# Looking around: consumer mindedness and information technology

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So as information technology tunnels deeper and deeper into everyday life, it's time to think not simply in terms of the next quadrillion packets or the next megaflop of processing power, but to look instead to things that lie beyond information.
(John Seely Brown & Paul Duguid, The Social Life of Information, Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000: 15)

**It is a truism that information and society are inextricably intertwined today. This, however, does not mean that the present information era and the modern consumer society are self-evidently coincided. In a just published book The Social Life of Information, John S. Brown and Paul Duguid draw attention to the positioning of information and its technologies in social life, instead of a vacuous information space. Raising the issue of information technology as a demand-side matter, not merely as supply driven, is a most interesting perspective with respect to the much-discussed tendency of food systems to become demand driven. Infocentricity is rather a hindrance than a help for food suppliers to be on firm grounds and to find fertile soil in contemporary consumer society.**

## Consumer-driven food system

One of the key words in recent (strategic) management theory is consumer mindedness. Creating and strenghtening customer bonds, building trust relationships, acquiring customer loyalty, are talk of the town. In accordance with these discussions, food industry and agribusiness in general, have started to talk and think about consumer-oriented agro-food chains. Turning the old supply chain into a demand chain is also known as the reversal of chains. Champions of this approach fitted it with such adjectives as irreversible, undeniable and urgent. All this has led up successfully to the propagation of a demand-led focus on a wide scale. Nowadays, many parties involved in food production are more aware of and attentive to the fact that it is, in the end, the consumer who is in charge. It is humbly acknowledged that consumer-driven food systems are of vital importance to thrive on economically in the food market of today and tomorrow.

The conceptualisation of food systems as shifting from being producer driven to being consumer driven and increasingly being designed to respond to consumer wants and needs as quickly as possible, perfectly fits with the central position of consumers and consumerism in modern society at large. The importance and impact of consumption has risen unprecedently during the final decades of the 20th century. Consumer society has reached maturity. To such an extent even that it is regularly assumed that particularly our consumer expenditures keep the wheels of the economy turning. Whether this may be absolutely correct or not, it is undoubtedly true that consumption and consumers are central to define Western societies and economies. Few will contend that this characteristic will change in the foreseeable future, and few will doubt that it applies to both the real and the digital world, as well as to both the "old" and the trumpeted new economy.

## The importance of information

Information is unmistakably pivotal to many aspects of modern life, both off-line and on-line. Interpreting information in terms of thermodynamics, in which mind as well as matter is all about information or order, the idea that information makes the world go round is a hard truth. But in more conventional uses of information too, such as in everyday language where this notion is quite often conceived interchangeably with knowledge, insight, and possessing or obtaining the content of messages, it is plain obvious that information is a most powerful "gadget."

As new and kaleidoscopic information and communication technologies cascade with dazzling speed into modern society, ICT may be regarded as the epicentre of the socioquake we are currently witnessing. The netted world of computers stores an enormous amount of information, everyone who goes on-line is "bombarded" with. And many people enjoy and devour all kinds of information that comes to us in quadrillions of bits via the World Wide Web. So much for information overload one is frequently inclined to think, considering that humans quite often can be typified as information sponges with an almost insatiable absorptive capacity.

Internet and e-mail are increasingly part and parcel of our daily routines with respect to communication and acquisition of information. E-commerce or e-tail is progressing. Purchasing by a click of the mouse becomes more popular by the day. On-line shopping is one-stop-shopping in your very own living room or study. In other words, it is impossible to ignore the expanding role of Internet as a distribution and marketing channel. Off-line and on-line, directly or indirectly, information technology has trickled down into the fabric of people's private and professional lives. And regarding the fast-moving developments in modern ICT, it may be safely predicted that

new technologies and tools will rather enhance than diminish this tendency.

## Days of miracle and wonder

"These are the days of miracle and wonder," Paul Simon sings in the song 'The Boy in the Bubble,' and these words are very appropriate to give an impression of modern ICT. Whereas we are living in the midst of the celebrated information revolution, we have to be rather cautious about ICT as the overpowering factor of modern life. A more relativistic attitude avoids the temptation of exaggerated infoenthusiasm. To reduce the excitement somewhat, it is healthy and needed to search for antidotes against a deterministic "tunnel" vision in which ICT is regarded as Alpha and Omega. Brown and Duguid's *The Social Life of Information* is inspirational to this.

