# **Chapter 6: Internal Influences** **Learning and Memory**

Among the myriad factors influencing how consumers make decisions, learning and memory stand out as key internal influences. This chapter explores these concepts, highlighting their implications for consumer behavior.

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Recognize two types of memory and its role in consumer decision-making process and implications for marketing.
2. Differentiate between the two types of processing and learning.
3. Recognize factors influencing information retrieval.
4. Discuss the implications of learning and memory for consumer behavior and marketing.

Key Concepts to Remember:

* Information processing system
* Information processing phases
* Perceptual system
* Memory (short vs. long-term memory)
* Learning:  
  classical conditioning vs. operant conditioning
* High-involvement learning vs. low-involvement learning
* Cognitive learning:  
  analytical learning, iconic route learning, vicarious learning
* Stimulus generalization and stimulus discrimination

Chapter Contents

[Information processing 3](#_Toc190959083)

[Short-Term vs. Long-Term Memory 5](#_Toc190959084)

[Memory - Implications for Marketing 7](#_Toc190959085)

[Learning 8](#_Toc190959086)

[Classical conditioning 9](#_Toc190959087)

[Operant Conditioning 10](#_Toc190959088)

[High and Low Involvement Learning Situations 11](#_Toc190959089)

[Cognitive Learning 13](#_Toc190959090)

[Iconic rote learning 14](#_Toc190959091)

[Vicarious learning 14](#_Toc190959092)

[Analogical reasoning 14](#_Toc190959093)

[Stimulus generalization and stimulus discrimination 15](#_Toc190959094)

## **Information Processing[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Understanding how information processing systems and phases influence consumer behavior requires a deeper exploration of two main components: the information processing system (which includes the perceptual system, short-term memory, and long-term memory), and the information processing phases (which involve exposure and attention, interpretation and transfer, and storage and retrieval).

*Information Processing, Learning, and Memory*

Consumer decision-making

The **perceptual system** plays a key role in shaping consumers' initial responses to products and brands by capturing sensory input. In the **food industry**, visual elements, especially color, are key. Bright colors like **red and yellow** are known to stimulate appetite and grab attention. Fast-food chains such as **McDonald’s** use these colors in their logos and packaging to evoke hunger and create positive associations, encouraging purchases.

**Short-term memory** is crucial for immediate decision-making. It has limited capacity and retains information only briefly. For example, a consumer might see an ad for a stylish handbag featuring a trendy model. If the ad is visually appealing and emotionally engaging, it can leave a strong impression. Later, when shopping, the consumer may recall the ad and be influenced to choose that handbag, demonstrating how short-term memory can drive impulse decisions.

**Long-term memory**, on the other hand, stores information more permanently—such as brand experiences, associations, and learned preferences. A consumer who had a positive experience with **Nike** running shoes may remember the brand’s quality years later. When shopping for new shoes, this memory can lead them to choose Nike again, even if competitors offer lower prices or better features. This illustrates how long-term memory shapes brand loyalty and repeat purchases.

The **first phase of information processing** is **exposure and attention,** how consumers encounter marketing messages, and whether they choose to engage with them. Digital marketing often uses targeted ads based on browsing behavior. For instance, someone who frequently searches for eco-friendly products may be shown ads from sustainable brands. Attention can also be captured through compelling storytelling that aligns with the consumer’s values and interests.

Once attention is secured, the next phase is **interpretation**. Consumers interpret messages through the lens of their prior experiences and beliefs. For example, a mobile phone ad with the tagline “Capture Every Moment” may resonate positively with someone who previously had a good experience with the brand. Conversely, a consumer with a negative experience may view the same message with skepticism. Transfer of meaning also plays a role if the consumer knows the phone has won awards for camera quality - that knowledge can enhance their interpretation of the ad.

Finally, the **storage and retrieval phase** determines how well information is retained in long-term memory and how easily it can be recalled during decision-making. Repeated exposure to positive messaging, such as social media posts and reviews about a skincare brand, can strengthen memory retention. When the consumer is ready to buy skincare products, these favorable impressions are easily retrieved, influencing their choice and demonstrating the power of consistent, positive reinforcement.

