

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ONLINE CONSUMER  
RESPONSE PROCESS

by

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I declare that A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Mrs J Hanekom

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I wish to thank:

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## **ABSTRACT**

Whether utilising online or offline communication media, the consumer progresses through specific response phases when being exposed to communication messages that have the intent of moving the consumer to buy a product, use a service or proceed to specific action. The focus of this study is on the online consumer response process.

The study firstly commenced with a discussion on the concept of web-based commercial communication (WBCC). The unique characteristics and needs of the online consumer were secondly discussed. Thirdly, the theoretical discussion focussed on, analysed and critically examined advertising response models. Fourthly followed a theoretical discussion on the general theory of consumer response. Theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process were fifthly developed. Lastly, the primary research objective of this study was addressed by developing a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

## **OPSOMMING**

Die gebruiker vorder deur spesifieke responsfases wanneer hy/sy blootgestel word aan aanlyn- of aflyn kommunikasieboodskappe wat die bedoeling het om die gebruiker te motiveer om 'n produk te koop, van 'n diens gebruik te maak of 'n spesifieke aksie te onderneem. Die fokus van hierdie studie is op die aanlyn-gebruikersresponsproses.

Hierdie studie het begin met 'n bespreking van die konsep webgebaseerde kommersiële kommunikasie. Die unieke karaktereienskappe en behoeftes van die aanlyn-gebruiker is tweedens bespreek. Derdens het die teoretiese bespreking op reklamerespansmodelle gefokus en dit geanaliseer en krities ondersoek. Vierdens is 'n teoretiese bespreking van die algemene teorie van die gebruikersresponsproses onderneem. Teoretiese kriteria vir webgebaseerde kommersiële kommunikasie en die gebruikersresponsproses is vyfdens ontwikkel. Laastens is die primêre navorsingsdoelwit van hierdie studie aangespreek deur 'n teoretiese raamwerk vir die aanlyn-gebruikersresponsproses, te ontwikkel.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*With the possible exception of the Equator, everything begins somewhere.*

(Peter Fleming 1997)

### 1.1 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

#### 1.1.1 Background and purpose of the study

Individuals and organisations currently use the Internet as communication medium because of its efficiency and its ability to be utilised for accessing, organising and communicating information (Citrin, Sprott, Silverman & Stem 2000). The Internet generates the possibility of exchanging and communicating information by means of a series of interconnected computers. Anyone with a computer and a modem can communicate via the Internet and the World Wide Web. The Internet has other features as well; however, the Web is the most utilised and popular of them all and can be seen as the commercial component of the Internet (Belch & Belch 2001:495).

This study explores the World Wide Web as communication medium, with the focus on the response process which the online consumer proceeds through when exposed to web-based commercial communication which intends to persuade the consumer to purchase a product, use a service or proceed into a certain type of action. For the purposes of this study, all advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional and organisational communication messages on the World Wide Web which intend to move the consumer through certain response phases to the point of purchasing or proceeding to a certain action are referred to as *web-based commercial communication*. To achieve an integrated communication approach and an integrated marketing communication approach, organisations endeavour to integrate advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional and organisational communication messages. This is also true for the online

environment. In view of the fact that all these communication messages are integrated in the online environment, the concept of web-based commercial communication, for the purposes of this study, is based on the following description of integrated communication: “*Integrated communication is the application of analysis, communication and evaluation techniques to create and manage integrated, multi-faceted interventions combining information, instruction, collaboration, business process design, feedback and incentive systems to improve human performance and productivity in the workplace in order to achieve [organisational] communication goals and objectives*” (Angelopulo, Barker, du Plessis & Schoonraad 2002:21). This definition could also be expanded to include non-organisational communication.

The concept of web-based commercial communication has been derived from this definition of integrated communication, various definitions of online advertising and traditional advertising, as well as concepts of the World Wide Web and online communication. Although this concept is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the definition that has been developed for the purposes of this study is introduced here:

*Web-based commercial communication is the integration of information-intensive, persuasive and influential online advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional, and organisational messages which are accessed voluntarily by, and which have the intent of progressing globally diverse consumers through certain response phases to the point of purchasing or proceeding to a certain action.*

The Internet is, according to Vijayasathy (2002), a valuable, interactive communication medium. Its unique characteristics as a communication medium distinguish it from traditional communication media. Kiani (1998:188) elaborates by explaining various significant characteristics of the World Wide Web. One of the most important and notable characteristics is the flexibility of this medium. A virtual advertisement or marketing message is much more flexible than a physical advertisement or catalogue, due to its ability to gather fresh and updated information based on direct feedback received from consumers. Marketers and advertisers alike can establish a dialogue between themselves and the consumer. Therefore, this

interactive medium differs from traditional media and should not be approached in the same way. Traditional media, in most instances, involve a one-way communication process from the marketer, advertiser or organisation to the consumer. During web-based commercial communication, the consumer is seen as an individual and not as part of a segment of consumers. The consumer becomes a part of the communication process due to its interactivity and the opportunity to personalise messages.

Sexton, Johnson and Hignite (2002) argue that whether the user/consumer uses the Internet for communication, education, entertainment or e-commerce, he/she has certain needs with regard to the medium. These authors include factors such as ease of use and usefulness as foundational characteristics of all types of computing technology acceptance by end users. The consumer/user of the Internet should be able to attain his/her communication goals and purposes when engaging in specific Internet-related activities, such as browsing, research or e-commerce. The attainment of specific communication goals are therefore an important motivator for Internet usage.

Furthermore, the consumer uses the Internet for a specific purpose and expects certain qualities from this medium. Online consumers themselves have distinct characteristics, such as the search for enjoyment from Internet use (Swaminathan 2000:13). Online users/shoppers also engage in information-seeking behaviour and will thus engage in web-based commercial communication or online purchasing processes because of the direct and varied information available on this medium. It is maintained that these online users/consumers can plan their shopping behaviour, and therefore use the Internet with specific intentions.

Whether online or offline, the consumer progresses through specific phases when being exposed to communication messages that have the intent of moving the consumer to buy a product, use a service or proceed to specific action. A number of models have been developed to explain the phases which a consumer proceeds through when moving from a state of not being aware of a company, product, or

brand to actual purchase behaviour (Belch & Belch 2001). These models include the traditional response hierarchy models like the AIDA model (Strong 1925), the hierarchy of effects model (DAGMAR model) (Lavidge & Steiner 1961), the innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962) and the information processing model (McGuire 1978; Belch & Belch 2001:148; Koekemoer 1998:78; Mortimer 2002:462). The basic premise of these models is that they order the consumer's response process as consisting of movement through a sequence of three basic stages: the cognitive, affective and conative or behavioural stages. This sequence of response has been questioned by researchers, though. Another configuration of the response hierarchy has accordingly been theorised by Ray (1973), who went on to develop the three-orders model of information processing that identifies three alternative orderings of the three stages, based on perceived product differentiation and product involvement. This model encompasses the standard learning hierarchy, the dissonance-attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy.

Based on arguments that not all response sequences and behaviours are explained adequately by either the traditional or the alternative consumer response models, the integrated information response model has been developed by Smith and Swinyard (1982). This model integrates concepts from both the traditional and the low-involvement response hierarchy perspectives. Researchers like Vaughn (1980) have realised the importance of the concept of involvement in studying how consumers proceed through different stages when responding to advertising messages. Therefore, other additional advertising planning grids, such as the FCB planning model (Vaughn 1980), have been developed in order to explain the consumer response process (Belch & Belch 2001:159; Mortimer 2002:463; Rossiter, Donovan & Jones 2000; Vaughn ... [sa]).

The elaboration likelihood model by Petty and Cacioppo (1983) shows the integration of some of the factors that may account for different types and levels of cognitive processing of a message by identifying a relationship between involvement and cognitive processing. Preston's (1982) association model of the advertising communication process extends and improves on traditional consumer response

hierarchy models and incorporates all of the measures of research commonly used in advertising. Based on the discussion on consumer response models, it is argued that every consumer proceeds through a cycle of response phases when being exposed and while responding to advertising and marketing communication messages, although the various models explain the hierarchy of response sequences differently.

Because web-based commercial communication, as well as online consumers, have specific, unique characteristics, the primary objective of this study is to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process in order to explain the online consumer response process as a dissimilar process from the traditional response process. This theoretical framework will be based on theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process.

The secondary objectives of this study are mainly to:

- examine the theory of web-based commercial communication, as well as the online consumer market
- critically discuss, examine and evaluate traditional consumer response models, as well as the theory of the general consumer response process
- develop theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication, as well as for the consumer response process.

## **1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

This study reviews academic literature and journal articles on the unique features of online communication on the World Wide Web and the distinctive characteristics of the online consumer. The literature review also includes discussions and critical reviews on traditional consumer response models and the general consumer response process. This study highlights the gap in existing literature with regard to the general consumer response process, online communication, web-based commercial communication and theoretical criteria for web-based commercial

communication, as well as the lack of literature regarding the online consumer response process.

This study is structured according to the following main areas:

**Firstly**, the study commences with a discussion on *web-based commercial communication*. According to Ashcroft and Hoey (2001:68), the Internet has several advantages and unique characteristics. The communication processes on the Internet are swift and product delivery is almost immediate. The two-way communication process on the Internet allows the consumer and supplier/marketer/advertiser to communicate directly, which is in direct contrast to the familiar one-way business transactions conducted in traditional media. This two-way communication process demonstrates the interactive nature of this medium, which opens up the possibility for the supplier to get to know his customer and to tailor the product according to his/her specific needs.

Ashcroft and Hoey (2001:69) elaborate on the unique characteristics of the Internet by illustrating it as a medium which provides an ideal forum for group communication and interaction. This type of communication is possible because there is no need for physical presence and the normal restrictions of time and place are not prominent in web-based commercial communication.

The discussion on *web-based commercial communication* includes the following main areas:

- The Internet as communication medium
- Integrated web-based commercial communication
- The marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online.

**Secondly**, the *unique characteristics* and needs of the consumer/user of the Internet are discussed. Ashcroft and Hoey (2001:72) explain that experienced Internet users

have already acquired sophisticated expectations of online services and websites, and it is important to consider these user needs in any online promotion or communication process. Internet users/consumers expect, for example, rich relationships with marketers/advertisers, since this is possible with the personalised and interactive nature of the medium.

The discussion on the *unique characteristics* of the online audience includes the following:

- unique characteristics of the online audience and
- differences between online and traditional mass media audience characteristics.

