

COLUMNS

Targeting customers in abstract terms versus concrete

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Liraz Margalit is Web psychologist at Clicktale

By **Liraz Margalit**

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Perspective matters a lot in life it affects our relationships with family, our understanding of events around us, and it underlines our education, lifestyle and basic worldview.

But perspective also plays a crucial role in how we shop online, meaning that for consumer psychologists, understanding the way that their customers view products for sale can be the key to staying in the black or dipping into the red.

In short, it does not just matter how good your product is and where you set the price point. It also makes a difference how close your customers feel to the product when they decide if they want to buy.

Consumer psychologists talk about distance in psychological terms, meaning that a customer using concrete thinking to consider an object has a different shopping experience than one who uses abstract thinking.

Think different

Consider two customers shopping for a couch at a furniture superstore, one who is thinking concretely and the other who is thinking abstractly.

The concrete thinker will zoom in on the present moment, allowing himself to focus on minute details: How soft are the cushions? How will the color of the fabric blend with the paint in my living room?

The abstract thinker, on the other hand, will zoom out and consider bigger issues: Do I like the way this couch looks? Do I feel ready to purchase new furniture right now?

Web-based businesses can take advantage of the power of perspective by using it to promote their high-value products online.

Humans are conditioned to consider luxury items from an abstract perspective and more practical items from a concrete perspective.

That is why the average consumer who hears the word "Ferrari" will immediately think of abstract ideas such as the power and status of getting behind the wheel of such a vehicle. But the word "Subaru" will bring to mind concrete concepts such as gas consumption and safety ratings.

So what do you do to push your high-value items online? You guide your consumers to think about them in abstract, high-level, Ferrari-esque terms.

High-level thoughts relate to the experiences that one can have with a product, while low-level thoughts relate to products' features such as their size, color and price.

To keep customers in an abstract frame of mind, use phrasing on your site such as why customers would buy an item the feelings and experiences such a purchase will invoke as opposed to how they will purchase it, which includes the price and method of payment.

Consider two subscription pages: The Fortune magazine activates low-level thinking by exposing the visitor to concrete specifics such as the price and the subscription duration.

The Wall Street Journal page, however, activates high-level thinking by pushing the visitor to consider the product as an abstract mode of enriching his or her life.

Right place, right time

Another factor that plays a major role in how we perceive purchases is distance in time, meaning how far off in the future a specific event or purchase is.

I recently helped a client in the travel industry conduct an analysis of visitors to its Web site.

Our research found that site visitors whose vacations were several months in the future were willing to pay significantly more for the same product than visitors whose trips were just around the corner. The reason?

Actual distance in time creates a wider psychological perspective, allowing consumers to focus on broad, non-specific aspects of vacation relaxing in the sun, for example as opposed to concrete, more urgent details such as which restaurant to book for dinner or how many swimsuits to pack in one's suitcase.

Of course, UX designers cannot control when customers come to their site and how far off in the future their travel dates are.

But there are tricks they can employ to guide their visitors to put psychological distance between themselves and their trips, and to up the ante on abstract thought via images and descriptions.

Pictures of dining in a scenic restaurant and descriptive terms about how a wine makes you feel are signals that guide consumers to imagine in the abstract, with a wide berth between themselves and the product.

Pictures that focus on contextual details such as the boarding gate of a plane, or descriptive terms that focus on a product's dollar value and usability, will bring the item closer to the customer's immediate experience and dial down its perceived price point in their mind.

Taking the theory for a test drive

In another study, we used heat maps to track user engagement on the Web site of one of a luxury auto retailer.

The results showed us that visitors were especially engaged with buttons that helped them choose the color of the cars, the seat fabrics, accessories and equipment all aspects of the experience of driving the particular vehicle.

Meanwhile, those same visitors had a very low click-through rate for the "used cars" button on the page, meaning that visitors who were engaging in abstract, high-level thinking about the product at hand were simply not looking for a more "practical" used car option.

When analyzing the data of visitors on a second-hand car Web site specifically geared toward customers looking to purchase a used vehicle, however, the heat map readings were completely different.

On this site, recordings showed us high levels of interaction with buttons linked to price, mileage and safety ratings, indicating practical and more realistic perception of the product.

Know your visitors

So what is the takeaway?

UX designers need to know who their customers are and what they are looking for.

On a high-class car site, it makes no sense to push the more practical characteristics of the product and sideline the luxury of the experience. That is why you will not hear a Ferrari salesperson tell a customer, "Check out this car's brakes." Instead, he will say, "Feel the way this baby hugs the road."

Meanwhile, the used car salesman down the road is not going to tell a customer to consider the wind in his hair when he gets behind the wheel. He is going to push how reliable and reasonably priced the cars on his lot are.

IF LUXURY RETAILERS want to set their price points high, make sure to anchor the products online with images and terminology that tap into high-level, experience-based thinking.

And for those who cater to bargain shoppers, it is good to know that their consumers are coming to them with a mindset that is more concrete and practical. But they can also play up abstract thought when marketing their big-ticket items.

Even online shoppers set on a finding a good deal love to day dream, and with the right perspective, conversion is always just around the corner.

Liraz Margalit is Web psychologist at [Clicktale](#), Tel Aviv, Israel. Reach her at liraz.margalit@clicktale.com.

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