## **Short-Term vs. Long-Term Memory[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Memory plays a crucial role in how consumers process information and make purchasing decisions. It can be broadly classified into short-term memory (STM) and long-term memory (LTM), each of which influences consumer behavior in distinct ways.

**Short-term memory** (STM) holds information temporarily for processing and plays a fundamental role during initial consumer interactions with brands and products. This type of memory is limited in both capacity and duration, typically retaining information for about 20 to 30 seconds. For instance, when a consumer comes across an advertisement while browsing online, the immediate details of that ad, such as the slogan and visuals, may linger in their short-term memory. If a catchy jingle or tagline is presented, it can make a memorable impression.

However, the effectiveness of STM in influencing decisions can be fleeting. For example, if a consumer is exposed to multiple ads over a brief time, the earlier messages may quickly fade from STM as new information takes precedence. This is why marketers use repetition in their campaigns. For instance, during the Super Bowl, ads are repeated or closely linked to popular culture, increasing the probability that viewers will keep their messages in STM long enough to influence their next meal choice or snack purchase.

**Long-term memory** (LTM), on the other hand, can store vast amounts of information for an extended time, sometimes indefinitely. LTM stores information about past experiences, learned preferences, and brand associations that influence decisions over time. Effective marketing strategies often aim to transfer information from STM to LTM, thereby ensuring brand recognition and recall during the purchasing process.

A practical example of this is the use of brand storytelling in advertising. When a brand tells a compelling story, it can create an emotional connection that aids in the transfer of information to LTM. For example, consider Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, which features diverse women shapes, sizes, and promotes positive body image. This emotional appeal not only resonates with consumers in the moment but also cultivates a memorable association with the brand, making it more likely that consumers will recall Dove when they shop for personal care products in the future.

Furthermore, repetitive exposure to a brand over time helps solidify its presence in long-term memory. Think about Coca-Cola’s consistent branding through its classic logo and color scheme. Each holiday season, the iconic Coca-Cola Santa Claus commercials reinforce brand recognition. The emotional connection elicited through these ads means that when consumers think of soda during summer barbecues or holiday gatherings, Coca-Cola is often the first brand they recall, thanks to its deep-rooted presence in their long-term memory.

Additionally, the way information is structured and the types of cues used in marketing can significantly affect how effectively memories are formed and recalled. For example, using mnemonic devices or familiar cultural references in advertisements can ease the encoding of information into long-term memory. A perfect illustration of this is how many brands employ nostalgia marketing, tapping into consumers' memories of their childhood to evoke emotions and create lasting brand loyalty. Brands like LEGO have capitalized on nostalgia by not only appealing to children but also bringing back iconic sets from the past, appealing to adult consumers who want to relive their childhood experiences.

In conclusion, understanding the roles of short-term and long-term memory in consumer behavior allows marketers to design more effective strategies. By crafting advertisements that capture attention and create memorable experiences, brands can enhance the likelihood that their messages will transition from short-term memory into long-term memory, influencing purchasing decisions and fostering brand loyalty over time. Through consistent branding, emotional storytelling, and strategic marketing techniques, companies can ensure that their products stay top-of-mind for consumers during the purchasing process.

*Reflect*

1. Can you think of a brand that has stayed in your memory for years? Why?
2. How do your favorite brands use repetition to reinforce your memory?

### **Memory - Implications for Marketing[[3]](#footnote-3)**

Marketers aim to leverage memory by building strong associations and enhancing recall through strategies like repeated exposure, persuasive messaging, and emotional storytelling. A compelling ad that evokes emotion can create lasting impressions, increasing the likelihood that consumers will remember the brand during purchase decisions. Emotional connections are especially powerful because they activate the brain’s limbic system, which plays a key role in emotional processing and memory formation.

