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# Using laddering to understand and leverage a brand's equity

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## Abstract

Understanding a brand's equity is difficult for researchers. Building on means-end theory, describes a method – laddering – which has proven useful in uncovering insights related to the source and the nature of a brand's equity. Through laddering interviews, a meaningful “mental map” can be developed that visually links a brand's attributes, the benefits or consequences of using it, and the personal values it satisfies. An analysis of 1,200 laddering interviews indicates that a combination of only seven basic values are at the core of most brand purchases. A number of illustrations of laddering insights and their implications for the marketing mix are given to show how laddering can help marketers understand and revitalize brand equity.

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Defining a brand's equity has been difficult for researchers. While we speak of equity in general terms, it is a consumer-specific concept that differs from consumer to consumer (Aaker, 1991). For this reason, many of the methods used to better understand brand equity – such as focus groups and surveys – have met with disappointing results. Building on means-end theory (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Gutman, 1982), we describe a method – laddering – which has proven useful in uncovering insights related to the source and the nature of a brand's equity and why consumers buy what they buy (Wansink, 2000).

Most methods that analyze brand equity focus on concrete product knowledge and not on how such attributes relate to important values for that consumer. One important component of a brand's equity lies in the emotional associations that brand has for a particular person (Keller, 1996). While related to product attributes, these abstract associations can have a deeper and more profound impact on one's relationship with objects such as brands (Bannister and Mair, 1968). Yet many methods used to gauge a brand's equity can fail to tap in to the deeper reasons why a person attributes such equity to the brand. Even if this is a dying brand, understanding its core seed of equity can provide a starting point to revitalize it (Wansink, 1997).

A laddering interview is similar to the classical picture of a psychologist interviewing a patient on a couch, revealing insights into their lives that are not apparent. The psychologist is trying to get to the root of the problem through questioning. Laddering serves the same function with the exception that the marketer is not searching for the root of a problem. Rather, he is trying to find the root reasons for the customer's purchase of a particular product. In contrast to surveys – which trace or assess general consumer sentiment – laddering assesses deeper reasons why individual consumers buy. Aggregating these deep perceptions allows more profound, but still generalizable, insights to be uncovered.

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Thanks to Nina Chan for assistance in organizing this article. More details related to the techniques described in this article can be found at [www.ConsumerPsychology.com](http://www.ConsumerPsychology.com) and at [www.MarketingClass.net](http://www.MarketingClass.net)

As marketing costs rise, it is critical that marketing operate more efficiently. When customers perceive personal relevance to a product's attributes, it is because it becomes more strongly and uniquely associated with desirable usage consequences (Olson and Reynolds, 1983). This article presents laddering as a useful method for evaluating means-end theory, and for generating deep consumer insights that help guide marketing strategy and execution.

### The means-end theory

Means-end theory suggests that there is a hierarchical organization of consumer perceptions and product knowledge (Young and Feigin, 1975; Gutman, 1982) that range from attributes to consumption consequences to personal values (attributes → consequences → values). This basic hierarchy starts with product attributes which have consumption consequences (for example, the "diet" attribute in a cola has the consequence of deterring weight gain, or the "convertible" attribute of a sports car might have the consequence of adding excitement or feeling of youth to a person). Each consequence, in turn, supports one or more important values in that person's life (Reynolds *et al.*, 1995). Similar to the Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), means-end theory seeks to understand human actions - in this case purchase behavior - as a means of satisfying different levels of needs. Means-end theory suggests that concrete attributes link to self-relevance and more abstract associations. Laddering is an effective method to evaluate and draw implications about the means-end theory.

