Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Purchasing

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In the world of consumer behavior, it can be difficult to figure out just what drives a particular decision. What is it that causes someone to make a purchase? One theory is that there is a specific need that has to be filled. I believe this is the strongest motivator for getting someone to spend their hard earned money. When there is an imbalance within an individual, their goal is to satisfy whatever is needed to fill the void. In an article challenging Maslow’s relevance in today’s world, Mark Rodgers summed his theory by say, “... brand strategists have come to use Maslow’s model as a means of defining and then building on needs that brand X will fulfill” (Rodgers, 29)

Abraham Maslow developed a theory as to what drives the needs that motivate us. He established a hierarchy to place each of them in a pyramid. For a person to make their way up the pyramid, they must fulfill each of the needs below. Each of these needs are fulfilled by different purchases that we make. By looking at what each level of need consists of, the types of consumption associated with them, and the relationship between the need and the decision process, we can gain a better understanding on why we make the choices we do.

**Physiological Needs**

At the bottom of the pyramid is physiological needs. They are the basic needs that each person needs to survive. Food and water fall under this category. These physiological needs are of absolute priority.

“Until these basic needs are satisfied to the degree needed for the sufficient operation of the body, the majority of a person’s activity will likely be at this level, and the other levels will provide little motivation (the other needs are still there, simply not dominant)” (Oleson, 84).
This is where marketers come into play. There are countless companies whose primary focus is
the sale of either food or drinks.

From a business perspective, the goal is to find a way to sell a product. When it comes to
the difficulty of convincing a consumer to make a purchase, selling food is relatively easy
compared to other products. Everyone has to eat. There are several other factors that are taken
into consideration by the consumer when making a purchasing decision. The cost of a purchase
is one of the strongest determiners at all levels of a decision.

When it comes to the physiological needs at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy, there are
very low cost ways to fulfill the need. McDonald’s may not be the healthiest choice, but it gets
the need filled, and it does so very cheaply. There are numerous companies whose primary
products are beds. These companies are all trying to position themselves as providing the best
night’s sleep at the best price for the cost. The need for sleep is very high, and consumers are
often looking for ways to improve the quality of their sleep.

For those less fortunate, it is important to understand that it is often very difficult for
these physiological needs to be fulfilled. They are not worried about anything other than where
they are going to get their next meal. For others, it is about finding a fine dining experience.
Some of the high-end restaurants focus on the quality and specialty of the food that they serve.
Consumers are drawn to them for the experience that accompanies the meal. When cost is less of
a determining factor to the consumer, they are able to look into more options.

Marketers’ biggest difficulty when it comes to physiological needs is finding their place
within a given market. With so many options, it can be difficult to convince the consumers that
what they have to offer is where the should go. This is why they spend so much time with clever
advertising and cost lowering efforts. When the cost of a purchase is low, the amount of time spent on making the decision is lowered, so marketers have to establish themselves to the point that they are often the first thing that comes to mind.

**Safety Needs**

After the physiological needs have been fulfilled, focus can be shifted to the needs for safety. This category is more complex than the physical needs of our bodies that we need to live. The need for safety looks into the security of: body, employment, resources, property and family, as well as others. These securities are not only short term and immediate, as with the need to eat, but deal with long term issues.

Companies like Monster.com have found a niche by offering a service for helping people find a job. This relates to multiple safety needs. The need for job security ultimately influences most of the other needs contained not only for safety, but for the rest of the hierarchy. This allows them to have a relatively strong foundation, because that need is nearly impossible to go without. Each different company must find a way to separate themselves from the others in order to draw consumers toward them.

Security systems, for homes and businesses, aim to fulfill a need that is sometimes very high on a consumer’s list of priorities. In today’s world, the need to feel safe and secure by protecting oneself and property has led to a growth in this type of business in many areas. In terms of the actual marketing approach of these firms, having a convincing argument that they are the best is often key. While cost is still a factor, this is one area in which many are willing to spend more to ensure that they are safe.
The long-term aspects of security lead to the complication within this level. Insurance companies, banks and investment firms allow people to plan for the future. They aim to ensure the consumer that the choices they make are of the most benefit for the future. The knowledge that one’s long-term security is taken care of allows consumers to open themselves to spend more money now.

Given the impact of these long-term decisions, consumers often spend much more time making their choices. When the outcome of a purchase has such an affect, more research is often done. When this happens, there is a need for much more rational information to be given by a firm. If someone wants a cheeseburger, it is easier to convince someone quickly that yours is the best for the least cost. On the other hand, when there is so much riding on the decision, as with long-term safety purchases, the consumer is much more inclined to ask questions to ensure that they make the best choice.