**Thirdly**, the theoretical discussion focuses on *advertising response models*. These models explain the phases/stages the consumer moves through, from the stage of being unaware of a message to the stage of purchasing a product, using a service or engaging in a particular activity. According to Zinkhan (2000:4), academic advertising research concentrated on the audience's cognitive reactions to advertising during the 1970s. During the 1980s, this pattern changed to an increased interest in monitoring consumers' emotional reactions. Theorists thus consider different stages/phases of the consumer's response process important and also differ with regard to the sequence of these processes.

This study critically analyses the following consumer response models chronologically:

- Traditional response hierarchy models:
  - AIDA model (Strong 1925)
  - Hierarchy of effects model (DAGMAR model) (Lavidge & Steiner 1961)
  - The innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962)
  - The information processing model (McGuire 1978).

- Alternative response hierarchy models: The three-orders model of information processing (Ray 1973):
  - The standard learning hierarchy
  - The dissonance-attribution hierarchy
  - The low-involvement hierarchy
  
- The integrated information response model (Smith & Swinyard 1982)
- The FCB planning model (Vaughn 1980)
- The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo 1983)
- The association model of the advertising communication process (Preston 1982).

In a study conducted by Ashcroft and Hoey (2001:68), which focussed on how the Internet impacts on today's public relations and marketing and the implications for librarians, they identified the ways in which promotional activities can be adapted to this new medium. In their paper, they proposed and argued that the AIDA model can be applied to Internet services or any other product or service in terms of the four stages of awareness, interest, desire and action which a consumer passes through when being exposed to communication messages. These authors reach the conclusion that the use of new media provides new opportunities for each stage of this model.

In this particular dissertation, similar studies are documented. It is argued that an analysis of existing advertising response models, the identification of phases from these models which can be applied to the online consumer response process and the identification of additional, unique online consumer response phases are imperative.

When analysing the applicability of certain phases of traditional advertising response models for the online consumer response process, the following are evaluated:

- the ways in which people find or become aware of a specific website and the phases they move through when becoming aware of the messages
- the phases which people move through when utilising different links
- the direct feedback phase
- the online discussion (interactive) phase.

**Fourthly**, the literature review includes a theoretical discussion on the *general theory of consumer response*. The following is included:

- A discussion on the three basic consumer response levels, namely the cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural levels of consumer response
- A discussion on the general consumer response process, which includes a discussion on the following:
  - Perception
  - Cognition
  - Affective/Emotion
  - Association
  - Persuasion
  - Behaviour.

**Fifthly**, *theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process* are developed, based on the theoretical discussions on web-based commercial communication and consumer response.

**Lastly**, a *theoretical framework for the online consumer response process* is developed, based on all the theoretical discussions in this study.

To summarise, Ashcroft and Hoey (2001:73) argue that new media like the Internet have a significant impact on the communication process. In traditional advertising, for example, exposure is usually incidental, but in the web medium the consumer mostly chooses if he/she wants to be exposed to advertising/communication messages and

also the amount of exposure (Raman & Leckenby 1998:739). Raman and Leckenby (1998) empirically determined the factors that affect individual exposure to material at websites created with a commercial intent. Websites created with a commercial intent include those which want to ultimately sell a product or service. They discuss the fact that the visitor to the web ad or website decides what to watch, when, and how much of it. If the consumer does not find the web ad or message useful or interesting, he/she will immediately terminate the visit at that point by clicking out.

Similar studies are documented during the literature review of this study. These include Kiani's (1998) study in which he addresses the opportunities offered by the Web to marketers, which considers the Web as a two-way communication model in which four different communication stages can take place. Kiani's (1998) paper also suggests the necessity of the development of new concepts and models for marketers to manage their websites, due to the abilities of the new marketing medium. It is suggested that new marketing models should consider all opportunities which the interactive media can provide and that account should be taken of factors such as the attraction of users, the engagement of users' interest and participation, the retainment of users and insurance that they return to the application, learning about their preferences and relating back to them to provide the sort of customised interactions they prefer (Kiani 1998:192). Although the above-mentioned study focuses on the application of the Internet to marketing processes, at the same time it argues that the abilities of the Internet as a new communication medium should be considered.

### **1.3 TYPE OF STUDY**

According to du Plooy (2001:48), exploratory research explores an unknown area of research and assists in identifying key concepts and consequences of problems or becoming familiar with unknown situations. This study can be described as an exploratory study, since it is an inductive investigation of the phenomenon of web-based commercial communication and the online consumer response process. It also explores a relatively unknown area of research, namely *web-based commercial*

*communication and consumer response*. It identifies the concept of web-based commercial communication, as well as theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to explore, describe, interpret, evaluate and conceptualise web-based commercial communication, the online consumer audience, traditional consumer response models, the theory of consumer response, theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process in order to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

The study will be conducted in five phases, namely:

- A *qualitative phase* in which a literature review of web-based commercial communication, the online consumer audience, traditional consumer response models and the theory of consumer response will be conducted
- A *comparative study* based on a critical analysis of the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online and a comparison of online audience characteristics with traditional mass media audience characteristics
- An *evaluation phase* during which traditional response models will be critically evaluated
- An *assessment phase* during which traditional consumer response model phases, unique features of web-based commercial communication and online audience characteristics as indicators of unique phases of the online consumer response process, as well as the theory of consumer response will be assessed for applicability to the online consumer response process
- A *developmental phase* during which theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process and ultimately a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process will be developed.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

### **1.4.1 The primary research objective**

The primary research objective is to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

In order to accomplish the primary research objective, the following secondary research objectives should be accomplished:

### **1.4.2 Secondary research objectives**

*Secondary research objective 1:*

To develop the concept of *web-based commercial communication*

*Secondary research objective 2:*

To identify the theory of web-based commercial communication and the online consumer audience

*Secondary research objective 3:*

To identify the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online

*Secondary research objective 4:*

To identify the differences between online audience characteristics and traditional mass media audience characteristics

*Secondary research objective 5:*

To evaluate existing advertising response models

*Secondary research objective 6:*

To identify the theory of consumer response

*Secondary research objective 7:*

To specify theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication

*Secondary research objective 8:*

To specify theoretical criteria for the consumer response process.

## **1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **1.5.1 The research method**

The research method for this study is exploratory, qualitative and comparative and will be conducted in four phases:

- *Phase 1* is a qualitative phase in which a literature review on web-based commercial communication, the online consumer audience, traditional consumer response models and the theory of consumer response will be conducted.
- *Phase 2* is a comparative study based on a critical analysis of the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online and a comparison of online audience characteristics with traditional mass media audience characteristics.
- *Phase 3* is an evaluation phase during which traditional response models will be critically evaluated.
- *Phase 4* is an assessment phase during which traditional consumer response model phases, unique features of web-based commercial communication and online audience characteristics as indicators of unique phases of the online consumer response process, as well as the theory of consumer response will be assessed for applicability to the online consumer response process.
- *Phase 5* is a developmental phase during which theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication and the consumer response process and ultimately a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process

will be developed.

## **1.6 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 1 highlights the context and motivation for this particular study. It is argued that the lack of literature regarding web-based commercial communication, the consumer response process and in particular the online consumer response process necessitates the in-depth analysis and examination of these concepts.

It is furthermore argued that the development of a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process is essential, since no evidence of such a framework exists in literature. It is thus necessary to address the primary objective of this study, namely to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

This will be accomplished through addressing secondary research objectives 1-4 in the next chapter, which discusses and examines the theory of web-based commercial communication.



## CHAPTER 2: WEB-BASED COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION

*Communication via the Internet is analogous to conversation. Some conversations are good and helpful, some bad and hurtful, some trite and some life-altering. With each, we must take what we find valuable and leave the rest behind.*  
(Israelsen 2005)

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The eruption of new technologies such as the Internet and the World Wide Web have transformed the way society works, learns, communicates, accesses information, shops and entertains themselves. It literally changed the way society lives. However, the most important benefit of the Internet for the purposes of this study is that it encourages, promotes and enhances communication (Israelsen 2005).

Ihator (2001) adds more transformations brought about by the Internet and the Web and affirms that modern information technology, including the Internet, is changing communication channels, corporate audience identification, modes and methods of communication, message content and form, communication feedback and corporate personae. It is also impacting the shared meaning of messages, information packaging, strategic information management and corporate identity. Ainscough (1996) elaborates that the Internet is perhaps the first genuinely new marketing medium for a generation and perhaps the first major change in advertising media since the advent of commercial television. Whether it will have the same immense impact on marketing and advertising as television is still to be seen, though.

The Internet is not only an advertising medium. It has many other communication functions, including commercial communication functions. For the context of this study, it serves as a medium for web-based commercial communication, which includes online advertising messages.

It should be kept in mind that online advertising is only one component of web-based commercial communication. Therefore, it is important to explain that this study explores the Internet and the Web as communication media, with the focus on the communication and response process which the consumer proceeds through when exposed to web-based commercial communication messages which is intended to persuade the consumer to purchase a product, use a service or proceed to a certain type of action.

For the purposes of this study and to facilitate an integrated approach, all advertising, marketing, public relations and promotional messages on the Web which intend to move the consumer through certain response phases/stages to the point of purchasing or moving to a certain action, and which are in support of the unified corporate brand of the organisation, are referred to as web-based commercial communication.

Since the Internet is widely used as a business communication channel which provides this valuable commodity to all stakeholders, it is imperative for all businesses to amend their traditional communication strategies and to transform to an integrated communication approach. These communication strategies may include all public relations, marketing, advertising and other commercial messages, which should be integrated in such a way that they all support the unified corporate brand of the organisation. It is important to note that this study explores the Internet and the Web as communication media, with the focus on the communication and response process which the consumer proceeds through when exposed to web-based commercial communication which intend to persuade him/her to purchase a product, use a service or proceed to a certain type of action. Thus, if online advertising or online marketing communication messages are referred to during this discussion, they also refer to web-based commercial communication messages such as marketing, promotional and any other advertising messages which intend to persuade the consumer to purchase a product, use a service or proceed to a certain type of action.

Similarly, when reference is made to advertising or marketing communication messages in the offline environment, it includes all communication messages which intend to move the consumer to buy a product, use a service or move to specific action.

Online advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional, and organisational communication messages are referred to as web-based commercial communication messages for the purpose of this study. Accordingly, the following definition of *web-based commercial communication* (WBCC) has been developed:

*Web-based commercial communication is the integration of information-intensive, persuasive and influential online advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional, and organisational communication messages which are accessed voluntarily by, and which have the intent of progressing globally diverse consumers through certain response phases to the point of purchasing or proceeding to a certain action.*

Because this study aims to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process based on theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process, it is imperative for it to explore the complex nature of the Internet and the Web as new communication media and the manner in which WBCC alter consumers' online response processes.