Laddering uses a series of progressive questions that allow an interviewer to understand how a product's attributes, the consequences of using it, and the personal values it satisfies are linked together. The hierarchical value map (HVM), shown as a graphic description of a laddering interview in Figure 1, consists of attributes, consequences, and values. Attributes describe the physical properties of the product. Consequences are outcomes, derived from attributes, which the customer associates with the use of the product. Values are derived from associations between consequences and personal value systems (Reynolds and Guttman, 1988). Values, often attributed to deep emotional

needs, often represent the real reason why people buy high equity brands. On Maslow's hierarchy, values would be on a higher echelon of human needs in comparison to product attributes and consequences. The strength of associations between attributes, consequences, and values have a strong influence on favorable intentions regarding a brand (Reynolds and Gengler, 1991).

### Attributes only scratch the surface

When first asked why they purchase a product, consumers typically answer in simple, convenient, "knee-jerk" ways. These responses are what "sound right" to the consumer, but they typically reveal little about the reasons for the purchase. These responses often describe attributes of the product, such as taste, price size, brand name, quality, and price or value. While they may describe the product accurately, these are seldom the real reasons people buy products. Past experiences in interviewing target consumers for various products produced some examples that illustrate how consumers initially answer with attribute-level responses (Wansink *et al.*, 1994). Consider the following quotations from different sets of interviews with females, 35 to 45 years old with two or more children at home:

I purchased the Maybelline line of cosmetics because it is a good brand name at a reasonable price.

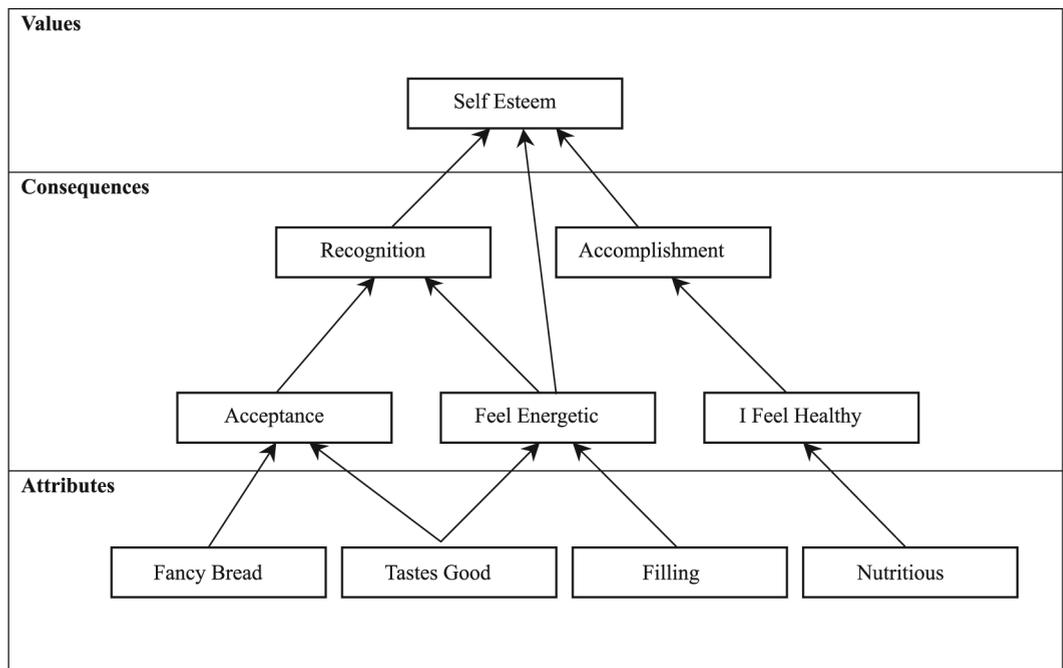
Oh, Haagen-Dazs tastes great and it's low in fat. I like to eat Honey Bunches because it tastes good and it fills me up in the morning, so I'm not hungry an hour later.

Johnson & Johnson's non-allergenic soap is really gentle on my skin and I can buy it almost anywhere I go.

Each of these explanations does little more than merely describe the physical characteristics of the product. However, it is from these attributes that an interviewer can begin to move towards the values behind these purchases through probing questions that examine some of the consequences consumers associate with these attributes.

