

Which Learning Theory?

There are number of different learning theories. In the following short case study, the firm is considering four promotional approaches. Each of their promotional approaches relies on a different learning theory. Can you identify what they are and how to use them?

Introducing Billy's Cookies

Billy had just started his business – Billy's Cookies - a range of cookies targeted at the young, affluent, coffee-drinking segment of the market.

Like others, Billy had noticed the significant lifestyle trend towards drinking coffee. Therefore, he thought there could be an opportunity for a food item that would go well with coffee. While he looked at various product concepts, in the end, he decided that there was a gap in the market for a range of low-fat, high quality cookies that people would purchase with their coffee.

He had approached quite a number of independent coffee shops trying to sell him product, but found only a few that were interested. The retailers that did try his cookies, he had found that sales through these outlets were quite low at this stage. This was mainly because the coffee shops didn't really cross-sell his cookies, as they also had other food items for sale.

His 'vision' for his product was to have people 'automatically' order a coffee AND a cookie - very much like 'burgers and fries', or 'bacon and eggs', or 'movies and popcorn'. But the question was: What is the best way to educate consumers to make that automatic purchase?

He was now considering various options and would like your advice on which one to choose?

1. Provide the coffee stores with a few thousand free cookies to automatically give away with each coffee - with this approach, consumers will become conditioned to eating a cookie with their coffee.
2. Provide the coffee stores with free cookies to give away as part of their loyalty card programs (that is, a free cookie with their free coffee after 5 purchases) - this is designed for consumers to see the cookies as a reward and will hopefully purchase one when they want to 'reward' themselves.
3. Give money to his family and friends to go to the coffee shops daily and buy a coffee and a cookie. he saw this is a longer-term program designed to get other consumers to notice that other people frequently buy cookies with their coffee.
4. Design a series of 'clever' posters that will sit on the counters at the coffee shops. As an example, a photo of a coffee, with the headline "What is missing from this picture?" and the copy at the bottom says, "Billy's Cookies - low-fat, high-quality, and designed to go with coffee".

Student Discussion Questions

1. Which learning theory is Billy trying to leverage in each of the four scenarios? (Choose from: classical conditioning, operant/instrumental conditioning, vicarious learning and cognitive problem solving.)
2. Which promotional approach do you think will prove to be the most effective? Why?
3. Do you think that Billy will achieve his 'vision' of making a cookie/coffee connection?