Memory significantly influences both purchasing and consumption behavior. Positive past experiences with a brand often lead to repeat purchases and brand loyalty. For example, a consumer who had a good experience with a particular laundry detergent is likely to buy it again. Conversely, negative experiences can deter future purchases if a product fails to meet expectations; the memory of that disappointment may lead the consumer to avoid the brand altogether.

Memory also shapes the consumption experience itself. Recalling positive memories while using a product like enjoying a favorite dish at a restaurant can enhance satisfaction and reinforce loyalty. On the other hand, if a product doesn’t match the consumer’s expectations based on past experiences, it can lead to disappointment and reduce future interest.

**Nostalgia** is another powerful tool in memory-based marketing. Brands often evoke nostalgic feelings by referencing childhood memories or cultural icons. For instance, an ad featuring a classic toy may prompt consumers to buy it for their children or themselves because it triggers fond memories and emotional connections.

**Repetition** plays a crucial role in embedding brand information into long-term memory. For **high-awareness brands** like Coca-Cola or Nike, repetition reinforces brand identity and keeps them top-of-mind. Frequent exposure through ads, social media, and sponsorships ensures consumers remember the brand when making decisions. Repetition also helps these brands successfully launch new products by linking them to existing positive associations.

For **low-awareness brands**, repetition is essential for building initial recognition. Consistent messaging across platforms, especially with clear visuals and catchy slogans, can gradually increase familiarity and improve recall. For example, a new organic snack brand might use social media ads and promotions to reach health-conscious consumers and build awareness.

**Timing** of repetition is also key. Research shows that spaced repetition ads shown at intervals can improve memory retention. Brands benefit by aligning ad schedules with consumer buying cycles or seasonal trends. For instance, a skincare brand might increase advertising in spring to promote sunscreen ahead of summer. Similarly, ads timed around major shopping events like Black Friday can reinforce brand messages and boost recall.

In summary, both high- and low-awareness brands can enhance consumer memory and influence behavior through emotional storytelling, repetition, and strategic timing. These techniques help ensure that consumers not only recognize the brand but also remember it when it matters most.

## **Learning**

Learning refers to the process through which individuals acquire knowledge and skills through experience, study, or instruction. In consumer behavior, learning shapes preferences, alters perceptions, and influences purchasing decisions. Theories of learning, such as classical conditioning and operant conditioning, illustrate how consumers develop associations between products and ideas, thereby impacting their buying behaviors.

*Learning Theories*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theory** | **Description** | **High-Involvement Example** | **Low-Involvement Example** |
| **Classical Conditioning** | A learning process where a neutral stimulus (such as a product) becomes associated with a meaningful stimulus (a jingle) that triggers a positive conditioned response (feeling good about the product). | A car advertisement uses emotional stories and beautiful visuals to create a positive association with buying the vehicle. | A jingle in a detergent commercial creates a positive association with the brand without deep processing. |
| **Operant Conditioning** | Learning that occurs through reinforcement (positive or negative) after behavior e.g. feeling good about the purchase). | A loyalty program offering points for purchases encourages consumers to buy from the brand repeatedly. | Discount coupons or promotional offers incentivize consumers to purchase snacks they might not typically buy. |

### Classical Conditioning[[4]](#footnote-4)

Classical conditioning involves creating associations between a neutral stimulus and a meaningful stimulus, resulting in a conditioned response. One of the most famous examples of classical conditioning is the case of Pavlov's dogs, where a bell (neutral stimulus) was rung before feeding the dogs (meaningful stimulus), leading them to salivate upon hearing the bell.

This concept can be applied to consumer behavior, especially in advertising. A well-known example of this can be seen in the advertising practices of many brands. For instance, Coca-Cola often uses music and imagery that evokes feelings of joy and celebration in its commercials. If a catchy jingle is consistently played alongside their advertisements, over time, consumers may start to associate that jingle with the feelings of happiness. This emotional connection leads to a conditioned response: whenever consumers hear the jingle, they may feel positively about Coca-Cola, influencing their decision to purchase it over competitor drinks.