### Consequences provide key marketing insights

The next step in finding the values impacting on a purchasing decision is to examine why the attribute-level distinction is important to the individual. This begins to reveal more personal reasons for purchasing a product,

**Figure 1** An illustration of a hierarchical value map

rather than describing the physical characteristics of the product. This is because consumers associate certain attributes with the relevant consequences of using that brand, and the purchase decision may result from hopes of achieving these associated consequences. Often the insights gained here can be directly applied to formulating a marketing campaign. To continue our example, consider the subsequent follow-up questions and answers to the four examples noted earlier:

I purchased the Maybelline line of cosmetics because it is a good brand name at a reasonable price. - *Why is reasonable price important?* - Well, buying a quality product that isn't high priced makes me feel good about myself because I am spending my money wisely.

Oh, Haagen-Dazs tastes great and it's low in fat. - *Why is food low in fat important to you?* - I like to watch my weight and live a healthy lifestyle.

I like to eat Honey Bunches because it tastes good and it fills me up in the morning, so I'm not hungry an hour later. - *Why is it important that you are not hungry an hour later?* - First of all, I have more energy and tend to get more accomplished at my job. And simply not having to stop work to eat something keeps me working and I get more done at work.

Johnson & Johnson's non-allergenic soap is really gentle on my skin and I can buy it almost anywhere I go. - *Why should a soap be gentle on your skin?* - Since its gentle to my skin, it does not dry it up, and I have this self-image of having very soft and delicate skin.

The results of asking "why?" to the initial answers given by consumers result in statements that begin to reveal more about the abstract and emotional qualities the customer associates with the brand. These are not merely statements about the product, but thoughtful, personal reflections that are one step closer to finding the personal values people had that drove the purchase. Consequences specify the way a value is linked to an attribute of the product (Reynolds and Gengler, 1991). Consequences are the key component to an effective brand marketing platform. It is from the consequences of a laddering interview that a marketing campaign is developed.

Often, there are many consequences revealed by a consumer about a purchase he has made. Questions are continually asked until a value is revealed. This value may present itself after as few as two questions or as many as 20 questions. The process is dependent upon the questions asked by the interviewer as well as the consumer's involvement with the product. An interviewer should not expect to find a consumer's personal values behind a purchase in three abrupt questions. Usually, 30-40 minutes of time and concentration must be invested into each interview to gain significant results.

### Values are the real reason people buy

The reasons for people's purchasing decisions are not always apparent. Although a

consumer will quickly respond to product-related questions, their responses are often not the core reasons for purchasing a product. Often they are not even aware of these core reasons (Rokeach, 1973). Most often, in-depth questioning reveals a deeper reason for purchasing a product. When consumers buy, they attempt to self-justify the purchase in order to maintain cognitive consistency. When a person buys a brand because it has high equity, they often buy it because it fits an emotional need as well as a practical one. For example, when a consumer was asked why he bought OB lager, an imported Korean beer, his initial responses included the facts that it was imported and had a fancy label. Through further questioning, however, it was found that his real reasons for purchasing the imported beer were a sense of belonging, personal wellbeing, and the importance of long-term friends that are evoked because of the purchase. Values such as these are - at some level - related to most product purchases.

Through the process of conducting over 1,200 laddering interviews, it generally appears that an average of 2.2 values are linked to the product, but some people may indicate fewer and some people more. Seven general values often prove to be the end goal for purchase behavior:

- (1) accomplishment;
- (2) belonging;
- (3) self-fulfillment;
- (4) self-esteem;
- (5) family;
- (6) satisfaction; and
- (7) security.

With the exception of security, most of these values can be associated with the social and self-actualization levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Table I shows eight different purchases from interviews with eight different individuals, and the seven general values

found behind these purchases. It is interesting to note that most of these purchases are related to two to four different values.

