

# Consumer empowerment in digital marketing: Between earned and surrendered power.

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## Abstract

*Today, we are* witnessing a renegotiation of the relationship between businesses, consumers and a fundamental reshaping of marketing in favor of the consumer. This paper explores the intersection of consumer behavior and digital media by clearly defining consumer power and empowerment in the contexts of the Internet and social media. In addition, we present a "bottom up" power dynamic where the consumer

frees himself from the expertise of the professional by relying on his own experience to assert a position and thus to exercise power, and an opposite, "top down" dynamic driven by the company towards its customer that takes the form of digital marketing strategies made with the aim of redistributing power.

**Keywords--** consumer empowerment, power, internet.

## Introduction

Early in the history of business, power was contested between manufacturers and retailers because of the ability of retailers to offer more product choices to consumers.

Today, the balance of power is shifting again, this time in favor of consumers. This fundamental change threatens the intrinsic informational asymmetry between companies and consumers and promises to redistribute power and redefine the nature of the company-customer relationship. This change leads us to ask the question: is consumer power acquired or ceded by the company?

Today, many consumers find it hard to imagine a world without the Internet, and many users find it "indispensable" [1]. These information technologies have transformed businesses and societies as well as consumers with unlimited access to information, better social networking, improved communication capabilities and tools. The individual consumer is at the center of this transformation and also benefiting from all the power it gives him. This is justified by many researchers who indicate that the power of online consumers is on the rise [2].

On the other hand, the concept of power that has been contested for years has given rise to another concept, consumer empowerment, which has been used in the marketing literature to explain the subjective experience and states related to increased capabilities or empowerment related to greater information or understanding [3] that makes the consumer more powerful than before. This perspective raises a number of subsidiary questions: if consumers have more power, who gave it to them? Where does it come from? And how are companies dealing with it?

This article will aim to contribute to the theory by discussing the evolution of the power dynamic between business and customer. We will evoke a "bottom up" power dynamic where the consumer frees himself from the expertise of the professional by relying on his own experience and the one of

his peers to assert an independent position and autonomously define his needs, and the opposite dynamic, "top down" driven by the company towards its customer. Through the ticket of these two movements, we first identify how the power of online consumers and the sources of supply have changed from a "bottom up" perspective. Then, we focus on the different strategies that companies have put in place to frame consumer power, or in other words, to exercise their power through consumer empowerment strategies from a "top down" perspective. We conclude with a discussion of who has the power and the implications of these power dynamics on businesses.

### I. The empowerment of the Consumer

#### A. Concept of Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has been applied in a variety of contexts such as policy studies (e.g., women's empowerment in politics) [4]; management studies (e.g., employee empowerment and job satisfaction) [5]; it has even been exploited in art therapy in the social field [6]; and consumer research (e.g., empowerment through increased access to information and greater choice) [7].

In management studies, empowerment is often equated with power sharing with subordinates and participatory management. In other words, empowerment describes the perceived power or control that an individual actor or organizational subunit has over others [8].

In consumer and information systems research, the Internet is a technology that fully supports empowerment. The latter refers to the way in which new technologies allow people to interact with the world at different levels (personal, group or community) and to do things that they found difficult to do or achieve before [9]. According to Kozinets et al, the Internet confers ultimate power, allowing its audience not only to observe a reality, but also to enter and actually experience it as if it were real [10]. Also, the Internet facilitates its users' access to information and presents them

with a vast choice of products and services they may need.

Due to the increase in the information base, and because knowledge is power, "customer empowerment," reflect the increased ability of consumers to access, understand, and share information, and this is what the internet facilitates and since it is considered a consumer empowerment technology [10].

### B. Consumer Empowerment as a Process

The concept of empowerment is defined by Gibson as "the social process of recognizing, promoting, and strengthening the abilities of individuals to meet their needs, solve their problems, and mobilize the resources necessary to control their lives" [12]. It is a concept that has its origins in work carried out mainly in the field of educational psychology [13]. Thus, these different works define the concept of empowerment as a process in four phases [14]:

- *An individual phase:* It corresponds to an awareness of an individual as a bearer of a singularity through the observation and analysis of his situation.
- *A collective phase:* It consists in creating links and sharing experiences, in organizing to develop a wider knowledge in a specific field.
- *A collaborative phase:* It allows people to learn, to decide on their choices, to act, to produce or to co-design.
- *A societal phase* that allows us to reflect on the evolution of society and democratic renewal.