To begin with, one should never underestimate the robustness of social patterns and practices. Particularly when old customs or ideas are firmly established or have a proven track record, they have a significant organising function in social life. New manners or mentalities easily breed (feelings of) confusion and insecurity, and, as a consequence, resistance. Notwithstanding the dynamical shifts in modern life we face or feel, most of the time human beings are more fitted up for evolutionary ways of change instead of revolutionary ones.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that so many "old" media did not lose their impact yet. Television, radio, magazines, billboards, newspapers, or catalogues remain significant sources of information. New media from the digital world first and foremost add to the array of information and communication means that are at the disposal of consumers. The same goes for the use of books or paper. "As digital communication grew over the past decade, so did paper consumption," note Brown and Duguid (2000: 174-5). And the departure of books and libraries, as (gloomily) foreseen a few decades ago, appear to be figments of the imagination until now. "Old" analogue artifacts do put a brave face on in the present brave new digital world. Moreover, information technology does not annihilate the call for paper and books, but has an accelerating effect upon their demand and usefulness.

Another example to modify overestimation of ICT-impact can be found in new conventional offices shooting up like mushrooms despite the fact that employees increasingly are teleworking from home. With respect to our central theme of information technology and consumer society, the most telling example is that the ongoing development of e-commerce – the "virtualisation" of shopping centres – is unharmful to unplugged shopping as today's norm. We are far away from a world advocated by e-vangelists in which only the die-hard infophobics will stick to this norm, while all the other consumers are netizens (citizens of the Net) who walk through the streets (hyperlinks) of cyberworld, foraging for goods and services all over the (food) market. Similar to the parallel developments just sketched, simultaneously with the construction of more and bigger virtual "cathedrals of consumption" in the digital world to practice our "consumer religion," in the real world huge and pompous mega stores and shopping malls of bricks, glass and concrete open their doors to the public to gratify their "shopaholism."

The examples mentioned above exemplify that information technology has to deal with the social context in which, among other features, a profound human need exists to meet face-to-face, to work together and to experience the company of other people. Human beings of flesh and blood are social animals after all, who do not "live on a strict information-only diet" (Brown and Duguid, 2000: 2). Explaining human problems and pleasures strictly in terms of information overload or imperfect information is quite often inept.

## Information and emotion

It may be clear by now that the matter of connecting information technology and consumer society is not a matter-of-course. Information technology has to cope with the fads and foibles of human beings. In this section, further reflections upon this matter lead to one of the most interesting transformations in consumer society that is on the rise today. At present, scholars are beginning to descry the emergence of an experience economy, an entertainment economy, or, as the author of this article prefers to dub it, an emotion economy.

Irrespective of the adjective that is being used, the proliferation of nonmaterial aspects of consumer goods and consumerism in general is emphasised. The general idea behind it is that in our affluent world of consumption, product qualities or prices are neither necessarily nor automatically decisive in explaining consumer behaviour. The emotion economy refers to the fact that (post)modern consumer behaviour is also sensitive to experiences, images, and associations that pluck consumers' heart strings. The appeal of many consumer goods does not depend on mere instrumental purposes. The attraction of (big) brands and their logos is just one manifestation of this phenomenon in which functional use and features of products are more or less subordinate to intangible assets. Contemporary consumption has much to do with identity (express your true self, showing who you are), moral judgements (social awareness, value seeking), and well-being (self-empowerment, self-respect). Maxims of today are "To have is to be," "I am what I consume," or "I shop therefore I am."

Small wonder, then, that there exists much discussion lately about ways to make consumers your customers by offering them personalised products tailored to meet their (idiosyncratic) taste, (life)style or (moral) judgements. Today, consumption is often much more then buying necessaries. The idea of satisfying consumer needs is even becoming obsolete, for as needs are connotated with functionality and scarcity. Contemporary consumerism going beyond customer satisfaction, however, is surrounded by connotations of indulgence, dreams, desires, abundance, amusement, integrity, or beauty. I would like to label this as product projection, i.e. we (sub)consciously attribute certain thoughts or feelings of ourselves to consumer goods. We consume what we are – or would like to be.