Based on these grounds, discussions regarding the Internet as communication medium, WBCC, integrated WBCC, features of WBCC and the online audience are crucial to this study.

An extensive literature review conducted during this study indicated that WBCC differs from traditional marketing communication messages (advertising). Therefore, it is assumed that the online consumer response processes will also differ from traditional consumer response processes.

In order to formulate theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process, it is essential to study the Internet and the Web as communication media.

Although advertising, and therefore WBCC, on the Internet seemed improbable initially, it has proved to be the most exciting channel for, and an outstanding marketing tool in, the advertising arsenal (Herbig & Hale 1997). Today the Internet is firmly established as one of the most effective promotional tools and communication media ever.

## 2.2 THE INTERNET AS COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

This study focuses on the exchange of commercial information between organisations and consumers, or WBCC, which are intended to move consumers through certain response processes prior to purchasing a product, using a service or proceeding to a certain type of action. As such, the following definition by Todd (1999) is of particular relevance.

Todd (1999:36) namely defines the Internet as “*a set of interconnected networks, which may themselves contain other networks, or just computers around the world. It allows those computers connected to it to exchange information at high speed – hence Super Highway*”.

This definition, as well as Ainscough’s (1996) description of the Internet, accentuate the ability of the Internet to allow access to and the organisation, exchange and sharing of information at high speed and thus concurs with Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace’s (2002) emphasis on information and their opinion that information is one of the most valuable commodities on the planet.

Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) concede with Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000) and Ihator (2001) and explain that the Internet is rapidly changing the way information is displayed and accessed on a global level. Organisations will be forced to alter their internal and external communication strategies, theories, paradigms and models according to the new communication opportunities offered online.

Vescovi (2000) proposes a change from *active consumer-passive company* to *active consumer-active company*, while Ihator (2002) states that the Internet may be

creating a shift from the traditional vertical and horizontal corporate communication paradigms. This shift, he says, is because computer technology has altered the power structure of and the relationship between organisations, their publics and stakeholders, and the media.

Based on the proposals made Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002), Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000) and Ihator (2001) for new marketing and advertising models for WBCC, it is clear that the re-evaluation and modification of every organisation's traditional communication strategies are imperative. These new and modified communication strategies, theories, paradigms and models are important to this study, since they will assist in identifying new and unique elements for the online consumer response process. They will also assist in explaining the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online; in other words, how WBCC messages which are intended to persuade consumers to buy a product, use a service or proceed to a certain type of action differ from traditional marketing communication messages.

At this point it is important to define the World Wide Web, since it serves as an information resource on the Internet and cannot therefore be defined in similar terms as the Internet. Todd (1999) defines the World Wide Web (WWW) as *“a function that uses the resources of the Internet to offer a very convenient and efficient way of presenting information structures. Most commonly, a human browser of the Web sees a hypertext document containing hypertext links to documents elsewhere on the Web”*.

The increasing popularity of the Web as advertising medium demonstrates the tremendous evolution in the media environment. Organisations started using the Web as a communication medium in order to disseminate organisational communication messages as well as marketing communication messages to all stakeholders. Organisations therefore started using this medium to conduct business on.

The reason for this progression from exclusively utilising traditional media to utilising

the Web for disseminating organisational communication messages and conducting business on, is that marketers and advertisers can easily and inexpensively establish their presence on the Internet and in addition reach an international audience interactively and on demand (Ainscough 1996). Thus initial presence on this medium is relatively easy and inexpensive to establish, and international by definition. This ease of establishment simplifies the process of attaining online presence for marketers and advertisers.

Literature also indicates that electronic commerce, which can be defined as *“the electronic exchange of information, goods, services and payments”* (Kiani 1998:187), has come of age. The development of electronic commerce resulted because of the increased utilisation of the Internet for private and commercial use. This encouraged organisations to offer their own content and services on the Web (Loebbecke, Powell & Trilling 1998:181).

Many organisations are already present on the virtual market and therefore electronic commerce is regarded as very popular, but the opportunities offered by this new environment are still relatively unknown. It offers new and distinct possibilities and thus, as previously established, advertisers should approach this medium differently than they do traditional mass communication models.

One of the apparent reasons for the prominence of the Internet and the Web as communication and advertising media is the realisation by organisations that the Internet facilitates an uncomplicated method of disseminating critical information to different audiences. Another eminent reason is that people are consuming less traditional media and spending more time online, due to the popularity of the Internet as general information provider.

A further reason for the growth in online advertising revenues is the realisation by marketers and advertisers that the Web should be a vital part of their marketing campaign (Making ads work on ... 2003). It has been established in preceding paragraphs (refer to section 2.2) that one of the reasons for the rapid development of the Internet as a communication medium in recent years is that more and more

commercially oriented people have started to use it as a communication medium. Although means of promoting and communicating product information to consumers were sought, the Internet community never allowed any form of advertising until a couple of years ago, when certain distinctive forms of advertising were allowed for the first time (Rao 1997).

In the next section, the nature of WBCC and the importance of the integration thereof are discussed.

## **2.3 INTEGRATED WEB-BASED COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION**

### **2.3.1 The nature of web-based commercial communication**

Dialogue, borderless communication, inclusive communication and continuous communication are regarded as the four basic pillars for effective communication. In this era of instant global communication, these four pillars remain important for general traditional communication, but have become even more important for online communication and should be pursued simultaneously (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002). For organisations to communicate successfully, these pillars for effective communication should be practised consistently.

In essence, the process of online or WBCC is a process of exchange. Therefore, online communication commences with the first pillar of effective communication, namely dialogue (Kiani 1998; Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002). Consequently, the old models of uni-directional communication are not valid anymore and are substituted with multi-directional communication models (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002; Kiani 1998; Vescovi 2000; Ihator 2001; Rowley 2004). The Web transforms the marketing function to many-to-many communication models, instead of the traditional principles of mass media advertising and one-to-many communication models, which are rejected and replaced (Kiani 1998; Koekemoer 1998:184 -185; Peters 1998; Rowley 2004).

The second pillar for effective communication suggests that the process of

communication should be borderless and that messages should be planned strategically and delivered consistently across cultures and time zones. Messages should also be consistent across any organisation's advertising, marketing and public relations activities. This clearly suggests an integrated approach to all online communication activities.

The third pillar for effective communication specifies that communication should be inclusive and should therefore reach all audiences, both internal and external. The fourth pillar for effective communication refers to the continuous nature of the communication process.

Despite the importance of the requirements for effective communication, Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) list the unique features of WBCC on the Internet as being ubiquity, flexibility, networked interaction, speed, global reach and time independence. These authors differentiate online marketing and advertising messages from traditional marketing communication message formats since online messages require a dynamic format for presenting information.

Ainscough (1996), when comparing online and traditional media, states that using the Web for marketing communication messages is similar to reading a book, although the Web has several advantages over traditional communications media:

- *The Web has no physical form.* This unique characteristic of online communication messages allows information to be transferred across the country or around the world in a matter of seconds. The user does not even know when he/she is linked to a computer in Cape Town, to one in Vancouver and then to another in Taiwan.
- *The Web is interactive.* Although this unique characteristic of WBCC is extensively discussed in a subsequent section, it warrants mention here as an advantage of WBCC on the Web over traditional communications media. Although the feature of interactivity is segmented into two distinct categories for the purposes of this study, namely the ability of the user to interact with other information sources on the web and the ability of the user to engage in

two-way communication with the organisation, Ainscough (1996) mentions only the one category, namely the possibility that users will link to other sources of information immediately. The author explains that these links are shown as highlighted text or images. They are established by the creators of each document and lead to related or supporting links, available at their site or at other sites around the world.

- *The Web is dynamic.* On the Web, marketers and advertisers are able to make last-minute changes and additions to marketing communication messages. They do not need to take lead time into consideration and they can constantly update and expand their online marketing communication messages at a relatively low cost and little investment in equipment.
- *The Web simplifies navigation through very large documents.* The user can travel effortlessly through a document, or through multiple documents, at his or her own pace by searching for topics and key words.
- *The Web is multimedia-friendly.* In a subsequent section, the importance of attracting to and retaining consumers at a website is discussed. The capability of the Web to incorporate not only text and pictures in websites, but also sound and video, makes WBCC more attractive and useful to the user than traditional media. This allows the marketer and advertiser to not only explain and show the product to consumers, but demonstrate it as well.

Ainscough's (1996) discussion of these advantages relates to Rowley's (2001) discussion of three distinct features of the nature of WBCC.

According to Rowley (2001), the first feature refers to the nature of the channel used by WBCC and how it differs from more traditional channels. The most important feature of the channel, consisting of the Internet and the Web, is that anyone can view communication, at any time and in any location. Rowley (2001) explains that the second feature is that the audience is global and undifferentiated, but that once contact has been made, the possibility of individually identifying and targeting consumers exists. The last feature is that the channel restricts the format of communication. This means that messages are primarily text-based and the

medium is essentially cognitive. It is possible to present more information on this medium than with the more traditional media, but this should not necessarily be seen as a restriction. Because of this feature, consumers can learn more about the nature of the organisation and its products and services than in any other medium.

It is argued that consumers have received more control over communication interactions with the organisation through WBCC on the Web because of the information-intensive nature thereof. In comparison with traditional communication messages, in the online environment, the consumer has to actively and voluntarily find or visit the marketer or advertiser's online message. Therefore, marketers and advertisers need to actively attract users (Kiani 1998; Raman & Leckenby 1998). Consumers are accidentally exposed to traditional advertising messages, but exposure to Web advertisements is deliberate and desired by the consumer (Raman & Leckenby 1998). It should also be kept in mind, though, that only those consumers who have access to the Internet and the Web can deliberately expose themselves to WBCC. The consumer also chooses the amount of exposure to a web advertisement and decides what to watch, when and how much. Therefore, Gordon and De Lima -Turner (1997), Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) and Vescovi (2000) point out that the Web and other interactive technologies shift control from advertisers to consumers, who are now free to seek information they desire and ignore other information. The reason for reconstructing traditional advertising models for the interactive, many-to-many medium underlying the Web is that in the online environment, consumers actively choose whether or not to approach firms through their websites and exercise unprecedented control over the content with which they interact. The consumer is now an active participant and a partner in the production of content. Therefore, the motivation of consumers to respond to and interact with the advertisement's content is a key point of virtual marketing and advertising.