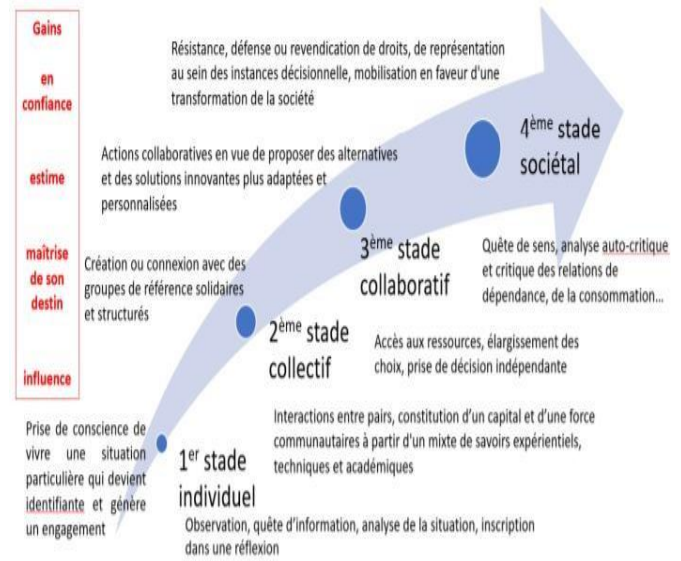


Fig 1 Empowerment, a process in four phases

Source: Fayn MG (2017) Towards an enriched view of consumer empowerment in marketing. In: 33rd Congress of the French Marketing Association Orleans, France.

This progression of phases transforms the "empowered" individual, giving him more confidence, control, and the ability to take part in the decisions that concern him by promoting a feeling of autonomy and control in his decision-making, made possible by the perception of the gain in skills[15].

In this literature review, we will structure the research on consumer empowerment according to two old movements. The first movement is "bottom up", where the consumer frees himself from the expertise of the professional by relying on his own experience and that of his peers to assert an independent position and define his needs autonomously. But it also happens that empowerment characterizes an opposite dynamic or movement, "top down", the latter refers to an authorization given to consumers to control certain variables of the product, it is driven by the company towards its customers.

## II. Sources of Consumer Empowerment: The

### Bottom-Up Approach

Consumer empowerment expresses an aspiration that starts from the bottom and goes up, freeing the consumer from the imposed straitjacket ("bottom-up" approach). The initiative comes back to the consumer. It is not a question of partnership but of taking control. This approach refers to different conceptions of the customer, as a compliant buyer, an influential expert or a vigilant citizen. Some researchers consider it to be a psychological state of the consumer, defined as "a mental state generally accompanied by an action that allows a consumer or group of consumers to assert their own choices and make decisions based on their needs, desires and demands on other individuals or organizations in the marketplace" [16]. From this point of view, we present in the following the sources from which the consumer procures his power.

#### *A. Technology Source*

The online consumer is technology-savvy, informed, connected and has a solutions-based lifestyle. Internet technology offers consumers greater flexibility and mobility, namely: the compression of space-time is hyper-intensified by advances in information technology and the digital revolution. We can now be "virtually" anywhere, and be "virtually" anyone and "virtually" anytime [17].

Advances in this technology have made it easy for online consumers to track and monitor their transactions 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Today, the evolution of consumer awareness is forcing companies to increase the transparency of their relationships with consumers.

#### *B. Economic Energy Sources*

There are two sources of economic power: an increase in negotiating power due to the consumer's ability to access more options in the marketplace, and a reduction in costs due to disintermediation in the supply chain. In

any case, information technology plays a crucial role in enhancing the economic power of consumers in markets.