In these days of rampant consumerism, triggering emotions by image, brand, or morals behind or around products as well as production, is in many cases at least as important to the orchestration of consumers' food choices than food products' physical qualities, such as taste or texture. The emerging emotion economy is based upon this change in current consumer culture, known as dematerialisation. Stated succinctly, the direction of this trend is from real goods to feel goods.

By implication, this tendency means that genuine consumer-

driven food suppliers are in need of a well-developed amount of social and emotional intelligence. Although there is much fanfare over consumer mindedness, it is anything but a simple affair. Consumer mindedness is as demanding as today's consumers, for it requires empathy and understanding of the whimsical wants or unmanageable needs of these "emotile" (a contamination of emotion and motility) as well as sophisticated consumers. Starting conversations, rather than monologues, with consumers, are major means to this end. With respect to this consumer mindedness through interactivity and responsiveness, information technology is of prime importance.

## The stuff of consumer mindedness

Adjusting information technology to the changing socio-cultural and agile business environment, is more complex and subtle than focusing upon sheer rationality and efficiency. Of course, information technology in service of speeding up logistics, controlling production processes and the like, is most important as it is. However, these kinds of applications should not be confused with the utilisation of information technology on behalf of consumer mindedness. Now we have had the opportunity in the previous section to look – with a visionary's eye – at the experience or emotion economy, we are able to see that there is all the more reason to make this kind of division. Information technology that is primarily concentrated on meeting certain technological or organisational procedures, possibilities or problems is not the very same as information technology in the service of entertaining, educating or emotionalising consumers, in order to provide them with engaging, emotionally sensitive, and memorable experiences. The firstmentioned information technology is supply driven, the second one demand minded. Mistaking the first for the latter results in information technology that is actually a placebo to consumer mindedness, not a panacea. Extending flexibility of production practices or creating infrastructures to quicken distribution, are rather necessary basic competences. Despite all the intellectual and financial efforts needed to develop this kind of competences, what is involved is nothing more or less than enabling means.

The improvement of capacities pointed at bringing foodstuffs such as eggs, milk or lettuce as fresh as possible to the consumer, differs from the development of consumer minded communication technologies. This competence depends upon the extent in which food suppliers look around, trace trends, are in touch with the signs of the times, or stay attuned to backgrounds, secret wishes and moral codes that make (different groups of) consumers tick. When a phrase of Brown and Duguid (2000: 1) is used somewhat loosely, all this can be denoted as "the fuzzy stuff." The fuzzy stuff is vital to the fine tuning of food products, as well as ways of production or food enterprises' corporate identities, and paces or patterns in contemporary consumer culture. To meet the challenges of the customized food market of today and tomorrow, the fuzzy stuff is as important as food stuff.

This conclusion does not belittle information technology. It rather empowers the impact and importance of it, because, paradoxically as it seems, information technology is of great use and value to explore "fields of human activity that lie well beyond the simple realm of information" (Brown and Duguid, 2000: 62). Modern information technology gives food suppliers innovative opportunities to consult and contact consumers in interactive and responsive ways. Two-way communication is essential to the "socialisation" of food systems for at least two reasons. Firstly, to start or continue a dialogue with consumers, suppliers have to tell their audience interesting and tempting stories. In other words, so as to engage a conversation with consumers, food suppliers – as information and service providers – should think seriously about information with competitive "access value." Secondly, food suppliers are able to learn what people care about, what appeals emotionally and mentally to them, what kinds of principles and personalities, or desires and dreams are nourished among different (target) groups of them, etc. In both ways, consumer mindedness occupies a prominent place, and it is recognised that "the ends of information, after all, are human ends. The logic of information must ultimately be the logic of humanity. For all information's independence and extent, it is people, in their communities, organizations, and institutions, who ultimately decide what it all means and why it matters" (Brown and Duguid, 2000: 18).

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