to be Loyal or Having to be Loyal?

Following those premises, this chapter focuses on how Web site elements (interface design, tools provided, usability, information, etc.) can influence customer satisfaction and prevent switching behaviors, acting as positive switching costs. Jones et al. (2000) mention that some switching barriers can be seen as more positive in their nature and others as more negative. Psychologically, it should make a great difference whether one maintains a relationship because of a perception that the supplier is superior in services and products (a positive reason), or because it is too expensive to leave the supplier, there is a monopoly on the market or the supplier is powerful (negative reasons). The main rationale behind the distinction between positive and negative reasons is similar to Lund’s idea of barrier push vs. positive pull (Lund, 1985); a supplier that retains its
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