Consumers have varied interests and needs, and marketers and advertisers need to plan and present their communication messages accordingly. It is therefore complicated for marketers and advertisers to communicate a single message to many consumers.

Despite the fact that information on the Internet is accessible to any consumer and that most communication messages are directed towards specific audience members, the virtual environment introduces a competency issue that does not exist in the physical world: the consumer needs computer skills and general literacy in order to browse on commercial websites. The literacy issue is also discussed as a unique characteristic of online audience members (refer to section 2.5.6). Literacy has always been an important issue in the marketing communication context. Marketers and advertisers need their target audience to understand their messages in order for their communication to be successful. To achieve this they need to know and understand their audience's competency and literacy levels.

General literacy as prerequisite for interacting with WBCC is important, since the Web accentuates content delivery. It is regarded as an information-intensive communication medium that allow the delivery of up-dated product- and non-product-related information (Kiani 1998). The Internet is therefore an alternative to real-world environments that offers online shopping facilities, and not a simulation thereof. In the real-world environment, the focus is usually on visual persuasion, but in the online environment, the focus is on information delivery because of the information-intensive nature of WBCC.

In general, WBCC has a variety of formats that can be used to attract consumers by being entertaining, while at the same time exposing them to the marketer's or advertiser's brand or strengthening their affiliation to it. Other online commercial messages may focus on conveying information by providing product information at their own or at other websites (Gordon & De Lima-Turner 1997).

The most important features of WBCC have now been indicated. The rationale behind creating marketing communication messages in the online environment is discussed next.

### **2.3.2 The rationale behind formulating online web-based commercial communication messages**

The following discussion on the functions of WBCC is based on an article published by Rowley (2004) which explores three different reasons for developing WBCC messages, namely creating presence, creating relationships and creating value.

### 2.3.2.1 *Creating presence*

Just as they would in the offline media environment, marketers and advertisers want to ultimately create a presence in the online environment. The offline environment refers to all advertising media other than online advertising media such as the Internet and the Web. The Internet and the Web have developed rapidly as exciting and indispensable marketing communication and advertising media, and, being present on these media has become crucial.

In the offline world, it is possible to grasp consumers' attention by placing advertisements in magazines and on billboards. In the online world, however, this situation dramatically changes. According to Rowley (2004), consumers will only view what is on the small screen of a computer if something attracts their attention, or if they are purposely searching for something and moving on to another screen. Therefore, the assumption is made that it is not sufficient to merely create a website. Other strategies should be implemented as well in order to create a web presence which can inform, persuade and remind consumers about the organisation and its products (Rowley 2004).

Rowley (2004) identifies the following promotional activities associated with a website, which are designed to attract traffic in order to establish an online presence:

- *Banner advertisements.* Banner advertisements are placed on other web pages, such as those of search engines. They offer links to other web pages and can be static or animated. Banner advertisements can be successful in that visitors see the advertisement and consciously or subconsciously note it, or in that visitors click on the banner advertisement and thereby click through to the organisation's website.

- *Portals.* If users are attracted to it, a portal can be an entry point to the Web by providing directions to other sites. Portals aggregate large audiences and then segment them, offering value-added services such as directories, searching, information, news, e-shopping and links to related websites. Portals therefore offer routes through which organisations can achieve visibility by using banner advertisements, hyperlinks and registrations.
- *Other promotional strategies.* Other promotional strategies include using an URL as the centre of offline marketing messages; providing special offers, intriguing information and draws; advertisements within an e-mail newsletter; the gentle manipulation of word of mouth (touch of keyboard) communication; and creating hyperlinks to websites. These are all promotional strategies which should assist in creating presence on the Web.
- *On-site promotion.* An organisation's website is a promotional event in its own right. Therefore, speedy downloading and an easy-to-use site with a good search interface is a priority.
- *Brands.* Organisations have to consider the relationship between established brands and Internet brands. They have the option of migrating the established brand online, extending the traditional brand, partnering with an existing digital brand or creating a new digital brand.

#### 2.3.2.2 *Creating relationships*

At the core of any business conducted online are consumer relationships (Rowley 2004). Because of the interactive nature of the Internet and the Web, two-way information exchange takes place in any e-commerce transaction. The consumer learns about the organisation and, in return, the organisation learns about the consumer. All interactions which the consumer engages in on a website provide information regarding the organisation and therefore embed the brand, communicate marketing and cultural messages and identify the product offering and other aspects of the organisation's positioning in the marketplace (Rowley 2004).

Factors that influence consumer perceptions are the following:

- catalogue of products;
- delivery arrangements;
- special offers;
- added-value features such as information and advice;
- extent of product details; and
- quality of the interaction with any personal service agents.

Based on these factors, the consumer makes a decision regarding the 'personality' of the organisation, and this influences his/her relationship with the organisation.

Reciprocally, organisations sketch consumer profiles based on interactions between the consumer and the organisation (Rowley 2004). The consumer usually provides personal information such as a name, address, telephone number, e-mail address and fax number, where they saw the advertisement, and credit card number when they order something online.

According to Rowley (2004), relationships are built through communication, consumer service, customisation and communities of interest. In all of these areas the Internet offers new opportunities for communication and relationship-building.

#### 2.3.2.3 *Creating value*

Organisations need to create value for their consumers in the online environment in order to ensure that they return to the website and that they continue to purchase products and use services. Rowley (2004) states that, by engaging and managing online communities, organisations have a unique opportunity to understand and learn about their consumers. An online community makes it possible for organisations to collect and control knowledge about their consumer base and thereby create value. As soon as online consumers are segmented into communities of interest, personalisation of communication and a continuing relationship with the consumer become possible. This provides the possibility of creating value.

According to Rowley (2004), the objective of any community is to create value for all stakeholders. Without this value creation, communities will not continue to exist. The author continues by saying that value creation can be achieved through the information content of other products generated by and shared within a community, or through the existence of an identified group.

This section highlighted the nature of WBCC, as well as the rationale behind formulating these messages. In order to contextualise the nature of WBCC, the integrated manner in which these messages are presented in the online environment and coordinated with offline marketing communication activities is discussed in the following section. This study focuses on the online consumer response process, which commences with the intent to interact with WBCC. This, as previously mentioned, refers to the integrated nature of advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional and organisational communication messages. Thus it is essential to discuss the integrated nature of WBCC in more detail.

### **2.3.3 The integrated nature of web-based commercial communication**

The integrated nature of WBCC is important to the context of this study, especially because WBCC was developed as a concept to indicate the integration of all online advertising, public relations, marketing communication, promotional and organisational communication messages.

WBCC was also developed as a concept to indicate the difficulty of distinguishing between advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional and organisational communication messages on the Web. WBCC messages have a commercial intent, just like advertising and marketing communication messages in the offline environment, and therefore have the prime purpose of influencing consumers to buy a product, use a service or proceed to a certain type of action.

Janal (1995) determines three components of integrated marketing which can, within the context of this study, be applied to WBCC:

- *Message consistency.* In order for the marketing process to be integrated, the consumer should find the same message regardless of the medium used. The marketing and advertising message should therefore be consistent in the online and offline environments. This aspect of the integrated nature of online marketing communication messages is discussed in a subsequent section.
- *Interactivity.* The consumer should have a way to conduct a meaningful dialogue with the organisation. Interactivity is one of the most significant characteristics of WBCC. A thorough discussion of this important aspect is therefore included in a later section.
- *Mission marketing.* Everything the organisation does stems from its definition of what the organisation is and what its purpose is. All marketing and advertising messages should be coordinated in order for it to be synchronised with the overall corporate brand of the organisation.

These three components describe integrated marketing in a general manner. For the purposes of this study, the integrated nature of WBCC is divided into two distinct categories: firstly, the integrated nature of WBCC on the Web, and secondly, the integration of online and offline marketing strategies.

#### *2.3.3.1 Integrated web-based commercial communication*

The focus of this study is on WBCC messages which are intended to move consumers through certain response processes prior to purchasing a product, using a service or proceeding to a certain type of action. The study therefore includes all marketing communication messages which have a commercial intent. It is thus important to note that the distinction between advertising and content may sometimes be blurred on the Web (Yuan, Caulkins & Roehrig 1998).

According to Richardson (2001:174), expenditures on Internet marketing communications (WBCC) continue to escalate year after year, with the majority of

organisational websites providing information about the organisation and its products and services. From the point of view of the organisation's consumers, the organisational and product information is "content", while from the organisation's perspective, it is "advertising" intended to induce purchases of its products.

Internet websites are used to reach diverse objectives, however. They are sometimes used to perform critical consumer support and communication functions, but can also be used to launch public relations initiatives and for direct e-mail promotion and multichannel marketing campaigns.

Based on these discussions, it is argued that all marketing communication messages are integrated in the online environment and that no clear borders exist between public relations, marketing communication, advertising, promotional or organisational communication messages. An organisational website consisting of organisational communication messages, for example, may be defined as a public relations function or message, since it contributes to building a positive organisational image. However, the same website may also be categorised as a marketing or advertising message for the organisation and its products or services.

In the offline environment, marketing messages can be more easily distinguished from public relations messages, because they often use different communication channels. Another reason for the easily distinguishable nature of marketing communication messages in the offline environment is because various aspects of communication fall under the responsibility of different people in different departments (Vescovi 2000). These people have difficulty in coordinating their messages, hence the fragmented marketing communication messages often distributed to the outside world.

The significance of an integrated approach in any organisational communication effort is underpinned by the importance of a unified and consistent communication strategy which assists in building a unified organisational corporate brand.

The conclusion could therefore be reached that the integration of all WBCC

messages, which could include advertising, marketing communication, promotional, public relations and organisational communication messages, is imperative in building consistency in communication, thereby contributing to an integrated marketing communication approach within the organisation.

### *2.3.3.2 The integration of web-based commercial communication with offline marketing communication messages*

In addition to examining the importance of integrating all WBCC messages, the importance of integrating WBCC with offline marketing communication messages should also be considered.

It is not sufficient to merely launch a website. According to Vescovi (2000), launching a website requires integrated actions in the sense that the development of a communication campaign addressed to the target users is also essential to make them aware of the existence of the site and about the advantages it can offer. Thus, Internet communication activities need to be integrated in the overall marketing communications mix and also need to be integrated with the operations of the organisation (Lagrosen 2005). Integration can be achieved, for instance, by using traditional media such as television, radio, outdoor, newspapers and magazines to make consumers aware of the existence of the website and the advantages it can offer.

