Exploring the Nature of Linkages Between Consequences and Values

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Laddering is one of the many ways of studying the linkages between consequences stemming from consumer choice and the personal values that may be related to that choice. This paper discusses seven issues related to laddering, both in terms of its use as an approach to gathering data and in terms of interpreting the output from laddering interviews: direction, number, and strength of linkages, degree of specificity, where in the ladder is the respondent’s main focus, which links should be at the top of the ladder, and relation of values to choice behavior.

Introduction

There are many ways to study the linkages between consequences stemming from consumer choice and the personal values that may be related to that choice. This discussion will focus on in-depth one-on-one approaches, with laddering (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988) being the primary method discussed. The purpose of this discussion is to raise several issues relating to laddering, both in terms of its use as an approach to gathering data and in terms of interpreting the output from laddering interviews. The reader is presumed to have a basic familiarity with laddering. Lacking this, the author suggests a review of Reynolds and Gutman (1988).

In-Depth Discussion Yields Linkages

Laddering refers to an in-depth discussion with a consumer that focuses on linkages between personal values and consumer choice. Such a detailed discussion will uncover many consequences that are more immediately related to consumer choice than are personal values. That is, there is no direct connection between values and consumer choice behavior. This suggests that there have to be some intermediate steps taken into account in explaining how values relate to consumer choice.

One goal of values research is to specify the content and sequence (or structure) of outcomes stemming from choice behavior that extends from attributes possessed by the choice object through consequences to “end benefits” or personal values. This is the particular goal of the laddering approach.
Lower Levels Imply Higher Levels

A sequence presumes a number of attributes, consequences, and values that are asymmetrically linked by the respondent whereby "lower level" elements lead to or imply "higher level" elements. In this context, attributes imply or lead to the presence of consumer benefits; and benefits lead to value satisfaction. Toothpaste, for example contains tooth whiteners, an attribute. This property of toothpaste gives the user whiter teeth, a benefit. Whiter teeth may lead the consumer to have a more radiant smile, leading to enhanced social relations. These higher level benefits may be driven by the value of belonging, or fun and excitement, or any of several other values.

Basic Issues Concerning the Linkage Between Consequences and Values

This introduction suggests several issues that will be explored which relate specifically to laddering in terms of the conduct of interviews and the interpretation of resulting material. The remainder of this discussion will be devoted to seven key issues relating to this topic:

1. **DIRECTION**: In what direction should the linkages run?
2. **HOW MANY**: How many links are there? How many elements should be represented in a chain?
3. **HOW STRONG**: How strong are the linkages between various elements connecting product to self or "the values level?"
4. **SPECIFICITY**: What should the level of specificity be in specifying elements?
5. **MAIN FOCUS**: Where in the chain connecting attributes and consequences to values is the respondent's main focus?
6. **TOP LINKS**: Top links: Values or "end benefits?"
7. **HOW CAN WE TELL**: Are values related to choice behavior? If so, how can we tell?

Issue 1: In What Direction Should the Linkages Run?

First, what is meant by the terms "linkage," "imply," or "lead to?" These terms suggest some form of connection between elements. This could be thought of in terms of some probability statement that one element will cause the occurrence of another element (how likely is it that A will cause B). This is illustrated by the example below:

GET MORE DONE → SUCCESS
LESS THIRSTY → RELAXED

The first example suggests that getting more done will lead to success. The second example suggests that being less thirsty leads to feeling relaxed. Each of these relations is more likely than a relation that runs in the opposite direction. That is, it is less likely that:

RELAXED → LESS THIRSTY
SUCCESS → GET MORE DONE
Given that the objective of the laddering approach is to uncover directionality in the relationship between adjacent elements, interviewers should beware of simple associations. Respondents often give associations in response to laddering probes (being less thirsty reminds me of being in a cool place), but such responses do not yield the type of data necessary to build hierarchical structure maps. Laddering focuses on "directed" associations.

**Level of Abstraction.** The levels of abstraction concept (Olson and Reynolds, 1983) suggests an ordering among elements such that there is a "right way" for these relations to come out. And within reason, this seems correct—attributes produce consequences, and within consequences, functional consequences produce social consequences, and social consequences produce value satisfaction.

**Functional to Social Consequences.** Functional to social or physical to mental consequences is the way most models have conceptualized the system. But it may be more complicated than this—can't social consequences produce functional consequences? Can't being well liked lead to having more self confidence and thus lead to enhanced performance? This seems to be a likely occurrence which runs counter to the typical levels of abstraction model. There would certainly seem to be some relevance for advertising from uncovering these nuances in the relations among elements. This is especially true as there may be some recursiveness among the interrelations among consequences at various levels. And, clarifying the linkage such consequence systems have to values is necessary to understanding how values relate to consumer choice.

**Connecting the Product With the Self.** Products are conceived of as possessing attributes—concrete and abstract—with the abstract attributes being perceptual attributes such as tastes good or good styling. The primary objective of laddering as well as, one would presume, other values-oriented research is in connecting product to self. And, as long as it is approached at this level, how meandering the pathways are may be of lesser importance.

**Issue 2: How Many Links Are There? How Many Elements Should Be Represented in a Chain?**

**Let the Respondent Decide.** One approach is to let the respondent decide in the context of the interview situation. But laddering, as other in-depth approaches, depends on the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. It may not be easy to let the respondent determine this independently of the interviewer.

**Specify in Advance.** Another approach is to specify the number of linkages in the form of some model. This seems too deterministic, too much like the a lot of the attitude models that seem so rigid.