Another example of classical conditioning is how pairing scents with products can create lasting associations. For instance, a luxury perfume brand may use a specific scent during in-store promotions or advertisements to provoke feelings of sophistication and elegance. Over time, consumers come to associate that unique fragrance with the brand itself. When they encounter this scent in other contexts later, it triggers the same positive feelings and prompts a purchase.

Another example of classical conditioning can be seen in the use of emotional storytelling in advertisements. Brands like Nike often portray athletes overcoming obstacles, effectively pairing the brand with the feelings of inspiration and determination. When consumers watch these empowering stories, they not only associate Nike with these positive emotions, but also internalize the value of perseverance. Therefore, when they seek sports apparel or gear, Nike comes to mind as a brand that represents their personal values and ambitions.

### Operant Conditioning[[5]](#footnote-5)

Operant Conditioning, on the other hand, involves learning through reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is particularly impactful, as it encourages desired behavior through rewards. For example, many retail brands have loyalty programs that offer exclusive discounts, rewards, or points for purchases made. When consumers receive a discount on their next purchase after spending a certain amount, this positive reinforcement strengthens their preference for that brand and encourages repeat purchases. A common practical application of operant conditioning in marketing is seen in loyalty programs. For example, Sephora’s Beauty Insider program offers customers points for every dollar spent. This positive reinforcement encourages consumers to continue shopping at Sephora to accumulate points, which can be redeemed for exclusive rewards. By providing benefits for repeat purchases, Sephora reinforces the behavior, leading to increased customer retention. Another well-known example is Starbucks' loyalty program, where customers earn stars for each purchase, ultimately leading to free drinks and special offers. This system not only incentivizes repeat business but also fosters emotional loyalty toward the brand.

Conversely, negative reinforcement can also influence consumer behavior. If a consumer has bad experience with a brand, such as poor customer service, they may choose to avoid that brand in the future. For instance, if someone orders a product online and it gets delivered late or is of poor quality, they might develop a negative perception of the brand. The aversion resulting from this experience can dissuade them from future purchases.

Brands can also use operant conditioning through promotional strategies that create a sense of urgency among consumers. Limited time offers or flash sales serve as positive reinforcements. When customers see a discount available only for a few hours, they may make impromptu purchases to take advantage of the offer, conditioned by the desire to avoid missing out on a good deal. An example of operant conditioning is seen in time-sensitive promotions or limited-time offers, such as flash sales. Brands frequently use tactics like “Only 24 hours left!” or “Last chance for 50% off!” to spur immediate purchases. This creates a sense of urgency, prompting consumers to act quickly to avoid missing out on a deal. When they take advantage of such offers, they experience immediate gratification, reinforcing the behavior of purchasing during promotional events in the future.

*Consumer Learning through Operant Conditioning*

*Reflect*

1. Can you recall an advertisement that made you feel an emotional connection to a brand?
2. How do marketers use classical conditioning in everyday advertising you are exposed to?

### **High and Low Involvement Learning Situations[[6]](#footnote-6)**

Involvement refers to the level of personal relevance or interest a consumer has regarding a product or brand. This significantly impacts how consumers learn about products, process information, and retain memories associated with those products. Understanding involvement helps marketers tailor their strategies to better engage consumers based on their level of interest.

High-involvement learning situations occur when consumers are deeply engaged and motivated to learn about a product. These scenarios typically involve significant financial investment, personal values, or risk perceptions, leading to extensive information processing and deeper engagement with the product. One example is purchasing a car. When consumers decide to buy a vehicle, they often conduct thorough research, comparing models, features, safety ratings, and pricing. They may visit multiple dealerships, take test drives, and seek recommendations from friends or online reviews. This high level of engagement leads to detailed learning and memory formation about the car brand. Brands like Tesla harness this high involvement by providing extensive online resources and community forums, allowing potential buyers to engage with the brand and feel informed and confident in their purchasing decisions.

