

Readiness to Change: Theoretical, Empirical and Managerial Issues

Abstract

We propose here that management's timing decisions would be materially improved if they could partition target audiences into those who are ready to change and those who are not. Based on findings from a wide range of secondary literature, we hypothesize that readiness to change has enduring, situation-specific, and conditional components. Individuals, we argue, can be differentiated on the basis of their enduring general and *category-specific* readiness to change and their readiness to change a specific behavior given their present *personal circumstances* and *stage in the behavior change process*. Finally, we contend that individuals will differ in their readiness to change should they be exposed to different persuasive interventions.

“Timing is everything.”

“Strike while the iron is hot”

“A stitch in time is worth nine”

Introduction

Timing is a strategic variable that has received relatively limited attention in the formal strategic marketing literature despite the significant role it frequently plays in success stories in the popular press. Managers face two broad classes of strategic timing problems. First, in many situations, managers must time responses to given or predicted circumstances. Timing in this sense is a matter of anticipating

and/or reacting expeditiously. Investors buy stocks low and sell high; purchasing managers stockpile before crises; and wine growers pick their grapes when weather conditions are “just right.” Timing, in many of these cases, becomes a matter of *predicting* personally uncontrollable events.

There are a great many other timing situations in which managers must *make things happen* at an appropriate time. The success of a given move then depends not only upon what the manager does but how the target responds. Home buyers make a low bid just when they think sellers are desperate and will “take anything.” Marketers launch new products just when they believe the market is ripe. Legislators introduce tax bills just when they think the “political climate” is most favorable. Timing in these cases is more complex since one must not only predict a market but change it. It is this second class of complex strategic timing issues that concern us here. Responsive targets who are not (totally) independent of the strategist's action. It is these strategic timing issues that concern us here.

The Basic Problem

In the second class of timing situations, a manager must address a fundamental question: when is the best time to act when attempting to change the behavior of a target audience? This target audience should be a consumer, a diplomat, a school superintendent, or even a social companion. There are two ways to view this problem depending on whether one will have multiple opportunities to influence an audience over time or whether one must make a single strategic decision now. The problem can be stated more formally as a problem of intervention timing or a problem of segmentation. That is, one can frame the problem in one of two ways:

a. Given multiple opportunities over time for intervening with a given individual target audience member, when is the best time to do so [1] to achieve a particular behavioral goal? Does one act now or wait? Does one act in

some preliminary fashion now and act more decisively later? This is the type of timing issue faced by psychotherapists, educators and social workers.

b. Given that one must act immediately, who within a given target population are the best candidates for being influenced by one or more proposed strategies? This is the problem as seen by commercial marketers seeking to launch a new product, and social marketers deciding how to spend a limited budget to influence mothers in developing countries to adopt practices to improve their children's survival chances.

It is the pursuit of internal and external indicators of readiness to change that concerns us here. Specifically, this paper has three objectives:

1. To identify the conceptual properties of readiness to change;
2. To explore the present empirical base for the readiness to change concept; and
3. To set out an agenda for future conceptual and empirical development.

I. Overview

We begin with the hypothesis that readiness to change is a psychological state that can be measured with some (possibly substantial) degree of error. We define readiness to change as follows: Readiness to change is a latent psychological state of willingness to undertake a new pattern of behavior or behaviors within a specific time period.

Readiness to change is a passive state related to – but different from – behavioral intention (Ajzen 1987). Intentions are active predispositions to carry out a specific behavioral scenario within a defined time period. Readiness to change is a willingness to act, possibly in vague ways and in some relatively distant future time period. Further, because it focuses on changes in patterns of behavior, readiness to change is also different from variety seeking (McAlister and Pessemier 1982).

Readiness to change is initially conceptual-

ized as an *enduring psychological state* that can be modified by one or more of four factors. Enduring general readiness to change is assumed to be a personality trait that varies over the population and that may prove to be associated with risk-taking (Farley 1986), approach/avoidance tendencies (Anderson 1986), innovation-proneness (Midgely and Dowling 1984) and state orientation (Kuhl 1985).

The first factor that may modify this general readiness to change is the broad category of behavior at issue. It is hypothesized that each individual will be willing to change some types more readily than others. It is expected that individuals will reveal a level of readiness to change, say, their work habits that is above or below their core level and that this level will vary from their levels of readiness to change their personal hygiene habits, leisure time use or diet. For some individuals, the variance across behavioral categories may be minor, for others substantial.