**Love/Belonging Needs**

Maslow’s theory includes the need for love and belonging. Friendship and family are the two largest aspects of this level. The need for support and connection to others is a large part of the experience of life. It is difficult to think about what it would be like to live without any connection to others. Dating sites have gained a major following in recent years. I can’t remember more than maybe one online dating site when I was in high school, and that was eight years ago. Now, see an advertisement for different ones almost constantly.

Being associated with a particular group is considered part of this level as well. We often make purchases that make us feel like part of the ‘in crowd’. This was very apparent to me growing up. All of the ‘cool kids’ wore specific things, and by not wearing those same things, it
was easy to be seen as an outsider. Harley Davidson has created not only a great product, but
have marketed themselves as a group of their own. There is a clear connection that is easy to spot
when fellow Harley riders interact, even with a simple wave when crossing paths on the road.

The need for family, from a business perspective is about selling consumers ways to
strengthen the family bond, not finding a new family. There are firms that offer ways to find
family members that someone may have lost touch with and wish to become reconnected. What
I’m dealing with primarily are the companies that offer consumers ways to experience parts of
life as a family. Disney has made it a focus that a trip to Orlando as a family is a memory that
will last a lifetime. Family trips like this, or smaller outings, like to dinner, are marketed as a
family bonding experience.

FaceBook has become one of the largest websites in the history of the internet. The
foundation of its creation was to allow people to become connected to others. This is a perfect
example of how the need for love and belonging can be fulfilled by a company. Although
FaceBook is free for the individual consumer, they make their money by posting advertisements,
using business-to-business sales. The larger they become, the more money they can make from
advertising.

They have become so engrained in to the popular culture that a movie was created to
show the metaphorical relationship between the use of the website and how people live today.
Many people, including myself, conduct a majority of their interaction with others through the
site. While they were not the first to take advantage of the idea (I can remember my mother using
online chat boards 20 years ago), they have been able to market themselves as the absolute best,
even making Myspace an afterthought.
Esteem Needs

Maslow’s Esteem level has created much of the consumerism that has built our country into what it is today. When I think about how many of the things that we buy are influenced by this part of the hierarchy, it amazes me. The ideas of self-esteem, confidence, achievement and respect for/by others are what make up this level. For many, everything from the clothes that they wear to the car they drive are often tied to this level.

So much of who we are is tied to our self-esteem that it can be difficult to imagine ourselves without the things that we attach to our identity. Depending on the demographic and psychographic, the clothes that we wear can be very different, but within each of those groups, and often much smaller groups, how we dress can have a drastic affect on our esteem. This goes back to the need for belonging. Belonging is often tied to our self-esteem, which strengthens the draw that a product can have on a consumer.

Many companies have established themselves as filling a need that is based almost entirely by our esteem. An individual’s personality is strongly tied to their esteem, again strengthening the power of this need. While Maslow’s pyramid says that the needs that fall below esteem are of superior importance to an individual, I consider esteem needs to have a larger segment of the market.

There are so many options at every level, but there are many more categories for marketers to find a position for themselves. With everything from cologne to hairstyles, consumers have countless decisions to make nearly every day. From a marketer’s position, this allows for an ever changing way to communicate with the perspective buyers. Many of the
decisions that consumers make are more long term. This leads to much more analysis of the
decision, as well as increasing the need for better marketing.

One of the largest purchases associated to the esteem need is purchasing a car. Many
people attach at least some of their identity to the car they buy. Some need a big, loud truck. This
adds to the market for not only the trucks themselves, but also the after market parts that can
supplement the esteem associated with them. The idea of the midlife crisis sports car purchase is
a clear look at this theory.

**Self-actualization**

Once all of the other needs have been met, the consumer finds themselves in a position of
self-actualization. This generally means that they are unencumbered by outside forces. They
know exactly who they are and what they want. It is at this point that Maslow believes true
creativity and acceptance of facts exists. When a person is in this level, it can be difficult for a
marketer to change their minds, if possible.

Some products, as with vacations, can be seen as sometimes within this area. The
spontaneity of leaving everything behind for a weekend away is an example. At the same time, it
is a marketers job to convince them that they are the place to go. If a person is in the realm of
self-actualization, they make all of the same purchases found in the other levels, but they are
unlikely to be influenced by outside forces, including the needs of each level themselves.

**Conclusion**

Each level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs have particular goods and services associated
with them. At each level, there are several things that must be taken into account. The availability
of finances is often the largest concern as to which level an individual concentrates on. In a study
published in a 2004 article in the International Journal of Consumer Studies, came to the conclusion that, “In general, as individuals progress through the theoretical stages of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it appears that money becomes less and less important to individuals” (Oleson, 91).

The connection that an individual has to the purchase, regardless of which level it is on, also has a bearing on how the decision is made. Although many purchases can be found, for different reasons, at each level, many of the choices we make have a fundamental place within one particular aspect. As marketers, it is our job to use the principles of need theory to find ways to influence the public.
Resources