Therefore, classical conditioning can play a role in shaping consumer attitudes. If consumers repeatedly encounter positive imagery and messaging associated with a car brand, such as luxury, safety, or innovation, they may develop a favorable attitude towards that brand. For instance, if an advertisement for a high-end SUV showcases scenic drives through beautiful landscapes, consumers may begin to associate the brand with adventure and luxury, influencing their decision when it comes time to choose a vehicle.

Conversely, in low involvement learning situations, consumers typically have less personal relevance or emotional investment in the products they purchase. These are everyday purchases that require minimal deliberation and often focus more on convenience or brand recognition than detailed information processing. Examples include buying snacks, household cleaning supplies, or toiletries. In these cases, consumers are less likely to engage in extensive research. Instead, they may rely on brand familiarity or the attractiveness of packaging to guide their decisions.

For instance, when consumers decide to buy a bag of chips, they may recognize and choose a brand they have previously seen in advertisements or on store shelves without deeply considering the product's nutritional value or ingredients. Instead, the visual appeal of the bag, a well-known logo, or positive associations from past experiences influence their choice. Here, operant conditioning can come into play, as consumers may encounter promotions such as "buy one, get one free" or loyalty programs that reward frequent purchases. This type of positive reinforcement strengthens the likelihood of repeated purchases, as consumers feel rewarded for their choices, whether it be through perceived savings or tangible rewards like free products or samples.

### Cognitive Learning[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Cognitive learning** in consumer behavior focuses on understanding, thinking, and problem-solving. Unlike behavioral learning, which emphasizes how external stimuli shape behavior through conditioning, cognitive learning views consumers as active participants. They seek out information, analyze it, and integrate new insights into their existing knowledge. This active mental processing helps consumers make more informed decisions and shapes their future behavior.

Cognitive Learning Approaches

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Learning** | **Description** | **High-Involvement Example** | **Low-Involvement Example** |
| **Iconic Rote Learning** | Learning through repeated exposure to the brand name (e.g. Ketoprofen) or logos and another concept (e.g. headache) without conditioning. | Consumers recognize the Apple logo and associate it with quality and innovation, influencing their choice when buying technology. | Shoppers easily identify familiar product packaging (like Pringles) in a store, leading to spontaneous purchases. |
| **Vicarious Learning** | Learning that occurs through observing others' behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors. | Consumers are influenced by influencer endorsements on social media, leading them to try those products. | Observing friends enjoying a particular snack brand prompts someone to buy it without much thought. |
| **Analytical Reasoning** | Consumers evaluating and comparing products based on features and benefits. | When purchasing a car, consumers compare safety ratings, fuel efficiency, and features before making a decision. | Consumers may quickly compare prices among various brands of laundry detergent but rely on brand recognition for choice. |

#### Iconic Rote Learning

Iconic rote learning is another important cognitive learning type, where consumers learn through repeated exposure to brand names, logos, or images without necessarily forming deep associations and without conditioning. For instance, brands like McDonald's or Apple leverage iconic rote learning through repeated advertising. Consumers often recognize the golden arches of McDonald's or the Apple logo without needing to reflect on their experiences with the brand. This recognition can influence purchasing decisions almost automatically, as consumers may opt for a familiar brand purely based on brand recognition rather than an in-depth evaluation of attributes.

#### Vicarious Learning

Vicarious learning, or modeling occurs when consumers observe others and learn from their behaviors and experiences. This approach is particularly evident in the context of social media and influencer marketing. For example, when consumers see a popular influencer using a beauty product and achieving positive results, they may be inspired to try the product, believing that they will have similar results. This observational learning can significantly impact brand choice and purchasing behavior, as many consumers trust recommendations from influencers they admire over traditional advertising.

#### Analogical Reasoning

**Analogical reasoning** is a cognitive process where consumers evaluate products by comparing them to familiar items based on specific criteria. For example, when shopping for a new smartphone, a customer might compare its camera quality to that of a high-end digital camera. They may also assess battery life, price, and storage capacity before making a final decision.