Kanso and Nelson (2004) conducted a study to determine the integration of Internet and magazine advertising, and their findings coincide with the opinions of Vescovi (2000) and Lagrosen (2005) that a solution to building awareness and enticing consumers to visit organisational websites is to promote a site through the use of traditional media. Though Kanso and Nelson (2004) studied only the integration of Internet and magazine advertising, other authors such as Vescovi (2000) and Richardson (2001) add the importance of integrating online advertising with other traditional media such as television, radio, outdoor and newspapers as well. It makes sense for marketers and advertisers to integrate offline and online marketing communication messages, because consumers are typically exposed to offline

advertising first. According to Kanso and Nelson (2004), print media are useful in integrating online and offline marketing communication efforts, since the consumer can refer directly to the advertisement when typing the uniform resource locator (URL).

Kanso and Nelson (2004) measured the integration of websites and print advertisements based on their cumulative dependency on four factors, namely:

- whether the URL is specifically mentioned by the copy of the print advertisement,
- whether the promoted product can be located in the web page with relative ease,
- whether the web page features more product visuals than the print advertisement, and
- whether the web page includes more product information than the print advertisement.

Although these four factors are mentioned as determinants for measuring the integration of websites and print advertisements, true integration will be difficult if the copy content does not specifically highlight the distinctive benefits of visiting the website. Therefore Kanso and Nelson (2004) conclude that a print advertisement has to offer the consumer reasons to visit the website.

In the past, websites informed consumers how the organisation operates in the offline world. Now, websites show visitors how the organisation operates in both the online and the offline worlds. In this sense, websites are advertisements for the organisation, as well as for the organisation's products and services.

Richardson (2001:174) explains that Internet marketing is similar to direct marketing, but that consumers may form or change their attitudes on the basis of the navigation experience while visiting the website. This statement by Richardson (2001:174) emphasises the importance of, for example, integrating direct marketing with other elements of the marketing communication mix. Given that this author regards

Internet marketing as being similar to direct marketing, it is obvious that WBCC should also be integrated with the other elements of the marketing communication mix.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the discussion of the unique features or elements of WBCC and the online audience.

## **2.4 UNIQUE FEATURES OF WEB-BASED COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION**

Because the Internet is a new and exhilaratingly different communication medium, it is to be expected that its communication processes will consist of different features than traditional communication processes. Since this study focuses on consumer response processes in the online environment, it is imperative to examine the unique features of this environment. The following unique features need to be examined in order to identify theoretical criteria for WBCC and, following on that, the elements of online consumer response processes.

### **2.4.1 Interactivity**

Bezjian-Avery, Calder and Iacobucci (1998:23) define interactivity as *“the immediately interactive process by which consumer needs and desires are uncovered, met, modified, and satisfied by the providing firm”*.

For the purposes of this study, the concept of interaction will be segmented into two types:

- Firstly, interactive WBCC is possible. This takes place primarily when the consumer interacts with the content of the web pages, in other words, links with other web pages and actively searches for information regarding the organisation.
- Secondly, the opportunity to communicate and exchange information with the organisation also exists, in addition to the opportunity for consumers to purposely interact with web content. The online environment therefore provides an opportunity for two-way communication.

#### 2.4.1.1 *Interaction with web content*

To exploit the unique opportunity that WBCC provides for consumers to interact with content, marketers and advertisers alike should ensure truly interesting and interactive websites which prevent the user from being a passive or captive consumer. Heinen (1996) adds that traditional media may hold the consumer's attention from a few seconds to a minute, but in the interactive online environment, time spent increases dramatically to between seven and ten minutes. In order to ensure the interactive success of any WBCC message, the advertiser should go beyond simple, meaningless banner advertisements by keeping the interactive nature of the Web in mind and applying it in order to establish an intimate relationship with the consumer (Making ads work on ... 2003).

Many other formats, such as video or television windows or "skyscraper" advertisements, are far more engaging to consumers than the traditional banner advertisement. Web advertisements which relate to television advertising do not appear at the same time as editorial content and the consumer therefore needs to click past it to reach content. Other Web advertisements are more like print advertising in that they appear together with editorial content but are still identifiable as advertising. Another form of Web advertising is similar to a television infomercial or a print advertorial, where the distinction between advertising and content is somewhat ambiguous (Gordon & De Lima-Turner 1997).

It is clear that the Internet offers marketers and advertisers the opportunity to combine capabilities similar to those of newspapers (i.e. text and graphics), radio (i.e. audio) and television (i.e. video) in one concise package. This combination of print, broadcast, outdoor and direct response media can be used creatively on the Web to create, for example, animated advertisements and exciting banner advertisements on screen (Karayanni and Baltas 2003).

As soon as the Internet user is able to interact with web content, advancement to a subsequent type of interactivity, namely two-way communication, is likely.

#### 2.4.1.2 *Two-way communication*

As mentioned previously, the second type of interaction during WBCC is the engagement of consumers and the organisation in two-way communication.

Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1995:271), Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000), Paul (1996), Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997), Korgaonkar and Wolin (2002), Joines, Scherer and Scheufele (2003) and Komenar (1997:38-41) explain that much of the attraction of the Internet lies in its interactive nature, which is displayed in the manner in which consumers can look for, give, as well as get information and services where and when they want it. Consumers can thus actively choose to access organisational information through their websites and thereby become active participants and partners in the production. Marketing and advertising messages alike will be less successful if marketers and advertisers use the Internet solely for the static provision of information. Users of the Internet want to be able to get information, but they usually want to provide information as well, and should be motivated to do so (Ellsworth & Ellsworth 1995; Kiani 1998; Vescovi 2000). Ithator (2001) therefore characterises the playing field between organisation and audience as being equal.

Successful Internet sites will allow interactivity on three levels, according to Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1995:271):

- The *first level* is the level of simple presentation of information and data. The marketer or advertiser only gets people to visit the page and the consumer only views and reads it.
- On the *second level*, the consumer is actively visiting the web page by clicking on buttons, searching for information and following threads of interest. While the consumer is actively visiting the web page, the website attempts to nurture more interest in the product, organisation or service.
- On the *third level* of interactivity, the marketer or advertiser can actually close sales and form some kind of relationship with the potential consumer, since the consumer leaves feedback, sends e-mail, leaves comments, orders and

feels some personal engagement with the page.

The first two levels of interactivity identified by Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1995:271) coincide with the previous identification of the first type of interactivity, namely interaction with the content of the website. The third level of interactivity identified by Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1995:271) coincides with the second type of interactivity, identified above, namely interaction between the consumer and the organisation.

Marketers and advertisers can increase consumer involvement and satisfaction because of the interactive capabilities of the Internet. Involvement of the consumer with the advertising or marketing message provides immediate feedback to the marketer or advertiser. Therefore communication with them is direct and two-way (Belch & Belch 2001:516; Rao 1997; Goldsmith & Lafferty 2002; Aldridge, Forcht & Pierson 1997).

Interactivity is an important feature of WBCC. It can influence the response process which the consumer proceeds through when exposed to WBCC messages and therefore warrants consideration in this study.

#### **2.4.2 Flexibility**

Kiani (1998), Rao (1997) and Kanso and Nelson (2004) add flexibility to the list of unique features of WBCC. In comparison with traditional media, the Internet is much more flexible for marketing and advertising. In the virtual environment, direct feedback can be received from consumers. A virtual advertisement or marketing communication message is thus much more flexible than a physical advertisement by virtue of its ability to gather fresh and updated information. Based on this information, the advertisement or marketing message can then be modified to target a larger or different segment of the audience. The message can alternatively be changed to make a better impression on users/consumers or to react to competitive and market conditions.

#### **2.4.3 Addressability**

The online environment simplifies the process of learning about consumers' demographics, attitudes, behaviours and communities of interest and therefore enables addressable marketing communication.

Demographic and attitudinal information may come in the form of e-mail communications to marketers, opinions volunteered on bulletin boards or information gathered in surveys, questionnaires, or registration processes. Behavioural information can be gathered from transaction records or "click-stream", which tracks how users behave in a site (Kiani 1998).

The marketer or advertiser can thus obtain a consumer's information and contact details each time he/she connects to a website. The site provider then has a record of the user's electronic address and the Web is able to contact the consumer uniquely in time and space (Kiani 1998).

The Internet therefore provides marketers and advertisers with the ability to identify consumers' names, addresses and purchase histories. All of this is possible because of the Internet's capability to 'memorise' information. This is difficult with the other four mediums, namely newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Kiani 1998; Kanso & Nelson 2004). Once the consumer's personal information has been recorded, the marketer can assess the marketing and advertising effort and personalise services, products and communication for that consumer.

Addressable marketing creates the opportunity for marketers and advertisers to create individual relationships and to customise and tailor either the product or the marketing effort to one consumer at a time (Kiani 1998; Joines, Scherer & Scheufele 2003). Addressable marketing, which was previously possible only via the mail and telephone, is possible at low cost and high speed in the online environment. This means that the dialogue between organisation and consumer can now be managed electronically (Kiani 1998).

A more personalised advertising experience is therefore possible in the online

environment because of the interpersonal communication aspect of the Web (Joines, Scherer & Scheufele 2003). Because of this intimacy between marketers, advertisers and the consumer, marketers and advertisers will learn about the individual's preferences and desires and will therefore be able to communicate a customised advertising message to consumers. As a result, the marketer and advertiser are able to address the online consumer personally.

It is thus possible to target specific individuals and to design messages to appeal to the specific needs and wants of the target audience (Belch & Belch 2001:516; Rao 1997). Marketers and advertisers can tailor one-to-one messages because of the interactive nature of this medium.

Blattberg and Deighton (1991) identify the fundamental impacts of the strong addressability of the Web on marketing rules:

- Because a database of transaction histories will be the primary marketing resource for organisations, they can determine what kind of product they can deliver and what market they can target. Therefore, consumers will now be able to shape organisations that serve them far more directly than with traditional media.
- Marketing will be more accountable. The unit of measure will be the lifetime value of each consumer to the organisation. Marketing efficiency will be measured by changes in the asset value of the organisation's consumer base over time.
- Distributors' steady erosion of manufacturer power will slow and may even reverse, as manufacturers take back functions from other channel members and use electronic data systems to administer them.
- Niches too small to be served profitably today will become viable as marketing efficiency improves. Communication will reach small or diffuse targets with increasing precision, and feedback on marketing actions will become more accurate.
- The discipline of marketing will begin to feel more like engineering. Marketing managers will need to learn statistical modelling of dynamic systems if they

are to interpret market responses to interactive marketing initiatives.