Readiness to change is not independent of one's life circumstances. As individuals transit through life, there are times and circumstances when they are more open to change and others when they are more closed. Thus, as life status changes, we may expect readiness to change to be modified depending on the nature and importance of the specific status change. This second modification will not affect behavioral categories equally. For example, a divorce may affect one subset of behaviors while a major increase in job status and income may affect another.

We should expect only so much predictive and explanatory power from measures of enduring readiness to change as defined by the first three components. One major reason is that each behavior change situation is unique for each target individual and subject to considerable cognitive control, particularly in high involvement situations. Individuals typically change only if the change meets specific current needs and wants and then only after a series of (sometimes extensive) learning and evaluation experiences. Assuming that the specific behavior change decision process is hierarchical, readiness to change may be expected

to vary with the third modifying factor, the stage in the decision process.

Finally, behavior change can take place under individual cognitive control without the intervention of others. As Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and others have amply demonstrated, individuals will often engage in new behaviors at the behest of others – sometimes in opposition to their personal wishes. Thus, a fourth factor that may modify readiness to change is the intervention of others. That is to say, an individual may have a personal readiness to change a specific behavior at a particular point in their decision process, but a different, presumably higher, readiness to change if subject to the persuasion of others (e.g. family, friends, or other change agents).

II. Empirical Bases for the Concept

The remaining sections of this paper will explore briefly some of the available empirical evidence supporting the concept of readiness to change and each of its five components. While we are some distance from specifying a methodology for measuring the concept or its components – the literature makes clear that several building blocks are already available.

A. General Enduring Readiness to Change

In the present framework, general readiness to change is assumed to be the most basic determinant of total readiness to change. There is considerable evidence that such a general personality characteristic does exist. It is either explicit or implied in the literature devoted to such concepts as (a) innovation adoption (Midgely and Dowling 1978; Rogers 1983), (b) exploratory behavior (Raju 1977; 1980; 1981), (c) variety seeking (McAlister and Pessemier 1982), and (d) novelty seeking (Hirschman 1980).

Hirschman (1980) points out that research in each of these intellectual domains have treated the concept as *either* a manifest or a latent variable. For example, in the innovation literature, innovativeness is defined by Rogers

and Shoemaker (1971, p. 27) as a manifest characteristic: “the degree to which an individual is relatively earlier in adopting an innovation than other members of his social system.” By contrast, Midgely and Dowling (1978) define innovativeness as a latent characteristic (as we do in this paper): “the degree to which the individual is receptive to new ideas and makes innovation decisions independently of the communicated experience of others.” Midgely and Dowling hypothesize that this trait is (a) present in all consumers; (b) normally distributed; and (c) generalizable across products. Hirschman points out that novelty seeking (as well as variety seeking [2]) can be defined as *behavior* that seeks out new experiences or as the result of an inherent “internal drive or motivating force.” (Hirschman 1980, p. 284).

The existence of a fundamental drive toward new stimulation is well documented in the psychological literature from which Midgely, Dowling, Hirschman and others draw. Research on infants (Flavell 1977), animals (Zuckerman 1979), and adults (Fiske and Maddi 1961; Maddi, Probst and Feldinger 1965) all reveal such a drive. The research makes clear that organisms need stimulation to function. However, they do not seek unbounded stimulation: individuals have a countervailing need for some amount of stability and homeostasis (Hebb 1949; Berlyne 1960; Festinger 1957). Thus, individuals oscillate between times of too little stimulus and boredom and times of too much stimulation and vary in the optimum stimulation level (OSL) that they seek.

Two widely used scales have been developed for measuring OSL by Zuckerman (1979) and Mehrabian and Russell (1974). Zuckerman’s instrument is called the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS). Using respondent self-reports, Zuckerman measured “a *trait* defined by the *need* for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (emphasis added). Zuckerman initially considered SSS to be a unidimensional general trait (GSSS). GSSS was found to be associated with “impulsiveness” factors on

Catell's 16PF personality scale and the "hypomania" scale of the MMPI (Blackburn 1969; Zuckerman, Schultz and Hopkins 1967). In marketing, Mittlestaedt, Grossbart, Curtis and DeVere (1976) found that GSSS was positively associated with *acting* rather than thinking about possible innovative behaviors and that high sensation seekers more often actually tried (rather than just thought about) product and service innovations and more often *both* adopted and rejected them. High GSSS individuals were also much less likely to reject product or service innovations symbolically (cf. Konglan and Coward 1970). In the late 1970s, Zuckerman modified the GSSS, proposing that sensation-seeking had four dimensions:

1. Thrill and Adventure Seeking (TAS): interest in daring behaviors (skydiving, skiing, and the like); undertaking activities that "are a little frightening";
2. Experience Seeking (ES): interest in trying nontypical experiences such as making friends with "far-out" groups, taking totally unplanned trips, trying mind-altering drugs;
3. Disinhibition (Dis): interest in sensations at the boundaries of experience such as going to "wild uninhibited parties" or "seeking pleasures around the world with the jet-set";
4. Boredom Susceptibility (BAS); concern about being bored or being around dull or boring people.