### Using laddering to investigate means-end theory

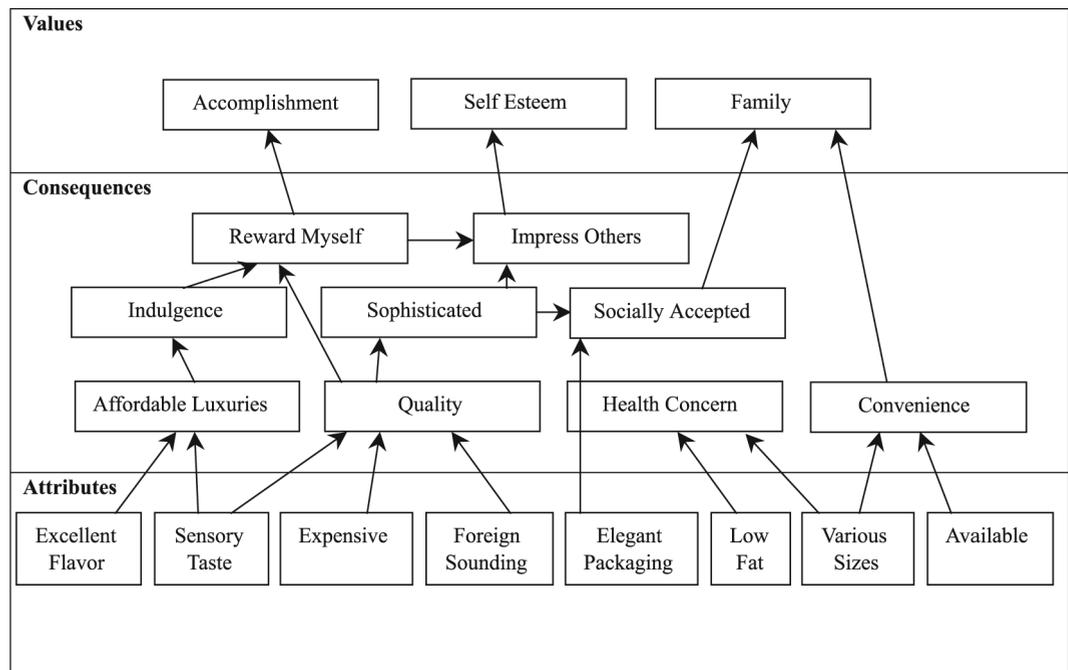
The object of a laddering interview is to uncover how product attributes, usage consequences, and personal values are linked in a person's mind. Doing so will help create a meaningful "mental map" of the consumer's view toward the target product, and by combining the maps of similar consumers a large, more exhaustive map can be developed.

The hierarchical value map (HVM) is a graphical description of a laddering interview that is used to see the relationships between the attributes, consequences, and values. Each attribute, consequence, and value was found by questioning the interviewee based on previous responses. This allowed the interviewer to slowly "climb the ladder" to get to the real reason a person buys any given product. Figure 2 illustrates a hierarchical value map for Haagen-Dazs Ice Cream. Laddering provides a way of peeling an onion in order to get past the superficial down to what is really important. This article will provide a good framework for conducting an interview.

The first step in effective laddering technique is to choose a brand champion, someone who is loyal to the brand and is enthusiastic about promoting the brand. Although not representative of the population, recall that the purpose of the laddering interview - in this context - is to show how they can be used to understand a brand's equity in order to revitalize the brand. The best strategy to uncover the core associations and elements of this equity is to talk to someone who feels strongly about the

Table I Values found behind consumer purchases

| Item                      | Accomplishment | Belonging | Self-fulfillment | Self-esteem | Family | Satisfaction | Security |
|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------------|-------------|--------|--------------|----------|
| OB lager                  |                | X         |                  |             |        |              | X        |
| Ivory soap                |                |           |                  |             |        |              |          |
| Maybelline                | X              |           | X                |             |        | X            |          |
| Honey Bunches of Oats     |                |           |                  | X           | X      |              |          |
| Diet Coke                 |                |           |                  |             |        |              |          |
| J&J's non-allergenic soap | X              |           | X                | X           |        | X            |          |
| Haagen Dazs               | X              |           |                  | X           |        | X            |          |
| Sony Playstation          | X              | X         | X                |             |        |              |          |

**Figure 2** A hierarchical value map for Haagen-Dazs ice cream

brand - a champion. Interviewing casual users or convenience-oriented “fair weather” purchasers will provide too few insights as to what the brand has which can be built upon and leveraged.

