Teens Privacy Rights Online

The purpose of this study is to see whether expertise in teens in regards to learning about privacy policies on e-commerce websites makes them more likely to correctly recall the information given in the policy as to whether it is a good or bad policy. In addition, this study will further consider whether teens with this expertise will be more skeptical than novices towards brand advertising when the privacy policy is a bad one.

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By the end of 2004, approximately 18 million teens have been on-line. It is predicted that by 2008, this number will increase to 22 million. Of those teens 12 – 17 years of age, 87% of them are surfing the web on a regular basis (Lenhart, 2005). Of these, 15% are e-tailing by buying mostly CDs, books, videos, and clothes. Another 49% of these teens are researching their purchases on-line before visiting the brick and mortar stores (Card, 2004; Hix, 2000; Kaplan, 2001).

Teens have long been recognized as having most of their money as discretionary income. In 1999, teens spent $200 million on the web, and the Internet influenced another $2.2 billion of their other purchases (Enos, 2001). If credit cards were as readily available to teens as they have been to adults, on-line purchasing by teens would be considerably higher (Pastore, 2001).

Many teens have been using the Internet as their personal shopping mall. Yet, they often admit to not being as careful about sharing their information as they know would be prudent Consequently, parents are becoming more concerned about their teen's on-line usage and have been installing filters. Those parents most likely to utilize filters to safeguard their teens include those who also regularly use the Internet, moms, those under the age of forty, and those who have a college education. Today's parents are not only concerned about protecting their daughters from dangers of the Internet, as has been the case in the past, but are equally concerned with protecting their sons (Lenhart, 2005).

As a result of teens admitting to some of their carelessness with their personal information on the web, an experiment with teens was undertaken. One hundred and twelve high school juniors and seniors representing 30 states who were the winners of the LifeSmarts competition in their own state were asked to participate in an experiment to determine their understanding of privacy policies on websites.

 LifeSmarts is a game show competition similar to College Bowl and is played like Jeopardy. It offers high school students an opportunity to learn about consumer and marketplace issues and then to compete as teams to answer important life questions. All teens had to compete individually through Internet testing to qualify. Therefore, this group of teens is Internet savvy as well as having consumer education learning skills.

In the design study, half of the teens were to learn about privacy policies through a fifteen minute presentation and the other half (the control group) would learn about consumer behavior. Through random selection, some teens would evaluate a good privacy policy while others reviewed a bad policy. Teens viewed the home page of a made-up athletic shoe company, read through a privacy policy, and were then asked to respond to questions about the privacy policy and the home page.

The text of the good privacy policy clearly explained how the company would utilize the information that was collected from site visitors. It offered bolded subcategories of typical questions a visitor to the site would likely want to know in relation to how their private information was handled. The bad policy expressed vagueness and was dismissive. It included fluff that had no relationship to information privacy.

Expectations were that those teens (referred to as Experts) who had received training about what to expect in a good privacy policy would likely correctly recall more policy information in the bad policy then would the Novices, teens who had not received information as to what to expect in a good policy. The findings were that

Novices did do better than Experts in correctly recalling 12 out of the 17 questions asked about the bad policy. Experts did a better job in correctly recalling what non-personal information was provided, how collected information could be removed and how secure were transactions over the Internet. Both the Experts and the Novices had high response rates (>80%) for what information was collected, how that information was protected from improper use, and that there was legislation protecting those thirteen years and younger. However, the Experts and the Novices together had low response rates in regards to whom the information was released and who was accountable for keeping the company's database secure.

In the good policy, the Experts did better in correctly responding to 11 of the 17 questions, but the percentage of correct responses were not as high as it had been overall for the bad policy. Four of the correct recalls by the Experts were in the 70% or slightly higher range, and six were 57% to 67%. The overall correct response percentage range for the Experts was 10% to 77%. For the Novices, the percent of the correct recall range was 22% to 70%.

Analysis of Variance findings showed that the type of privacy policy was significant (.002) and the interaction between the privacy policy and the training was marginally significant (.075). However, the type of training was not significant.

It was also expected that Expert teens that were exposed to a bad privacy policy would tend to produce more negative brand evaluations than would Novices. In looking at the brand components of goodness, superiority, likeness, performs efficiently, stylishness, and desirability, the Experts were more negative than the Novices in their evaluation of the brand in all six components in those who had read the bad privacy policy. Both Experts and Novices ranked superiority the highest. Likeness was the second highest. However, there was less difference between the means of Experts and Novices in liking than between the components of goodness and superiority. There was little difference in the means among performing efficiently, being stylish, and being desirable.

Experts, who had read the good privacy policy, only rated four of the six components less favorably than did Novices. These components were goodness, superiority, likeness, and desirability.

Overall, Novices who read the bad privacy policy had higher mean scores in evaluating the components of the brand. Experts had more consistent mean scores in evaluating the brand's components whether they had read the good or the bad privacy policy.

Analysis of Variance findings showed that the type of privacy policy and the type of training were both significant (.044 and .018 respectively) as they related to brand superiority. On the other hand, there was no significance between the interaction of policy and training.

In conclusion, Experts and Novices were less likely to correctly answer good privacy policy questions than those asked about a bad privacy policy. Yet, Novices reading a bad privacy policy were more likely to accept the brand components.

Implications for further study may mean considering whether it is the training or the exposure to the type of privacy policy that influences what is recalled in a company's privacy policy. Perhaps another consideration is a need to develop a uniform template for all privacy policies which provide a standard policy format similar to what we now see when selecting a credit card.

References

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