

Model numbers meant to confuse shoppers

You're shopping for holiday gifts, and you're amply armed with brand names and model numbers. Should be a breeze, right?

Brand names indisputably help shoppers find products with the highest and most consistent quality. And when a product is more complicated than, say, canned peas, brand names and model numbers can help shoppers find the best price for the product with their preferred mix of features.

But due to misplaced marketing practices, brand names and model numbers sometimes confuse rather than help consumers.

As Christmas approached a couple of years ago, relatives asked what gifts I wanted. At the top of my list was an electric razor. Being a careful and knowledgeable shopper, I spent time checking with friends and reading catalogs. A new issue of *Consumer Reports* had run an evaluation of electric razors. Armed with this information, I wrote down my first choice of brand and its model number, and also listed a couple of alternatives.

But come Christmas morn, there was no razor under the tree. By the time my relatives got to the stores, my chosen brand had grossly altered its model numbers, and failed to indicate the new models' relationship to earlier models. The product testing and rating magazines had not delivered any subsequent information about new razor models.

In this case, the model numbers served only to confuse shoppers.

Basic marketing practices dictate that new models should have some ties to the old ones. In the case of my razor, clearly after a respected consumer information source gave the brand top ratings, the company should have kept the same product numbers, or at least told buyers how the new model numbers were related to the old ones.

Doing so would have allowed the company to maximize sales from satisfied users as well as readers of the publication. But actual marketing practice is sometimes not logical.

A hundred years ago, activists feared the power of corporate monopolies, so laws were passed to prevent any firm from gaining such power. These laws are enforced today.

In his book, *Dilbert Future: Thriv-*

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on
Misplaced Marketing

ing on Stupidity in the 21st Century, Scott Adams predicts that capitalism increasingly will hurt consumers through "confusopolies," or systems of marketing by which consumers are unable to tell what's going on.

In the world of consumer electronics, customers shopping for a new stereo, television or VCR may end up buying out of exhaustion instead of confidence and knowledge. Finding a store with "the lowest prices" is easy. Many stores advertise, "We'll match

anyone's price on the same model."

However, since no two stores carry the same model, direct comparisons are impossible. Driving from store to store, shoppers find the same brands but a different array of model numbers at each location. Choice can't be based on price comparisons.

Economists say prices and transactions are set by supply and demand. But then, to an economist reality is just a concept.

In the case of the shopper who travels from store to store, as his fuel costs cut into potential savings realized from "smart shopping," he decides to buy the product at the store with the least confusion and frustration.

Ultimately, the "confusopoly" diminishes the consumer's choices as surely as a monopoly does. ■

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