Marketers can enhance their strategies by understanding how consumers learn and process information through **analogical reasoning**, **iconic rote learning**, and **vicarious learning**. For instance, a car manufacturer launching a new electric vehicle might use analogies to compare its features with traditional fuel-powered cars. They could also include testimonials from satisfied customers (vicarious learning) who describe how the vehicle fits into their lifestyle, helping potential buyers relate through **self-referencing**.

By tapping into these cognitive learning mechanisms, brands can improve consumer understanding, increase information retention, and influence purchasing decisions more effectively. This approach highlights that consumer behavior is not just a reaction to marketing stimuli; it’s a dynamic process shaped by personal experiences, observations, and mental strategies.

*Reflect*

1. How does high-involvement learning differ from low-involvement learning in your purchasing habits?
2. How often do you make purchase decisions based solely on brand recognition without researching alternatives?

## **Stimulus Generalization and Stimulus Discrimination[[8]](#footnote-8)**

Stimulus generalization and stimulus discrimination are two important concepts in understanding consumer behavior, particularly how consumers respond to various marketing stimuli.

**Stimulus generalization** occurs when consumers react similarly to different but related stimuli. This cognitive process means that a consumer who has positive experiences with one brand may extend those feelings to other brands or products that have similar characteristics. For example, if a consumer has a positive experience with a specific brand of laundry detergent, let’s say Seventh Generation, they may also develop a favorable opinion of other products under the Seventh Generation brand such as dish detergent or bathroom cleaning detergents, or even similar brands that share comparable packaging, scents, or pro-environmental values. This tendency can work to the advantage of brands that can capitalize on their established identity to attract new customers. If a brand introduces a new product line, consumers might be more willing to try it simply because it is associated with a brand they already trust, even if the new product is different from what they typically purchase.

A practical example of stimulus generalization can be seen in the beverage industry. If a consumer enjoys the taste of watermelon Synergy kombucha, they may also be inclined to try other flavors from this brand, due to the established positive association with the original taste. This behavior illustrates how positive feelings can extend beyond a single product to a range of similar products.

**Stimulus discrimination** refers to the consumer’s ability to differentiate between similar stimuli and make distinctions based on their preferences or past experiences. This concept is crucial in preventing confusion and ensuring that marketing messages resonate with the target audience. For instance, while consumers may enjoy a particular brand of chocolate, they might be discerning enough to distinguish between the different types of chocolate products available (e.g., dark, milk, and white chocolate) or even differentiate among various brands within the same category.

An example of stimulus discrimination can be seen with smartphone brands. A consumer who prefers the iPhone may exhibit strong preference and loyalty to Apple, and even if other brands release similar models with high-quality features, the consumer may choose not to switch due to their established loyalty and familiarity with iOS. The specific and unique qualities of the iPhone, such as its user interface and ecosystem compatibility, allow the consumer to discriminate between what they perceive to be superior aspects of the iPhone compared to competitors like Samsung or Google Pixel.

Additionally, marketing strategies often aim to promote stimulus discrimination. Brands often highlight unique features or benefits in their advertisements to set themselves apart from the competition. For example, when promoting a skincare product, a brand may focus on its rare natural ingredients or unique formulation methods that differentiate it from rival products. This focus on distinct attributes encourages consumers to discriminate and make informed choices based on specific characteristics that resonate with their preferences.

*Reflect*

1. Why do consumers tend to trust brand extensions from familiar companies?
2. Have you ever actively avoided a similar-looking product because you preferred a specific brand?

*End-of-Chapter Self-Reflection*

1. What role does memory play in the brands and products you choose?
2. How often do you buy something because you see someone else using it (vicarious learning)? Why?
3. Do you think advertisements influence your purchasing decisions more through logic or emotion?
4. Have you noticed a brand using stimulus generalization to encourage you to try a new product?

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* Launch! Advertising and Promotion in Real Time by Solomon et al. 2009: <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/launch-advertising-and-promotion-in-real-time>
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