

# BOOK REVIEWS

Readings in Consumer Behavior, reviewed by Herbert J. Rotfeld  
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**READINGS IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS. (SECOND EDITION.)** Wallendorf, Melanie & Gerald Zaltman (eds.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1984. 456 pp.

A decision to adopt this text for class use would turn more on the compilation "philosophy," rather than quality of the articles. In other words, it depends on just what the instructor wants from a readings book. While all the readings are unarguably outstanding journal articles, many instructors might feel that the article selection was unduly narrow in focus and of limited instructional utility.

To a regular reader of the academic journals, few of these readings would be new. They are mostly reprints from the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research* and *Journal of Consumer Research*. The editors state a desire to introduce the reader "to a sample of the best research in the consumer behavior area," and these journals are generally recognized as the "leading" research publications. To review the articles herein would entail second-guessing and reevaluating the work of the journal referees. However, whether or not these articles add insight to the basic materials found in a survey text depends on what the instructor wishes to emphasize in a course.

For many, a collection of readings would be used to help expand and/or explain areas of information covered in only limited amounts in the main text. In consumer behavior, this would entail articles that describe and review various knowledge areas of consumer behavior and consumer decision processes, possibly providing an array of differing perspectives and approaches to this field which we like to consider interdisciplinary.

The editors' goal is different. They state in the brief preface, "We intend that the book be used to provide examples of the way in which our knowledge of consumer behavior is built and tested." Accordingly, most of the articles are reports of research studies. The resulting collection tends to appear very "micro" in its basic concerns and considerations. For example, instead of a review of the very extensive literature on children's responses to advertising, we only see a narrow report of a study "Gift Decisions by Kids and Parents." Instead of a review on consumer

research and public policy applications, or papers that attempt to apply our knowledge of consumer behavior to public policy issues, the book carries two narrow consumer research studies that attempt to address public policy concerns.

This is not to say that such an editorial orientation is a failing of the text. It all depends on the instructor's desires for classroom texts adopted. In addition, the paucity of available research in some text sections may result in a narrow study serving as the only available review and/or addition for the material. In a few instances, a brief review of research literature may be found. (Under "Communication Processes in Consumer Behavior," the third article, following two unrelated research reports, is Moore's "Subliminal Advertising: What You See Is What You Get.")

One may wonder how many "research examples" should be dissected in class before the students are bored by overkill. At what point are the methods and analysis ignored while the students simply look at the introduction and conclusions?

Some instructors might also be bothered that almost all the articles are drawn from a limited number of journals, all three sharing the same focus, concerns and basic methodologies. The journals that served as the sources are generally seen as the "best" sources of information on the cutting edge of consumer research, but it would be myopic to believe that the leading research is *only* found within their pages. One colleague has often gone even so far as to say many believe that anything appearing in these three journals must be good since the journals only publish the best. "Best" herein is, of course, mere puffery, and not really a sign of objective evaluation. In case you haven't noticed, you are currently reading the *Journal of Advertising*.

These journals have also come under periodic criticism within their own pages about how the articles are becoming increasingly narrow in focus and methodologies. The criticisms appear, but articles representing broader efforts are rare. An editorial in the March 1984 *Journal of Consumer Research* noted that some readers feel the journal is currently less interdisciplinary and far narrower than it has ever been. The editors defensively asserted that the authors in the journal come from a broad range of academic departmental affiliations, though this

could merely be a sign about how a narrow range of interests, concerns, and approaches have overwhelmed a broad range of disciplines.

Again, this is not to say the book or the articles are bad. It simply depends on what the instructor desires from a collection of readings that students will be requested (required?) to purchase in addition to the basic text. If the desire is that they read a collection of narrowly defined research articles, a series of examples of research that are narrow in scope to help illustrate how mainstream current work in consumer behavior research is studied and tested, this would probably be an excellent book. If a readings book is bought to survey bodies of research information, to expand upon ideas and concepts that a basic text can only touch upon due to space limitations, the instructor should look elsewhere.

HERBERT J. ROTFELD  
The Pennsylvania State University