The second scale frequently used to tap the OSL phenomenon is Mehrabian and Russell's Arousal Seeking Tendency (AST) scale (Mehrabian and Russell 1974). This scale also has four dimensions: (a) arousal from change, (b) arousal from unusual stimuli, (c) arousal from sensuality, and (d) arousal from new environments. The AST scale has been found to be correlated with Budner's (1962) Intolerance of Ambiguity scale and Wesley's (1953) Rigidity scale but not with Rokeach's (1956) Dogmatism scale (Raju 1977, 1980, 1981). In marketing, Raju used the AST scale to study consumers' exploratory behaviors. Raju concluded that exploratory consumer behaviors reflect three types of motivation: (a) desire for the unfamiliar (risk-taking); (b) desire for variety; and (c) desire for information (curiosity

seeking) (Cf. McAlister and Pessemier (1982). Raju hypothesized that the OSL was not a basic personality trait but rather a mediating variable between other personality traits and exploratory behavior. However, this view has been challenged by Joachimsthaler and Lastovicka (1984).

A different approach to the general concept of change-proneness is Julius Kuhl's distinction between individuals who, in the face of opportunities for change, tend to be either action-oriented "metastatics" or state-oriented catastatics (Kuhl 1985). Kuhl proposes that individuals differ fundamentally in whether they react to change by exploring the possibilities inherent in it or look for ways to maintain their existing status. Kuhl's 20-item scale was used recently with some success by Bagozzi, Baumgartner, and Yi (1990) to understand the attitude behavior relationship.

B. Category-Specific Readiness to Change

The work of Zuckerman, Raju and others offers clear support for the hypothesized general readiness to change construct. There also exists a good deal of literature that suggests that readiness to change also varies by behavioral category. This is the finding of much of the innovation adoption literature. In their recent review of this literature, Gatignon and Robertson concluded:

Innovators must be identified and characterized on a *product category basis* . . . there is not a generalized innovator across product categories or interest domains. (Gatignon and Robertson 1985, p. 861; emphasis added.)

It is not clear, however, what the category traits are along which readiness to change might vary. There may be universal traits that apply to all target individuals. Thus, for example, all individuals may be more ready to undertake changes that are:

- a. Continuous rather than discontinuous (Robertson 1971);
- b. Simple rather than complex (Rogers 1983);

- c. Compatible rather than incompatible (Rogers 1983);
- d. Reversible rather than irreversible;
- e. Trialable (Rogers 1983);
- f. Private rather than public.

It also may be hypothesized that there will be category differences across individuals that are not universal but that reflect differences in individual needs, wants, and lifestyles. For example, there is evidence in the literature that individuals will differ in readiness to change depending on their *familiarity* and/or *involvement* in the behavior category.

a. Johnson and Russo (1984), Bettman (1979) and others point to *familiarity* or experience as a potential source of category differences. They note that those who have had experience with a category will “possess a superior ability to encode new information, which may increase search and learning of new alternatives” (Johnson and Russo 1984, p.543). They hypothesize that experienced consumers will adopt new alternatives more rapidly because they have developed (1) cognitive scripts that allow them to efficiently search for what they need to know, (2) categorization schema to store what they do learn, and (3) more efficient decision making processes that will speed them toward change. This hypothesis is consistent with innovation adoption research by Taylor (1977), Robertson (1971), Danko and MacLachlan (1983), and Dickerson and Gentry (1983) which shows innovators to be drawn inordinately from heavy users in a particular product category or related category.

b. *Involvement* is also a trait that may be expected to influence readiness to change, particularly what Houston and Rothschild (1978) label *enduring involvement* (cf. Krugman 1965; Mitchell 1981). (We consider situational involvement further below.) However it is not clear whether involvement would *increase* or *decrease* readiness to change. On the one hand, it may increase it. Higher involvement has been shown to lead to more extensive searching for information about products while shopping (Moore and Lehmann 1980)

and to paying more attention to advertising messages (Celsi and Olson 1988). Both behaviors may be evidence of greater exploratory behavior. More involvement presumably is also associated with more familiarity with its potentially positive information-processing effects. However, it may be hypothesized that high enduring involvement would decrease readiness to change for at least two reasons: (1) high involvement may be associated with complex, highly interconnected cognitive structures related to the behavior in question that would be difficult to modify or change; and/or (2) high involvement may be associated with significant “ego-commitment” to present choices and, thus, high behavior loyalty.