Although the goal of the laddering interview is to extract the abstract, possibly subconscious, reasons for purchase behavior, begin with questions that allow the brand champion to talk about the product's attributes. The consequences that are revealed along the way become the key insights used in formating a marketing strategy. Consider the following questions:

- How long have you used the product?
- How often do you use the product?
- Where do you buy the product?
- What do you like about the product?
- Is it a good value for the price?
- Have you tried similar products?
- What would it take you to switch?

The purpose of this first round of questions is to find what attributes or properties of the product cause the interviewee to purchase and champion the brand. Once several attributes of the product have been identified, and questioning is becoming repetitive, it is time to move on.

Before beginning questioning again, review the answers given. The following questions should be based on previous responses given by the brand champion. In this manner, a “ladder” begins to be constructed, establishing

links between the attributes, consequences, and values. Inquiring why an attribute is important occurs in the second round of questions.

Inquiries about attributes elicit answers about consequences. Questions that investigate consequences - in turn - aim towards finding the underlying personal values, the real reasons the purchase is made. This requires the interviewee to reflect upon the purchase and, therefore, it is important to continue questioning along the same vein. Stopping and returning to a consequence at a later time will often result in the interviewee losing their train of thought about a given consequence.

Finding the right questions to ask in any given interview can only be done through experience. Table II offers a few tips for conducting an interview. It is important to note that the following is merely a short list of questions that was compiled in doing the interviews for this study. Practice and experience will offer the best framework for what question should be asked at any given moment during the interview. However, this is a good foundation with which to start conducting laddering interviews.

### Laddering insights and marketing implications

Understanding that there exists a core of finite values behind every purchase can be useful in

**Table II** Suggestions for conducting a brand equity-based laddering interview

| Facilitation techniques   | Actions to avoid  |
|---|---|
| Ask questions that would reveal personal reasons  | Don't rush  |
| Ask questions that cause a person think and respond with a sentence, not yes/no           | Don't ask questions that can be answered in one word  |
| Ask "Why?"  | Don't force the interviewee to answer the question in a certain way   |
| Question a person's reasons for their responses   | Don't expect to get to a value in three questions   |
| Allow the questioning to flow, even if the questions are not directly brand related       | Don't assume that a person means something other than what they say   |
| Ask questions that give the interviewee free reign to answer the question as they see fit | Don't force the issue. Some of the consequences may not lead to where you want to go. Change topics and start again |
| Watch the person's face as they answer the question and listen to the tone in their voice |   |

helping stimulate implications for the promotion, place, price, and product aspects of a successful marketing campaign. Recall OB lager. Brand champions for the product often viewed "belonging" as a value they associated with OB lager. To leverage this, OB lager could be sold in upper scale liquor stores or offered in conjunction with finer dining at an elevated price to give the consumer the feel that he or she is a member of an "elite" group. This would consciously or unconsciously appeal to potential consumers' values of belonging and security, while also acknowledging attributes of the product that are appealing to the consumer.

The results of laddering could also be used to help salespeople better understand the customer and their decision making process. It has been suggested that implementing an adaptive selling technique, through laddering, results in greater knowledge of sales situations and customer characteristics. This greater knowledge, in conjunction with adaptive selling, positively affects sales performance.

The ultimate goal of laddering is to develop a successful marketing campaign. Laddering helps understand why customers really buy and helps develop key insights that will serve as the platform on which a marketing campaign can be built. Laddering can tap into the set of meanings and associations that differentiate the product from the competition (Reynolds and Gutman, 1984). These findings can then be used for designing marketing segmentation and positioning strategies (Gengler *et al.*, 1995) that explicitly link the attributes and consequences of a product. Table III illustrates some key laddering insights and their implications for the marketing mix.