Consumers are now able to easily create network effects. The emergence of consumer-to-consumer (C2C) markets has also made companies aware of the importance of consumers in traditional markets (C2B). Consumers now do not need to accept value dictated by companies, but can actively create value in markets. Consumers can search for any product or service, taking advantage of the transparency of the Web and the relative lack of monopoly power to increase their negotiating power with companies. The primary source of consumers' growing economic power is their ability to access the best values in the marketplace and to negotiate using Internet technology.

#### *C. Sources of Social Power*

Unlike other media, on the Internet, the marginal cost of contacting a consumer through email and other communication technologies is zero [18]. Consumers can easily access social networks, experts and communities using new communication technologies. Now, online communities perform tasks typically performed by businesses, making them even more powerful [19]. In many online communities, group buying (creating collective negotiating power) is also becoming popular [20]. Increasing sources of consumer social power enhances the economic power of consumers.

Consumers are also now creating new meanings and values about products and brands in these communities, and shaping the future strategies of companies. These consumers can also easily contact the company directly to file a complaint, creating social pressure on the company's operations.

#### *D. Psychological Empowerment*

The origins of empowerment have been studied in various

disciplines, and as discussed previously in the field of psychology, psychological empowerment as a process includes two dimensions, intra-personal empowerment and interactive empowerment [21]. Intrapersonal empowerment refers to how individuals see themselves and their ability to influence others and the political system [22].

Personal empowerment consists of three sub-dimensions: Perceived control refers to a person's belief in their ability to influence others in different situations; self-efficacy is an assessment of one's ability to perform a particular task; perceived competence refers to the perceived ability to perform well Ability to work or task [23].

#### *E. Empowerment through Social Networks*

Researchers have examined how new media technologies have stimulated interactional empowerment [24]. With the growth of social media, individual users have access to a variety of online channels that have tipped the balance of power in their favor. In the digital age, ordinary Internet users are visible, organized, and able to virally influence the decisions of others. Without the constraints of time and location, anyone with access to the Internet has the potential to spread a message to millions of people - at rapid speed. The connectivity established via online social networks can enhance users' ability to take collective action and demand social change. As a result, [25] empowered social media users, tend to demonstrate social influence by adopting the opinions of others or expressing opinions that converge with those of others [26].

#### *F. Source Related to the Decision-making Process*

As a process, consumer empowerment like decision making is a process that is defined by a set of actions put in place by the consumer to exert control over each stage of decision making that concerns him. As such, its definition is more subjective as it is linked to individual perception and concerns the consumer's feeling of being able to control what follows:

1) *Information Search*: Once the theater of engagement shifts online, the consumer is in a comfort zone. This transition takes place in the information-seeking phase where the online consumer can easily access an enormous amount of information about products and services from a variety of sources (e.g., search engines, company sites, brand sites, third-party sites). At this point, companies frequently lose the attention of consumers and consumers easily get as much information as possible about the company's marketing mix. Information is a major contributor to a consumer economic power and a detractor from corporate power.

2) *Product*: Today, many software programs make consumers the primary product makers [27]. Consumers now act as the designer of the product. Consumers can easily access information about product specifications, user experiences (especially via online communities) and expert reports from public information sources.

Due to the increased use of custom orders, manufacturers must develop modular product designs to meet a highly variable order, which has been conceptualized as "customerization" [28]. Today, we are witnessing customer-centric strategies instead of product-centric strategies. These changes suggest the end of the product era and the birth of the customer era. All of the above factors are driving manufacturers to build lasting relationships with consumers, thereby improving consumers' negotiation power.

3) *Price*: By removing barriers to entry and transaction costs, the Internet enables the free exchange of information. This reduces asymmetries in access to information and allows buyers and sellers to be better informed [2]. Consumers can simultaneously access comparable products and services with low search and switching costs, giving them more options and the ability to easily compare prices, thereby increasing consumer negotiation power.

On the other hand, there is a recent increase in the popularity

of the Shopping Bot, the intelligent agent that finds the best price combinations. Consumers are also benefiting from special offers targeted to them due to improved personalized communication. In addition, because of lower barriers to entry for companies in digital markets, there is less monopoly power for many types of product and service categories, competition is much equal and more transparent to consumers. Companies are less likely to cheat consumers. In short, pricing and market transparency provides consumers with the information they need to find the best deals.