C. Life Status Specific Readiness to Change [3]

Readiness to change may rise or fall as an individual’s general circumstances change as well as in response to more immediate situational changes (e.g. the unavailability of brands). We are concerned here with relatively longer term life status changes. These changes include changes in residence or marital status, arrival or departure of children or relatives, losing or changing a job (or having another significant household member lose or change a job), experiencing a major change in income or asset value (e.g. an inheritance) and so forth. Andreasen (1984, p.784) hypothesizes that:

The probability that a given consuming unit will change its attitudes, perceptions, and/or behavior with or without the intervention of a change agent (such as a marketer) is directly proportional to the amount and type of status change the unit has recently undergone (or is currently undergoing).

The effects of these situational changes are both direct and indirect and are of three major types. First, there are effects that are more or less mandated by the status change itself. Households that move must find new banks, supermarkets, hairdressers, and the like (cf. Andreasen and Durkson 1966; Bell 1969). The

arrival of a first child means new clothing expenses, furniture, diaper services, and perhaps expanded housing (Wells and Gubar 1966; Landon 1979). These effects may be described as *need-driven*. Some changes may generate more needs than others. For example, Roseman (1971) proposes that short distance residential moves have less effect on a household's "center of gravity" and so require fewer adaptations. This speculation receives mixed support in the research of Gottko and Sauer (1988) who found more retail patronage changes but *fewer* actual or planned purchases by long distance movers than by short distance (local) movers.

A life status change may also provide the occasion for activating new want-driven behaviors or entire new lifestyle patterns. There appear to be three mechanisms operating here. First, the status change may simply act to *stimulate* change. Thus, a residential move may prompt a household to finally get rid of an old car or an old refrigerator even though it is not a necessary change. Or, a divorce or change of jobs may lead to a head of household taking up a new hobby, going back to school, or becoming a vegetarian.

Second, a status change could act to *liberate* new want-driven behaviors. The most obvious case would be where the household receives a significant increase in income or other in-flow of assets (Morgan 1985) and begins to travel or engage in an expensive hobby. If someone moves out of the household or the family moves to larger quarters, the situational change may create space for a new bedroom set, an indoor gym, or a photography darkroom. Such liberating effects were identified by Arnould in his studies of innovations in Zinder Province, Niger. Arnould found that "consumption of fancy beds, woven tapestries, and other items employed in women's competitive display behaviors . . . and Meccan goods [goods brought back from a pilgrimage to Mecca] would expand if incomes permitted" (Arnould 1989, p. 254). On the other hand, a major situational change could have the inverse effect, *inhibiting* rather than stimulating behavior. Thus, a reduction in income, a move to a smaller house, the arri-

val of a new child or a grandparent could all cause a household to give up certain past behaviors (e.g. entertaining, eating out). While these would be changes *per se*, they are not the positive type in which marketers are typically interested.

A final, broad set of possible effects of general situational change posited by Andreasen is intrapsychic. A considerable body of medical and psychological research has established that status change can bring about significant physical and emotional trauma (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1974). The precipitant cause of this trauma is *stress* with the level of stress proportional to the number and types of life status changes experienced. Dohrenwend et al (1973) have calibrated stress levels brought about by various types of life status changes. These researchers found that the stress effects for some status changes vary by sex and social class and by whether the status change is evaluated negatively or positively (see also, Andreasen 1984).

On the basis of his analysis of status change effects on consumer behavior, Andreasen has concluded:

Life status change measures clearly differentiate households according to likelihood of changing. . . . the respondents who were undergoing life status changes were more likely to be changing their brand preferences spontaneously, either as the result of direct effects of specific life status changes or as the result of intervening changes in lifestyles (Andreasen 1984, p. 794).

Andreasen also found that the extent to which individuals were effective in *adjusting* to life status change may have influenced their satisfaction with existing products and services. It may be hypothesized that increased dissatisfaction as a result of life change may then lead to further increases in readiness to change.