**Determine by Aggregate Response.** Still another approach is to let the number of linkages be determined by the aggregate of respondents. When individual data are combined, what emerges are the relations that occur most frequently across
respondents. This doesn’t address the issue at the individual level, but prototypical individuals or perceptual orientations can be represented by mapping the resulting data. The process of creating an overall element by element matrix in which all direct and/or indirect relations are counted is the basis for this approach.

**Other Alternatives.** Finally, pilot work could be done to uncover elements and linkage systems. These could be formed into prototypes or perceptual orientations and given to respondents to see if “they can recognize themselves.” This approach doesn’t solve the problem of the number of elements per se, but puts the focus on segmenting respondents at the overall “ladder level.”

**Issue 3: How Strong Are the Linkages Between Various Elements Connecting Product to Self or “The Values Level?”**

The laddering method only requires that the respondent answer a Why? probe—essentially this is a zero/one response.

**Does Frequency Equal Strength.** Is it true that the more often a relation is mentioned, the stronger it is? Although there is precedent for this assumption it is not necessary to make this assumption to map hierarchical relations among elements. On the other hand, it is appealing to be able to assess strength of relations independently of their frequency of occurrence. It is also appealing to be able to assess the strength of connections among elements as represented in an ad.

**Direct Assessment.** It is possible to have respondents assess the likelihood or probability that A will lead to or imply B. Pretesting would have to be done first to establish likely linkages to assess. Obtaining strength of relations as separate from the frequency of their occurrence is perhaps best done on a post hoc basis. At the very least, respondents could be asked to assess strength of relations among adjacent elements (or even nonadjacent elements) after the ladders were elicited.

One of the strengths of the laddering method of interviewing is the stress on the situation and the involvement of the respondent in becoming aware of relations usually taken for granted. Any excessive demand to analyze these relations in the midst of uncovering them would take away from this spontaneity.

**Issue 4: Level of Specificity in Specifying Elements**

In any qualitative approach in which respondents are allowed to respond in their own words, some coding of responses is necessary. As in photography, the proper focal length is essential.

When elements are too narrowly specified, there is not enough redundancy to build up frequencies across respondents. Without repetition, aggregate maps tend to be too unstable. When elements are too broadly specified, too much meaning is lost when interpreting maps or ladders. For example, do “taking care of emergencies,” “planning for unforeseen needs,” and “planning for short term needs” all have close enough meanings to be grouped together in studying financial services?
Building Dictionaries. It would be nice to be able to broaden or narrow the focus so as to approach the problem at the correct range. This relates to the building of dictionaries of meanings associated with the elements to be mapped. How we aggregate depends on the purpose of the study and relations among elements.

Issue 5: Where in the Chain Connecting Attributes and Consequences to Values Is the Respondent's Main Focus?

Presumably the respondent's focus is at the consequences/benefits level. Is there one particular benefit, that even though it is implied by other benefits or implies other benefits, is the central reason why the consumer chooses the product or service? It may be better to begin the probing process at this area of central focus or prime importance and ladder up and down, rather than start at the bottom and ladder up.

This is what providing situational frameworks helps us with—getting the respondent to start out at a meaningful level. At this point the best answer to the level of focus seems to lie in evoking a relevant situation into which the respondent can project him- or herself. This gives the best assurance that wherever laddering starts, meaningful connections between elements will be obtained. Durgee (1986) makes the point that laddering should include lines of questioning that deal with key wants or motives in-depth. Invoking an appropriate situational context is one way to increase the probability of obtaining a meaningful and relevant set of hierarchical associations.

Issue 6: Top Links: Values or End Benefits?

Are values “ends” or “guides”? If the latter, are they better thought of as acting downward to determine which consequences are more or less desirable, or as ends to be implied by high level consequences?

If values are guides, perhaps some end-level benefits can be specified that are more firmly anchored in the everyday experience of respondents than arc typical values (see Rokeach, 1973; Kahle, 1983). Such end benefits might be studied in relation to values to uncover the reasons they are sought. For example, “success,” “good family life,” and “friendship” are end benefits that may have more meaning to people than some of the terms used to study values. The term “sense of belonging” has meaning to people, but does it have the same meaning or could it have many meanings depending on what end benefits are being sought?

Issue 7: Are Values Related to Choice Behavior? If So, How Can We Tell?

If low level consequences do not link strongly to values in any direct way, but have to be mediated by their relationships to other higher level elements, how can we tell if they are linked to values? And by the same token, how can we tell if the choice behavior per se is linked to values? Do we step back in our research and give respondents a chance to look at some overall set of relations we have extracted
from them, and ask them if this makes sense? Being refreshed from a beverage is not very strongly connected to accomplishment, no matter how you slice—or squeeze—it.

Again, if we look at values, not as ends, but as guides, the question is better asked: Do values select consequences, rather than are values implied by consequences? To this end, one could work up a ladder through the end benefit level and then ask respondents which value would be most related to the entire sequence rather than the final level.

It is possible, with some additional brand or product sorting exercises to calculate a correlation index indicating the level (attribute, consequence, value) at which respondents make discriminations among relevant choice alternatives (see Reynolds, 1986 for a discussion).

Summary

The objective of the above remarks is to stimulate the interest and imagination of people using laddering to explore the relation between values and consumer choice. It is hoped that these issues will stimulate thinking on some of the strengths of the method as well as some of the unanswered questions still remaining.

References