#### **2.4.4 Accessibility**

In the context of this study, the feature of accessibility is divided into two distinct parts. Firstly, the ease of accessibility of the Internet for organisations and stakeholders, and secondly the importance of easily accessible websites and WBCC for consumers.

Kiani (1998), Paul (1996) and Kanso and Nelson (2004) point out that the Internet provides an opportunity for organisations to conduct business globally and across different time-zones. Because of Internet facilities, organisations can now conduct business on a 24-hour basis and that makes them accessible to many different stakeholders across the world. One of the most important benefits of accessibility is the fact that even smaller organisations which may not have had the resources to expand their business globally offline, can now do so online (Kiani 1998). These organisations do not have to be physically present in other countries, thereby saving a lot of money which can be spent on more aggressive online marketing efforts.

Besides the easy accessibility of the Internet for organisations, it is also important that organisational websites are easily accessible for consumers. There is little sense in having a website which is inaccessible to consumers. Web users want control over communication exchanges with organisations, and they can tailor-make their own messages only if they can access marketers' and advertisers' web-sites easily by means of either direct address or "click-through" from another site (Aldridge, Forcht & Pierson 1997).

Karayanni and Baltas (2003) agree with Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997) that organisational websites should be easily accessible and that information should be easily retrievable. Websites should therefore be well organised and easy to navigate.

#### **2.4.5 Swiftiness of the communication process**

One of the major advantages that the Internet, and accordingly WBCC, has as a communication medium is speed. The Internet is the quickest way for consumers to obtain information on an organisation and its products or services. Because of the expectation created by the foregoing, consumers demand quick feedback on requests and suggested improvements (Ribbink, van Riel, Liljander and Streukens 2004).

#### **2.4.6 Active attraction of consumers to web-based commercial communication**

No guarantees exist in the online world that a consumer will automatically visit a website, interact with WBCC or engage in two-way communication with an organisation (Heinen 1996). Therefore, it is imperative for any online marketer and advertiser to ensure that consumers are attracted to the organisation's website and exposed to its WBCC messages. In addition to the fact that the website should be developed in an extremely creative way, Kiani (1998) adds that the website should have a mnemonic "address" as well as links to other sites.

It is thus clear from Heinen's (1996) and Kiani's (1998) explanations that in the online environment consumers should be actively attracted to WBCC. Exposure seldomly occurs by chance.

#### **2.4.7 Active engagement of consumers' interest and participation in web-based commercial communication messages**

One way for marketers and advertisers to engage consumers' interest and participation in WBCC messages is by using creative tactics and techniques. The online environment permits a uniquely creative approach to WBCC messages and does not necessarily inhibit creative advertising messages. The advantage of creatively designed websites or WBCC messages is that they can enhance an organisation's image, lead to repeat visits and positively position the organisation in the consumer's mind. According to Kiani (1998), the importance of engaging users'

interest and participation cannot be overemphasised. If users are interested in a website or WBCC message, they will interact with the message and this will ultimately lead to a transaction. This can be encouraged by providing consumers with convenience-oriented content, communities of interest and links to other sites (Kiani 1998).

#### **2.4.8 Ensuring that consumers return to a web site**

In addition to attracting and engaging consumers' interest and participation, Kiani (1998) proposes that the marketer and advertiser should ensure that the consumer returns to the website. This will ensure that the organisation establishes and maintains a loyal consumer base (Rowley 2001). It is not enough if users are drawn to the site and engage with suitably interactive and valued content, but do not return to consume more of the available WBCC messages.

The return of consumers to a website can be achieved by keeping the site 'fresh' through continuously renewing content and/or providing content that is inherently changeable on an ongoing basis, such as weather reports, news, stock market information and special limited-period discounts (Kiani 1998; Rowley 2001).

#### **2.4.9 Customised interactions**

The possibility to tailor a product or marketing effort for one consumer at a time exists in the online environment. It is thus possible to customise interactions between a specific consumer and the organisation. Kiani (1998) states that "*as a two-way and addressable communication channel, interactive media provides an unprecedented opportunity for marketers to 'relate' to a consumer*". This allows the marketer and advertiser to gather necessary information from an individual consumer and to deliver a personalised service, product, or communication about the availability of such a personalised service or product (Kiani 1998).

Ribbink, van Riel, Liljander and Streukens (2004) are of the same opinion as Kiani

(1998) and emphasise that the website can be personalised to the consumer's needs, although this may be a challenging task. It is a demanding task because of the lack of human touch. Nevertheless, marketers and advertisers should strive to customise their WBCC messages to consumers' individual needs.

#### **2.4.10 Accentuation of information delivery**

In the online environment, the emphasis is less on visual persuasion than on information. It is important for consumers to be able to access this information freely and easily. Consumers can find information on any topic and additionally find information on product specifications, costs, purchase information, etcetera. Because of the unique feature of interactivity of WBCC, consumers constantly have the power to request more information from the organisation if they so desire. Online advertisements will provide product, organisational and service-specific information to consumers. This is not always possible with traditional advertising, where the emphasis is generally on visual persuasion.

Kanso and Nelson (2004) elaborate by explaining that the Internet offers more content-rich information about specific features of a product. Consumers who visit websites in order to search for products to buy or services to use are usually information-hungry, and marketers and advertisers should therefore ensure information richness as a quality of WBCC.

#### **2.4.11 Effective target marketing**

Belch and Belch (2001:516) consider precise target marketing in the online environment as one of the important and unique features of WBCC. It is possible to target very specific groups of individuals in the online environment. This is because only those individuals who are significantly interested in the products, organisation or services discussed on the website, will visit the site. Therefore, marketers and advertisers attempt to design their marketing and advertising messages to meet consumers' needs and wants.

Because target marketing cannot be performed in the same way in the online environment as in the offline environment, prominent authors on online marketing communication, such as Kiani (1998), Ihator (2001) and Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997), believe that the best way to segment audiences is to base the segmentation process on the interests of the audiences.

#### **2.4.12 Information empowerment and uncertainty reduction**

Ihator (2001) suggests that one of the advantages of the new computer age for the corporate communicator is information empowerment and uncertainty reduction. He proposes that this advantage allows the organisation to have an agenda-setting function. Whenever the organisation has the ability to acquire, process, interpret and directly disseminate information, the opportunity for misinformation, disinformation and misinterpretation diminishes (Ihator 2001).

With the dissemination of information via traditional media, a third person or gate-keeper is always part of the communication process. This third party could have a different mindset or communication goal and therefore alter the original meaning of the message. Ihator (2001) explains that computer technology allows organisational communicators to reduce randomness in information diffusion, strategically place a message and establish an organisation's interpretative framework, without any influences from third parties or gatekeepers.

Besides this newly acquired ability of the organisation to reduce uncertainty and to control communication messages, employees are also empowered by this new information technology. According to Ihator (2001), they are now able to interact online with colleagues, stakeholders and even the audience. Information-sharing is thus possible, because they can now go directly to the source of the information, share their viewpoints with each other and even distribute media releases directly.

#### **2.4.13 Purchase facilitation**

Kanso and Nelson (2004) and Joines, Scherer and Scheufele (2003) add purchase facilitation as one of the unique features of WBCC. By offering product and purchase details, identifying the nearest dealer, quoting prices and offering consumers the choice of buying whenever they are considering making the purchase, the Internet can facilitate transactions. This unique feature distinguishes the Web from other advertising mediums and also seems to be the reason why many users are logging on.

Purchase facilitation as a feature of WBCC is important to this study, since purchasing a product is usually the last phase in the consumer response process.

#### **2.4.14 Ease of use**

One of the many reasons why consumers prefer using the Internet and the Web to access WBCC messages and product information is the ease of use of these media. When the consumer has access to the Internet and is in any way literate enough to use it, a well designed website that is pleasing to the eye will ensure the consumer's return to the site (Ribbink, van Riel, Liljander & Streukens 2004). Ribbink, van Riel, Liljander and Streukens (2004) include aspects such as functionality, accessibility of information and ease of ordering and navigation as important features for easy access to a website and WBCC.

#### **2.4.15 Online relationship-building**

The building of relationships in the online marketing effort is just as important as relationship-building in any offline marketing effort. Currently, the focus is on relations and interactions between marketer, organisation and consumer.

The first unique feature of WBCC, as discussed earlier in this section, is the interactive nature of WBCC and the Web as communication media. This feature enables marketers and advertisers to build and manage relationships (Lagrosen 2005). These relations can be created when organisations and consumers interact on an ongoing basis via the Internet (Hanson 2000:188). The ultimate goal for any

organisation is that consumers choose a specific organisation as their primary choice on a long-term basis. They will only do so, though, when they feel that the interaction with the organisation has been profitable and rewarding (Lagrosen 2005).

According to Barker (2006), relationship marketing focuses on communication *with* the consumer rather than *to* the consumer. This approach emphasises the importance of feedback and two-way communication. Although feedback and two-way communication pose a challenge to marketers and advertisers in the offline environment, it is possible and rather simple to establish relationships based on feedback and two-way communication in the online environment, because of the interactive nature of this communication medium. Transactional marketing should now be replaced with interactive marketing (Barker 2006). Interactivity is one of the unique features of the Internet (refer to section 2.4.1) and therefore eases this paradigm shift.

Relationship marketing is defined by Barker (2006:181) as *“the commercial activity between economic partners, service providers and consumers aiming to create, maintain and terminate these relationships to achieve mutually beneficial objectives based on profit and trust between these parties”*.

Since this definition highlights the importance of achieving mutually beneficial objectives based on profit and trust between economic partners, service providers and consumers, it is obvious that elements such as trust, commitment and social support are crucial to relationship marketing.

Barker (2006:182a) explains these elements as follows:

- *Trust*. Trust is about equity, looking ahead and the allocation of scarce resources such as time, money and product benefits. Trust reduces conflict and increases satisfaction and confidence between partners.
- *Commitment*. This refers to a desire to maintain a valued relationship.
- *Social support*. Social support provides benefits such as the reduction and

control of uncertainty, an increase in self-acceptance, and social integration within the larger community.

Although Barker (2006) describes relationship-building in the offline environment, the same principles hold good for the online marketing effort as well. Indeed it can be argued that relationship marketing may prove to be easier in the online environment than in the offline environment. The Internet provides the opportunity to consumers to interact with information on the website, as well as with the organisation. The element of interactivity is thus easily achievable, as well as two-way communication with the organisation and other stakeholders. In this way, it is possible for the organisation to receive feedback and to react based on the feedback. Organisations thereby practise relationship marketing and build successful and lasting relationships with consumers.

