

6. MEANS-END ANALYSIS

If you have taken a marketing course, you've heard the old adage, "Customers don't buy features; customers buy benefits." Some consumer behaviorists maintain that this is not the end of the story—that benefits are frequently not an end in themselves, but merely a means to achieving some valued end state that is important to the consumer. In other words, we might rewrite the adage to read: "Customers buy features that bring them benefits that get them closer to valued end states." These valued end states may include things such as self-esteem, safety/security, good health, freedom, happiness, peace of mind, belongingness, achievement, and social approval.

For instance, a customer might state that one of the reasons she bought a car is because it is red. When asked why the color red is important to her, she says that the color red is important to her because it means that the car is more likely to be noticed. So now we know something about one of the features (the color red) that is important to her and her perception of the benefit that has been gained by that feature (being noticed). If we stopped the line of questioning here, however, we would not have a complete picture of this consumer's purchase motivations with regard to this feature. Note that at least two realistic possibilities exist with regard to the underlying reason that this benefit, "being noticed," is important to this consumer. If asked, "Why is being noticed important to you?" she might respond, "Because it makes me feel good about myself when others notice me." In this case, we would conclude that the benefit "being noticed" is important to this consumer because it leads to the valued end state of self-esteem.

<u>Feature</u>	<u>Benefit</u>	<u>Valued End State</u>
color red	being noticed	self-esteem

On the other hand, the consumer might respond that the benefit of "being noticed" is important to her "because it means that other drivers are more likely to see the car, and therefore I am less likely to be in a car accident." In this case, we would conclude that the benefit "being noticed" is important to this consumer because it leads to the valued end state of safety.

<u>Feature</u>	<u>Benefit</u>	<u>Valued End State</u>
color red	being noticed	safety

Obviously, these two different responses lead the consumer behaviorist to very different conclusions with regard to the consumer's purchase motivations.

The process that is used to identify the underlying links between features, benefits, and valued end states is called a "Laddering Interview," and consists primarily of repeatedly asking a consumer to identify why something is important to him/her. In fact, this questioning is repetitive to the extent that it typically feels awkward for both the interviewer and the respondent. This push to identify the underlying reasons that a consumer sees a feature or benefit as important, however, is at the core of the laddering interview. A hypothetical laddering interview follows.