HIERARCHIES IN ATTITUDE

What comes first? And what comes last?

An important question is this: Among cognitions, affect, and conations, what comes first, and what comes last? This question is addressed through the concept of attitude hierarchy. **Attitude hierarchy** refers to the sequence in which the three components occur. Scholars have identified three different hierarchies: (a) learning hierarchy, (b) emotional hierarchy, and (c) low-involvement hierarchy. See Figure 6.4.

**Learning Hierarchy** In the learning hierarchy, cognitions come first, affect next, and action last. That is, we think first, feel next, and act last. We learn about the brand and form brand beliefs first; these brand beliefs then lead to brand feelings, which in turn lead to brand purchase intent, purchase and use. If we wanted to buy a refrigerator, for example, we would begin by learning about various brands’ features (form cognitions); feelings and intent will follow later.

**Emotional Hierarchy** In the emotional hierarchy of attitude, we feel first, then act, and think last. Based on our emotions—attraction or repulsion toward certain brands or persons or things—we avoid or embrace them, buy them, use them. Finally, through experience, we learn more about them (i.e., form cognitions). If we were looking at a wedding dress or a wedding suit, our immediate emotion would be the overriding force driving our attitude. Our emotion would make us act (i.e., buy the dress); and then we might care to look at the fabric and comfort.

**Low-Involvement Hierarchy** One universal truth about consumers is that they differ in their degrees of involvement in various activities and likewise in their product choices. Recall that we defined involvement (in Chapter 2) as the degree of interest a consumer takes in a product or activity. When consumers have a stake in a product choice, it is a case of high involvement. With low stakes in the choice, involvement
is low. The learning and emotional hierarchies described above are high-involvement hierarchies, as both occur when consumers have high stakes in the decisions, such as the choice of a spring break destination for most students. In contrast are decisions with low stakes, such as picking up a new variety of bread. With such decisions, consumers don’t want to take the time to think or acquire a lot of product knowledge, nor do they feel particularly emotionally moved about the product. Rather they buy the product casually, with feelings and thoughts to follow with product use. Thus, in the low involvement attitude formation hierarchy, action comes first, followed by feeling (which itself is mild in intensity), followed in turn by cognitions (which would be few in number).

Suppose that we are in a neighborhood convenience store browsing the cold drinks vending machine and we notice a new kind of energy drink from South Africa, 911. Its white can with red lettering is attractive, and the energy logo is vibrant and looks inviting. What would we do before we buy it? Do we have to know a whole lot about it? Not really. Nor do we have to feel any emotions about it. Instead, what we are likely to do is just put the coin in, push the button, and grab the can. Out the store, we take the first sip, and say “Umm! This is good.” And we like it (feeling). Then we pause to note what flavor it has, and then we might read the ingredient information on the label (cognition). Thus, in this case of a low-involvement product selection and consumption, action comes first. Feelings come next, and cognitions or thoughts last.

**MARKETING IMPLICATION OF ATTITUDE HIERARCHY**

These hierarchies have marketing implications. We all know that consumers look at some products as primarily rational purchases and at others as primarily emotional purchases. For primarily rational purchases (like home appliances), we must provide to consumers a lot of product knowledge, so that they may then base their decisions on rational grounds. We would fail if instead we began to appeal to their emotions. But once they have formed beliefs, then some emotional appeals will help to move them to action.

For primarily emotional purchases (like a wedding gown), in contrast, we should first hook consumers emotionally. If the bride-to-be does not fall in love with the look of the dress, our attempt to deliver product knowledge would only fall on deaf ears.

For extremely low-involvement products, on the other hand, we don’t need to tell consumers much about the brand—as long as we have made the brand name familiar. Our first priority should be to make it very convenient for them to buy it. Marketers stimulate low-involvement purchases by using attractive product displays. Consumers see them, and they just reach out for them.

In the middle range of involvement, if the product has some performance features that consumers usually worry about, then we should advertise those features—but we should limit our advertisement or sales-story to one or two features and not beat them over their heads with details (as consumers are not motivated to devote much mental effort). For low involvement products, attractive displays and convenient availability are the most important tools, as consumers will take action soon after giving it a little bit of thought or experiencing a little bit of feeling, as the case may be.3 (See Figure 6.5.)