4) *Place*: Place has brought "convenience" and "expertise" to markets, especially in retail contexts [29]. The Internet revolution has brought the retail environment into its own home. Now, one can easily track their own orders on the Internet. Today, convenience is at the ringing door, and expertise is in the computer introducing endless information. Convenience has become a strong expectation on the Internet.

Now, manufacturers have even opened their storage backrooms to consumers to better inform them about their inventory. Providing this increased level of information to the consumer can empower individuals in disputes. The introduction of information technology has caused manufacturers to focus more on consumers rather than intermediaries. This, in turn, means passing on a higher level of profit to the consumer rather than the retailer by introducing better deals for consumers, thus empowering the consumer economically.

5) *Promotion*: The introduction of personalized messages between the company and the consumer has strengthened the voice of the consumer. Now, the company needs consumers' permission to sell its products for the first time in its history [18]. Consumers are gaining more control over their media selection for purchasing decisions. The rise of user-generated content, blogs, and community sites has led to increased competition for branded corporate

websites. The company can no longer influence the entire information environment, as in a physical store or traditional media such as radio or television. Unprecedented access to information allows consumers to have a more balanced view, threatening the power of the corporation.

6) *Information Filtering*: As the amount of information increases, the quality of information becomes more important. Consumers make better decisions with less information instead of storing and analyzing large amounts of data [30].

Consumers can now access filtered and accurate information through comparative search engines/shopbots and online community recommendations. This is a source of technological and social power for consumers. However, because comparative search engines have different algorithmic approaches, the top-ranked web page in one search engine may not even be ranked in another search engine. Online communities and opinion leaders play an important role in supporting the consumer purchase decision, or filtering decision. Knowledge that has long resided in the minds of consumers is now exposed on community boards. Collaborative filtering (evaluating information within online communities and discussion forums) is an important support for consumer decisions and can help reduce confusion.

7) *Buying*: At the buying stage, the influence of the seller diminishes as the consumer initiates the purchase and the seller is replaced by a discrete, consumer-oriented information process. In this process, the firm can only affect the process by offering more purchase choices and thus payment. The consumer decides how to buy and how to pay. Therefore, the company must develop its online retail or shopping cart technologies to achieve its expected outcome of consumer convenience at the purchase stage.

8) *Post-Purchase*: Online consumers can become extremely active in the post-purchase phase. Any product can be

evaluated and reviewed by peers. Negative word-of-mouth (WOM) created within e-communities and spread to others can be very detrimental to a business in the post-purchase stage [31].

Entire sites are now dedicated to spreading positive or negative information about a company. For example, the PayPal Sucks site ([www.paypalsucks.com](http://www.paypalsucks.com)) is dedicated to providing negative information about the PayPal service. At the same time, there are sites dedicated to spreading positive information, for example the Fan ClubGoogle (unofficial from [www.ugfc.org](http://www.ugfc.org)), Fans Listings ([www.thefanlisting.org](http://www.thefanlisting.org)).

### III. Marketing Strategies for Consumer Empowerment: "Top Down" Approach

Since the development of information and communication technologies, companies have been facing new challenges, of which power is one. Companies are establishing strategies to adapt to the evolutions and changes in the market and consumer behavior. In the context of consumer empowerment, there are also marketing strategies that aim to support customers in mastering their consumption experiences, and then to integrate them in the creation of value. Such cooperation redistributes power, causes the company to cede some of its power and blurs status differences. As a result, consumers become co-producers, co-innovators, marketing assistants, relays, solution providers or part-time employees [32], influencers...

#### A. New product Development Strategy

Collaborative managerial or marketing strategies by which companies involve consumers in the creation of new products, this strategy takes two forms or in other words is divided to two main distinct strategies practiced by companies and which have been developed by Fuchs and Schreier, 2011: empowerment to create and empowerment to select. Empowerment to create consists of involving the consumer in the definition of promising new product concepts, relying on the creative and innovative capacities

of the consumer, through innovative ideas proposed by customers; and empowerment to select, which aims to select the offer that will be produced and marketed by the company that relies on consumer votes for product selection.