For relationship-building, the Internet presents completely new modes of interaction. E-communities or virtual communities serve as one example in which people with a common interest can carry out their social discourse and activities using the Internet (Lagrosen 2005). Organisations can build strong and effective relationships with consumers if they organise electronic communities to meet multiple social and commercial needs.

#### **2.4.16 A summary of the unique features of web-based commercial communication**

The unique features of WBCC or online marketing communication messages can be summarised in the form of a comparison between WBCC messages and marketing communication messages (advertising) in traditional mass media. Table 2.1 shows the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online.

**Table 2.1: Comparing the features of WBCC messages with marketing communication messages (advertising) in traditional mass media:**

	<b>Web-based commercial communication</b>	<b>Traditional media</b>
<b>Interactivity</b>	Dialogue (two-way communication)	Monologue (one-way communication)
<b>Flexibility</b>	Immediate modification of the advertising message is possible	Traditional media are more rigid. Modification of advertising messages takes place over a longer period of time
<b>Addressability</b>	Personalisation of services, products and communication for specific individuals is possible	Mass media do not provide for individualised advertising/marketing communication messages
<b>Accessibility</b>	Organisational information is accessible on a 24-hour basis for all stakeholders across the world	Organisational information is only accessible when contact is made with or by the organisation (e.g. advertising/promotional messages)
<b>Swiftiness of the communication process</b>	Rapid communication between organisation and consumers	Time delays in communication and feedback
<b>Active attraction of consumers to WBCC</b>	Exposure is not accidental. Consumers have to be actively attracted to the website	Exposure can be accidental
<b>Active engagement of consumers' interest and participation in WBCC messages</b>	Uses creative tactics to engage consumers' interest	No interaction required, therefore only attention and no participation is required
<b>Ensuring that consumers return to a website</b>	Since exposure is not accidental, organisations need consumers to return to a website or marketing communication message	Exposure is usually accidental. Consumers would not usually repeat the experience of their own accord
<b>Customised interactions</b>	Customisation of	Mass media communicates to

	communication to one consumer at a time	mass audiences
<b>Accentuation of content delivery</b>	Emphasis on information delivery	Emphasis on visual persuasion
<b>Effective target marketing</b>	Targets individuals who are significantly interested in a product or service based on consumer profiles	Consumer information is not easily obtainable. Targeting is therefore more complicated.
<b>Information empowerment</b>	Organisations can reduce uncertainty and control communication messages	Gatekeepers may alter messages and change meaning
<b>Purchase facilitation</b>	WBCC offers abundant product information, as well as the opportunity to buy	Purchase facilitation can be compared to direct marketing in the offline world
<b>Ease of use</b>	If consumers are computer-literate, the Internet is easy to use	Consumers need to be literate in order to read and understand messages in traditional mass media
<b>Relationship-building</b>	Possible because of the interactive nature of the Internet	More challenging because of less personal consumer information

This table summarises the important differences between WBCC and marketing communication messages in the offline environment. WBCC messages contain unique features which differ from the features of marketing communication messages in the offline world. WBCC has distinct features and therefore the assumption is made that the online consumer response process will also differ from the traditional consumer response process. Since this study aims to develop theoretical criteria for WBCC and the online consumer response process, the differences discussed in the table above will assist in this aim.

Just as WBCC differs from offline marketing communication, the online audience also possesses unique characteristics which differ from the characteristics of the offline audience. These characteristics are subsequently discussed.

## **2.5 UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ONLINE AUDIENCE**

In the previous section, the unique features of WBCC were discussed. Since WBCC has numerous features that differ from traditional marketing communication, this study will argue that the audience that uses this new medium also differs from the users of more traditional media. Because of the rapid development of the Internet and the Web as communication media and the ensuing use thereof by organisations, marketers, advertisers and all other organisational stakeholders, the demographics of online users have also changed to a microcosm of society bridging social class, age and household makeups (Web use rises to detriment...2001).

Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) agree in explaining that Internet technology has changed the online communication scene, creating different online audience segments. All communication practitioners therefore need to adapt to the new characteristics of online audiences. Some of the most important characteristics of the Internet or online audience and online consumers are discussed below:

### **2.5.1 Communities of interest**

Kiani (1998) debates the view of some marketing authors (Blattberg & Deighton 1998; Kierzkowski, McQuade, Waitman & Zeisser 1996; McKenna 1995) who believe that the online consumer is not part of a segment of a market, but should be perceived as an individual market. This view is challenged in that Kiani (1998), as well as Ihator (2001) and Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997) believe that segmentation of some nature is still necessary, but that the Internet and other information technology are making traditional audience definition and segmentation more complicated. The Internet audience cuts across geographic, national, cultural and political boundaries, with the result that a new form of segmentation is taking place in the online environment. Kiani (1998) believes that the focus should still be on the individual consumer, but also elucidates that the segmentation process is enduring and is replaced by a new form of segmentation.

Based on this new segmentation approach, organisations should organise electronic or virtual communities to meet multiple social and commercial needs. Organisations can then present these communities with relevant messages. All WBCC messages should be structured around these categories or communities (Kiani 1998). Barker (2006b) explains that virtual communities are formed between people globally, which provides communication spaces to work together in teams. Various key terminologies are used to describe these communities, such as 'brand communities', 'communities of interest', 'virtual communities of consumption' or 'Internet cultures'. According to Barker (2006b), the most widely used term is 'virtual communities'. Armstrong and Hagel (1996) choose to refer to these categories as electronic communities and classify them into four distinct categories:

- Communities of transaction: These communities facilitate the buying and selling of services and products and the delivery of the relevant information (e.g. caring).
- Communities of interest: These communities bring together participants who interact with one another on specific topics. Barker (2006b) refers to these communities as virtual communities of practice. These communities are defined as a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise on the topic through ongoing interaction and with reliance on new information and communication technologies.
- Communities of fantasy: These communities create new environments, personalities or stories.
- Communities of relationship: These communities are created around certain life experiences that often are very intense and can lead to the information of deep personal connections (e.g. cancer forums).

Kiani (1998) elaborates by explaining that marketers and advertisers used to focus on consumers' needs within the parameters of their product. With the advancement of the online marketing and advertising concept, marketers and advertisers analysed a few of the above-mentioned categories and structured WBCC messages around these categories. However, marketers and advertisers should ultimately analyse the

business of organisations in unrelated industries that are targeting the same consumers (Kiani 1998). In this way, consumers belonging to the same category could be exposed to different WBCC messages for different products and services.

Other authors believe that audience segmentation in the online environment should be based on different concepts. Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997), for example, believe that “benefits” is the key to Internet segmentation. These authors declare that, because of the interactivity of the medium, consumers choose the messages they want. By selecting different options, they then segment themselves, based on their desired product benefits.

Although Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997) present a valid argument, the presumption that online consumers should be segmented into communities of interest is more relevant to the purposes of this study.

Online communities of interest could also be related to one of the unique features of WBCC, namely interaction. In order for a consumer to belong to a certain community of interest, he/she should actively interact with web content and also participate in the two-way communication process in the online environment.

Both the interactivity of WBCC and the existence of online communities of interest contribute to changing the original consumer response process to an online consumer response process unique to the online environment. Therefore, these two characteristics contribute to the formulation of theoretical concepts for the online consumer response process as reaction to communication between organisations and consumers, or WBCC, which intend to move them through certain response processes prior to purchasing a product, using a service or proceeding to a certain type of action.

## **2.5.2 The audience is connected to the organisation**

Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) describe detachment as one of the features of the mass communication model. The communicator was, in many instances, isolated from the audience and this created a uni-directional communication channel. These authors continue to explain that organisations used to communicate and the audiences merely consumed the information. The Internet has, now closed the gap between organisation and audience member. Stakeholders are all connected via the network. Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) argue that it is evident that communicators have grasped the opportunity to be connected to audiences world-wide in the many “contact us” buttons and links on almost all organisational websites. This new online communication model necessitates communicators’ engagement of members of the audience on a one-to-one basis (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002).

### **2.5.3 Members of the audience are connected to each other**

In the new online environment, organisations need to understand that members of the audience are connected to each other. The organisation is now only a link in the communication network and should try to control the connectedness of the audience. Everybody, including the organisation, the audience members and all stakeholders, is a communicator. Stakeholders are able to discuss and debate organisational activity without the organisation’s knowledge (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002). Rowley (2001) identifies e-mail, Usenet groups, e-mail listservs, portal discussion areas and consumer forums, among others, as the means by which stakeholders can contact one another. If organisations understand this interconnectedness of audience members, they will attempt to create a unified corporate brand for the organisation by unifying all marketing communication messages.

### **2.5.4 Audience members have access to other information**

In the connected world, information does not exist in a vacuum (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002). Audience members have access to a diversity of information sources and can access different online sources within minutes and even seconds. It was

difficult for audience members to analyse, discuss and challenge information from the organisation in the past, but the situation has dramatically changed over recent years. It is obvious that audience members' ability to access different information sources poses a threat to a unified organisational corporate brand. If different messages by the organisation are communicated to different segments of the audience, this could destroy any credibility the organisation ever had.

### **2.5.5 Audience members pull information**

In the past, organisations used to 'push' information through to audience members. However, in recent times, audiences have started pulling information from organisations. They do not only have access to newspapers, television and radio anymore, but can deliberately seek information in the online environment (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002).

Barker, du Plessis and Hanekom (2006:285) describe Internet traffic *pull* as the provision of information to individuals at their request. Consumers *pull* information by using links to directories and other sites. Internet traffic *push*, according to Barker, du Plessis and Hanekom (2006:285), is information provided to individuals whether they have asked for it or not. This information needs to encourage the target audience to revisit the site. Consumers will only revisit a site if the site has real value or relevance to them.

In the traditional media environment, organisations could make messages stand out, and audience members could only debate these messages amongst each other by means of telephone and post. The control of all communications is now in the hands of the audience member and is shared within the Internet (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002; Vescovi 2000; Paul 1996; Joines, Scherer & Scheufele 2003). Therefore, organisations should carefully scrutinise all messages disseminated to the audience.

It is important for organisations to customise and coordinate organisational messages. Members of the audience can pull the information that suits their needs

and interests and do not need to accept every message an organisation wants to send to them (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002).

### **2.5.6 Literacy**

Consumer literacy has always been important for marketing and advertising practitioners. This consumer competency has been used until now to segment audiences and to understand their needs and wants. Marketing and advertising strategies have been altered according to the literacy level of audience members. In the new information age, this is not entirely different. Consumers still need to be literate, but in a totally different way. Therefore, the meaning and definition of literacy should be carefully reviewed (Ihator 2001). In the traditional marketing paradigm, marketers and advertisers expected of audience members to be able to read and write. In other words, their literacy had to be text-based and alphabetic (Ihator 2001).