## Discussion

The laddering techniques described here allow marketing professionals to dive below the surface and uncover insights that help better understand the equity of the brand and to further build it or extend it. By delving into a consumer's psyche and harvesting information regarding their basic motivations and personal values, the marketer can uncover the unique characteristics of a specific brand that truly affect those decisions. These insights hold the key to developing successful marketing techniques that focus upon and leverage these attributes and how they link to usage consequences and to values.

Many have suggested that the principal task of marketers is to educate the consumer about a product through the use of self-relevant advertising messages (Moriarty, 1983). However, no suggestion was made as to how to identify "self-relevant messages" (Seggev, 1982). For example, Arby's "different is good" campaign suggests that an individual can be unique among their peers in choosing a roast beef sandwich as opposed to a hamburger. Arby's failed to identify why "being different" was an important self-relevant message when a consumer is looking for something to eat. L'oreal, on the other hand, effectively uses the "because I'm worth it" campaign to target the personal value of acceptance, through consequences of better body image and social compatibility.

Means-end theory suggests a hierarchy of meanings behind consumer product knowledge (Young and Feigin, 1975; Gutman, 1982). Laddering provides a

**Table III** Laddering insights and their implications for the marketing mix

| Product                               | Key laddering insights  | Marketing implications  |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Nike soccer shoes and clothing</b> | Gives me a sense of belonging to a certain group<br>Makes me more a part of the soccer community<br>I wish I could live the lifestyle of a professional soccer player   | Sponsor tournament events locally and nationally<br>Put premiere soccer players' numbers on shoes<br>Buy time in the score box shown on the TV screen during games<br>Offer Nike Soccer newsletters, statistics, and promotions at POP  |
| <b>Sony Playstation</b>               | My friends come over and we spend an evening working together through a game or playing against each other<br>Challenging games require more critical thinking and decision-making. It feels more like a puzzle rather than a game<br>Some games are suited to adults only, so I don't feel like I am playing a "kids' game," but taking part in a high quality adult entertainment   | Set up gaming Kiosks in nightclubs in large cities such as LA and New York<br>Get Joey and Chandler to play Playstation on <i>Friends</i><br>Set up store displays away from other game systems and in untapped outlets such as bookstores<br>Target magazines such as <i>Maxim</i> , <i>SI</i> and <i>Playboy</i> with "mature" ads  |
| <b>J&amp;J's non-allergenic soap</b>  | It's dependable and trustworthy<br>I am concerned about my skin and keeping it healthy – J&J takes those worries away<br>I guess its because I feel like a responsible parent and that is really important to me<br>It makes me look as though I spend days at the beauty salon, like I'm a very sophisticated person. I am just smart about the products that I use<br>I can find it anywhere, so I never have to worry about not being able to get it | Free sample size soaps in childbirth bags given out during childbirth classes<br>Offer the soap in bulk sizes at "bulk prices" to appeal to family consumption<br>Sell the soap at health stores<br>Have doctors distribute free samples during visits<br>Set up POP displays that illustrate a muddy child washing his face while a mother looks on with a smile of approval |

method for targeting the most self-relevant and abstract meanings consumers associate with product knowledge. This article's purpose was to extend means-end theory by showing how the laddering interview technique could be used to uncover the key values that consumers most frequently associate with products.

Laddering can be used to build upon traditional measurement methods for brand equity. The findings can be used to convert brand champions into heavy users (Wansink and Park, 2000), encouraging them to use the product or brand more frequently or in different ways (Wansink and Gilmore, 1999). Laddering can also be used to develop adaptive sales techniques where salesmen learn to access a customer's core values and tailor their sales strategy to suit each individual customer (Gengler *et al.*, 1995). The seven general values of laddering can be further examined for their accuracy in capturing abstract product knowledge. Our study simply offers the range of values that our laddering interviews had produced. Further analysis can be applied to explore the effectiveness between attribute to value chain lengths.

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