These practices have encouraged companies in many industries to empower their customers by allowing them to take control of processes that were once the exclusive domain of marketers.

It is proposed that it would be useful to think of customer empowerment in new product development (NDP) in terms of two basic dimensions: customer empowerment to create ideas for new product designs; and customer empowerment to select product designs (see Figure 2). Therefore, customers can be empowered to submit ideas for new products, thus empowered to create, empowered to select, i.e., vote on which products should ultimately be commercialized [33].

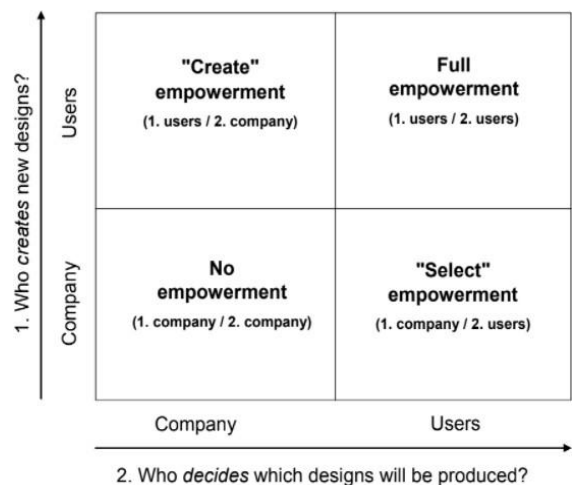


Fig 2 NDP strategies for consumer empowerment

Source: Christoph Fuchs and Martin Schreier, (2011). Customer Empowerment in New Product Development, 19p.

#### B. Influence Marketing

The internet, Web 3.0 and social media can be described as the source of this evolution and with it the transfer of power from marketers to consumers [34]. The internet empowers consumers, who can now create their own content on websites or via blogs through Web 3.0, connect and exchange with other consumers, compare prices and be more informed than ever before. Everyone is online these days and businesses are reaching their customers better on the various social media platforms. Since marketers need to be where their consumers are, many companies have started using social media in addition to the traditional marketing mix [35]. However, most companies are still struggling to realize their full potential. Nevertheless, they feel the pressure to change their strategy and approach their consumers differently according to their preferences. And they are not neglecting the preferences of consumers on social networks. Consumers prefer to listen to recommendations from family and friends and are skeptical of traditional marketing messages. In this regard, one study found that "WOM is the most reliable and actionable source of information for consumers" [36]. Furthermore, it highlights the fact that "the effectiveness and power of human-to-human contact, whether in person, by voice, via the Internet, or on review sites, is considered more targeted and effective than traditional marketing." As a result, marketers have increasingly realized that it is time to cede some of their power and rally influencers and large networks to their advantage.

Initially, celebrities like Beyoncé or Oprah Winfrey, who have a huge fan base on social media platforms, were targeted by marketers to promote their products or services due to the fact that they are able to reach and influence a large number of people [36]. However, due to the development of Web 3.0, anyone can be an influencer and could be valuable to marketers as long as they have a large influence, huge network, and strong presence on social networks.

However, influencer marketing has a variety of benefits for marketers: "Unique branded social content from a trusted and

influential source. It also gives them content syndication across all platforms, the ability to target micro-niches at scale, higher click-through rates (CTRs) and lower cost-per-click than traditional posting, fresh and sustainable content, and loyal partners who care and share.

### *C. Online Community*

The growing popularity of social media has led companies to recognize the power of word of mouth in online environments, in which consumers use technologies to communicate with others about products and services [37]. In these contexts, online communities play a prominent role. An online community comprises "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact on the basis of a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported or mediated by technology and guided by certain protocols and standards" [38]. Unlike other online marketing tools, such as viral marketing campaigns or advertising on social networking sites, online communities facilitate consumer-to-consumer online conversations and allow businesses to interact directly and transparently with consumers [39].