D. Decision Stage-Specific Readiness to Change

For specific behavior changes to occur, target

individuals need to *decide* to act (and in many cases, *continue to act*) in some new way. As a wide range of research has demonstrated, the decision to change typically comes about only after a series of steps have taken place, key factors put in place and critical barriers to action removed. According to various researchers, specific beliefs about the behavior and about significant others must be acquired (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen 1987), a sense of self-efficacy achieved (Bandura 1977), and an understanding of how to control the behavioral outcome realized (Ajzen 1987; Kuhl 1985). To the extent that the individual behavior change process is sequential or hierarchical, readiness to change will be a function of how far along the process the individual has gone [5].

E. Intervention-Specific Readiness to Change

While many individuals will change entirely on their own without the intervention of any change agent, others will change *only if* there is an effective, persuasive intervention, typically by other individuals. Bearden and his colleagues (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989; 1990; Bearden and Rose 1990) have developed a promising framework for understanding differences across individuals in their likely responsiveness to such interpersonal intervention. Building on earlier work by Park and Lessig (1977), Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel have developed a scale that measures consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SUSCEP), "a general trait that exists in varying degrees in different individuals." SUSCEP has two components: normative and informational reflecting individuals' susceptibility to influence about values and through the provision of information.

Both SUSCEP subscales were found to be positively correlated with (a) the motivation to comply component of The Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980); (b) Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) measure of individuals' level of Attention to Social Comparison Information (with a substantially higher correlation for the normative component);

and (c) a 9-item Interpersonal Orientation scale that measures self-perceived willingness to interact with others regarding consumer-related topics (with a higher correlation for the informational component). Both components were negatively correlated with: (a) Eagly's (1967) self esteem scale; (b) a 5-item self-confidence scale that measures self-perceived ability to choose the best buy from available brands (with a higher negative correlation for Bearden et al's normative component). A positive correlation was found for the normative component and a list of 21 normative behaviors but a nonsignificant (although positive) correlation between the informational component and 17 informational behaviors. Finally, a positive correlation was also found between the normative component and Kassarian's (1962) measure of other-directedness.

Summary

We have proposed here that management's timing decisions would be materially improved if they could partition target audiences into those who are ready to change and those who are not. Based on findings from a wide range of secondary literature, we postulate the existence of a latent psychological state we have labelled "readiness to change". Individuals, we argue, can be differentiated on the basis of their enduring *general* and *category-specific* readiness to change and their readiness to change a specific behavior given their present *life status* and *stage in the behavior change process*. Finally, we contend that individuals will differ in their readiness to change should they be exposed to different persuasive *interventions*.

However, for the concept of readiness to change to be useful to management, we must demonstrate an ability to:

- (a) measure total readiness to change and its five components;
- (b) establish the functional relationships among the components;
- (b) identify audience characteristics associated with differences in the various readiness to change measures;

- (c) establish the ability of readiness to change measures to predict behavioral intention and actual behavior.

Comments

In a comment on this paper, Ignace Glorieux has offered several useful extensions and criticisms. One useful extension is the proposal that one consider that it is possible that the nature of a desirable intervention will change as time itself passes in a given situational context.

Glorieux's principal criticism is that the paper does not pay enough attention to the *managerial* timing of interventions but rather to the problem of classifying individuals in terms of their potential for intervention. He recommends further extension of the sections dealing with decision stages and situational factors as one way to provide more insight of direct relevance to management.

This point is valid but ignores a central point of the paper. I have argued that it is not possible to make optimal managerial decisions about the timing of interventions without knowing the status of potential target audiences. Traditionally, the latter has meant understanding the needs, wants and perception of these audiences. In this paper, I have stressed the importance of also understanding the audience's readiness to change if one is to direct limited resources toward those on whom they will have the most impact. This, in point of fact, *is* implicitly a timing recommendation in that the proposed model will help identify whom one should target *now* and whom later.

Glorieux also argues that the proposed model unduly emphasizes psychological variables to the neglect of sociological variables. He points out that, inevitably, interventions must address individuals in social situations. I agree with the latter point but counter that the proposed model *must* be psychological in basic character because it represents a basis for measuring a psychological state, i.e. individual readiness to change. However, it must be noted that the model does explicitly incorporate sociological inputs, particularly the likely responsiveness of individuals (a) in changing

situations and (b) in the face of attempts by others to exert interpersonal pressure.

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