A firm's role in online community management can be passive or active [40]. Passive engagement involves providing a platform for online conversations and, notably, the firm does not engage consumers in conversations. In contrast, active engagement involves direct interactions with community members, such as responses to consumer posts or the opening of new threads by a company employee. Companies that follow an active engagement strategy often use a hybrid approach that includes both active and passive interaction elements with their customers [40].

### *D. Empowerment of Consumer Privacy*

Another strategy is being adopted by companies, but this time to deal with privacy issues. Companies have several tools at their disposal that allow them to collect, analyze,



record and exploit consumer data to target and personalize their advertising. The idea is that targeted advertising reaches specific target groups that are relevant to the advertiser, but on the consumer's side their privacy is at stake, so several researchers highlight the importance of "control" over personal information as a central element of the privacy concept. Many researchers have also alluded to this control. According to, Olivero and Lunt, consumers tend to demand more control in situations of increased threats to their privacy, suggesting that companies that delegate control to consumers may be able to gain a competitive advantage [41]. It has also been found that consumers' privacy concerns are associated with their perceived control over their private information [42]. It has also been pointed out that information privacy, in cases where the consumer's data is held by another party, is also the ability of the consumer to be able to exercise a substantial degree of control over that data and its use [43].

According to Fried, "privacy is not simply an absence of information about ourselves in the minds of others, rather it is the control we have over information about ourselves." [41]. All of these definitions emphasize the importance of individual control over personal information as central to the concept of privacy and are missing from the literature and practice. Using this context, privacy empowerment can be defined as a psychological construct related to the individual's perception of the extent to which they can control the distribution and use of their personally identifying information.

The researchers noted that another indicator of the potential importance of empowerment was the fact that the concept of empowering the individual to control privacy is embedded in three of the FTC's (The Federal Trade Commission) four fair information practices [44] [45]. These principles were suggested to the industry by the FTC in response to growing consumer concerns about privacy. The three that incorporate the concept of enhanced

individual control are as follows: Notice, which can be viewed as an act of consumer empowerment, because with the information provided in the notice, consumers can make informed decisions in their best interest. Choice, such as "opt-in" or "opt-out," which provide consumers with an option as to how their personally identifiable information is used beyond the use for which the information was provided. It is suggested that in order to define their choices, consumers feel empowered [46]. And finally, access, which provides consumers with reasonable access to the information that a website collects about them, including the ability to review the information and correct inaccuracies. This principle clearly gives a consumer control over personal information and helps guard against the collection and retention of harmful misinformation.

### *Conclusion*

A shifting power relationship between consumers and businesses relies heavily on the ability of consumers to access a variety of information sources that strengthens their voice at the individual and community level, and thereby changes markets. In a historical context, such dynamics are not surprising, but an understanding of the sources in this current period of change is essential for marketing strategists. While consumer empowerment is a difficult concept to pin down, the growth in sophistication and the use of information and communication technologies appears to be driving the process.

Empowerment allows consumers to seek out better value propositions, but providers seem to have difficulty controlling or managing the empowerment process. In terms of decision-making processes, the Internet improves the number and quality of value propositions, market knowledge, ability to search, and ability to leverage alternatives. This information revolution suggests a shift of power from information to consumers. Faced with a market environment where information is the equivalent of power and where the consumer can gain power from many sources other than

technological, i.e. economic, social, psychological, etc.

On the other hand, companies have taken various strategic paths that have as their primary role the promotion of controlled consumer empowerment while developing consumer-centric marketing strategies that seek to control the delegation of power. The marketing strategy is based on a premise of power. There is a need to regain control of the marketing process, i.e., to manage consumer empowerment. Being perceived as the best company to empower customers can be a winning strategy, whether it is by creating a situation where consumers feel empowered enough (co-creation strategy), going through the tickets of influencers to be closer to customers (influencer marketing), or others, all of these strategies are taken into account by companies with a view to cede some of their power to consumers.

In conclusion, the discussion in this article supports the existence of several sources of consumer empowerment that companies cannot easily control, but they are encouraged to be aware of the increased power of the online consumer and to respond accordingly.

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