Ihator (2001) suggests that, in the information age, the following new types of literacy may be required:

- Document literacy: This is the ability to interpret and use information from different kinds of nonprose formats, such as forms, charts, graphs, maps and other visual displays, in which information is not arranged in sentence or paragraph form.  
As soon as a consumer is able to acquire, digest and understand a message through images, graphics, video, audio and other visual displays, he/she does not necessarily need to be alphabetically literate.
- “Tool” literacy: This is the use of images, graphics, video and audio to present information.

### **2.5.7 Audience members as information and communication regulators**

It was established in section 2.3.1 that the old uni-directional models of marketing communication are not valid anymore and that organisations are not controlling and

monopolising channels of communication any longer (Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002; Kiani 1998; Vescovi 2000; Ihator 2001; Rowley 2004). Audience members want control over the who, what, where and how of information exchange and initiate their own contacts, control information flow and seek out marketers and products rather than the other way round (Aldridge, Forcht & Pierson 1997; Joines, Scherer & Scheufele 2003).

One of the unique features of WBCC which holds important implications for consumer participation in the marketing and advertising process is the shift in channel power which takes place during WBCC activities. With this newly acquired power, consumers have access to the mass media to tell their stories from their own perspectives and complain vehemently if necessary (Ihator 2001).

Karayanni and Baltas (2003) identify this shift in channel power which takes place during WBCC as the result of demassification. They describe this term as “*the degree to which a specific message can be conveyed to each individual belonging to a large audience*”. Demassification usually implies that a certain degree of control over a communication system has shifted from the message producer to the message consumer (Karayanni & Baltas 2003).

Because audience members have easy access to information technology such as websites, they are able to share their viewpoints and experiences with any other audience members (Ihator 2001). This provides audience members with the power to control channels of communication and to influence organisational communication messages by controlling contact as well as content (Peters 1998).

The combination of this newly acquired power of the audience members with the speed with which they can act pose a real threat to organisational survival. The threat lies in the online audience member’s ability to influence other online consumers’ attitude towards the organisation. Therefore, organisations should ensure a strong, unified corporate communication strategy which contributes to creating a unified corporate brand.

### **2.5.8 Search for enjoyment**

According to Newman, Stem and Prott (2004), consumers will more often return to a website when they experience feelings of joy and excitement while engaging with the information on the website. These authors indicate the importance of “*a pleasant environment with a high level of arousal*”. Therefore, the more a consumer enjoys the interaction on a website, the more he/she will habitually return to the website.

A further conclusion may now be drawn, namely that enjoyment and a feeling of excitement while engaging with WBCC messages are elements of the online consumer response process and therefore central to the context of this study.

### **2.5.9 Online audience’s search for uses and gratifications**

Closely linked to the search for enjoyment is the online audience’s search for uses and gratifications on the Web and from WBCC messages. Various audience members may seek different uses and gratifications within the same medium or media content (Joines, Scherer & Scheufele 2003). Users may initially interact with a website because of accidental exposure or curiosity, but what is important for the marketer and advertiser is continuous use of the website. If users do not receive some type of reward or gratification, they will not return to a website for further interactions. Since the return of users to a website is the aim of any WBCC message, online marketers and advertisers should ensure rewards and gratifications from using this mass medium.

### **2.5.10 A summary of the unique characteristics of the online audience**

The unique characteristics of the online audience are summarised in the form of a comparison between the characteristics of the online audience and the traditional mass media audience in Table 2.2 below.

**Table 2.2: Comparing online audience characteristics with traditional mass media audience characteristics:**

	<b>Online audience characteristics</b>	<b>Traditional mass media audience characteristics</b>
<b>Segmentation</b>	Communities of interest	Segmentation based on demographics, pshycographics, etc.
<b>Audience- organisation connectivity</b>	Audience is directly connected to the organisation or communicator	Communicator is isolated from the audience
<b>Audience member connectivity</b>	Audience members are connected to each other because of the possibility of interactivity in the online environment	Audience members are seldom connected to each other
<b>Audience members' access to other information</b>	A diversity of online information sources can be accessed	Audience members have difficulty to access 'other' information sources which are not offered by the organisation
<b>Audience members' method of obtaining information</b>	Audience members 'pull' information	Organisations 'push' information
<b>Literacy</b>	Electronic document and tool literacy	Text-based and alphabetic literacy
<b>Control over information and communication</b>	Audience members want control over the who, what, where and how of information exchange	The organisation controls information exchange and communication interactions
<b>Search for enjoyment</b>	Audience members want to experience feelings of joy and excitement	Exposure is usually accidental and therefore enjoyment is not that crucial
<b>Search for uses and gratifications</b>	Audience members need rewards for interacting with WBCC messages in order to ensure their return	Exposure is usually accidental and non-recurrent and therefore rewards are not crucial

This table summarises the important differences between online audience characteristics and traditional mass media audience characteristics. Since WBCC has distinct features and the online audience has distinct characteristics, the assumption is made that the online consumer response process will also differ from the traditional consumer response process. Some of the secondary objectives of

this study are to develop theoretical criteria for WBCC and the online consumer response process, therefore the differences discussed in Table 2.2 will form part of the basis of such discussion and development.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

Secondary research objectives 1, 2, 3, and 4 have been addressed in this chapter by highlighting the unique features of WBCC, as well as the unique characteristics of the online audience. It was indicated that these features and characteristics differ from the features and characteristics in the offline environment, therefore the conclusion was drawn that the online consumer response process would also differ from the traditional consumer response process.

In order to contextualise these features and characteristics, as well as to facilitate the formulation of theoretical criteria for WBCC and the online consumer response process, the following were discussed in this chapter:

- The Internet and the World Wide Web as communication media
- The nature of WBCC
- The integration of WBCC
- The integration of online and offline marketing communication efforts.

The next chapter focuses on consumer response models.

## CHAPTER 3: CONSUMER RESPONSE MODELS

*A model is an abstract conception of reality; it is a simplification of complex variables – a blueprint which shows the essential elements of a larger system and which cannot be regarded as anything more than a rough approximation to a complicated reality.*

(Karmarck 1983)

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the early 1920's, Daniel Starch, as quoted by Wilmshurst (1985) and Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), put forward the idea that in order to be effective, any advertising:

- Must be *seen*.
- Must be *read*.
- Must be *believed*.
- Must be *remembered*.
- Must be *acted upon*.

With these steps, Starch reflected on early models of attitude formation by advocating that consumers respond to advertising messages in a set sequence (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993). These steps of Daniel Starch's can be effective in predicting advertising effectiveness as well as the process that consumers follow when they are exposed to advertising messages. However, although this proposed explanation of the consumer response process by Starch can be utilised in certain uncomplicated situations, it does not take into account the many different variables which influence the consumer response process. Yet it can be regarded as the antecedent of the variety of different consumer response models which aim to explain this complex process and which are explained, examined and evaluated in the chronological order in which they are listed below:

- The first and most well-known model of the consumer response process is the *AIDA model* (Strong 1925). The AIDA model, as well as the *hierarchy of effects model*, sometimes referred to as the DAGMAR model (Koekemoer 2004:90), developed by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner (1961); the *innovation adoption model* (Rogers 1962) and the *information processing model*, developed by William McGuire (1978), are jointly referred to as the *traditional response hierarchy models*. Chronologically, they are the first consumer response models developed and they explain the response process which consumers proceed through from a state of being unaware of a product or service to actual purchase behaviour.
- Michael Ray (1973) developed the three-orders model of information processing. This model encompasses the standard learning hierarchy, the dissonance/attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy and represents the *alternative response hierarchies*. It demonstrates advancement on the traditional response hierarchy models in its understanding of the complex consumer response process. Its alternative response hierarchies progressed from the static hierarchical phases depicted by the traditional response hierarchy models to alternative orderings of these phases depending on two variables, namely topical involvement and perceived product differentiation.
- The *integrated information response model* by Smith and Swinyard (1982) follows on the alternative response hierarchies and includes additional concepts such as the realisation that not only advertising messages have an influence on consumer response, and the importance of the formation of attitudes.
- The *FCB planning model* by Vaughn (1980) introduces new variables, involvement, and thinking and feeling dimensions and assists in understanding and examining the consumer response process.

- The *elaboration likelihood model* by Petty and Cacioppo (1983) focuses on an integration of some of the factors that may account for different types and levels of cognitive processing of a message, by identifying a relationship between involvement and cognitive processing. It thus addresses the different ways in which consumers process and respond to persuasive messages.
- The last model is Preston's (1982) *association model of the advertising communication process*. The purpose with this model is to extend and improve on traditional response hierarchy models such as the AIDA model, as well as to incorporate all of the measures of research commonly used in advertising.

Each of these categories of models is discussed in detail in the following sections.

### **3.2 TRADITIONAL RESPONSE HIERARCHY MODELS**

The four best-known traditional response hierarchy models are the AIDA model (Strong 1925); the hierarchy of effects model developed by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner (1961); the innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962) and the information processing model, developed by William McGuire (1978). These models explain the response process which consumers proceed through from a state of being unaware of a product or service to actual purchase behaviour (Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006). These models appear to be similar, but were developed for different reasons. They also explain the consumer response process as a process proceeding from the cognitive stage to the affective stage and lastly to the behavioural or conative stage (Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006; Mortimer 2002; Koekemoer 2004; Burnett & Moriarty 1998). This is a “learn – feel – do” sequence that requires communication to raise awareness and change attitudes before the consumer will consider buying (Koekemoer 2004:91).

The main premises of these models can be summarised as follows:

- During the *cognitive stage*, the consumer response process consists of attention, awareness, knowledge, presentation and comprehension. These stages explain the phase during which the consumer becomes aware of the advertising message or product or service advertised. It is during this stage that the consumer gathers information, becomes conversant with and understands the advertising message.
- During the next stage, the *affective stage*, the consumer response phases include interest, desire, liking, preference, conviction, evaluation, yielding and retention. This phase thus depicts the emotional phase of the advertising response process. During this phase, the consumer will feel affectionate towards the advertising message or product or service being advertised. He/she will become interested in the advertising message, product or service advertised and begin to desire the product.
- During the last stage, the *behavioural stage*, the consumer proceeds to take some sort of action. The traditional response hierarchy models include phases like action, purchase, trial, adoption and behaviour. It is evident that, during this phase, the consumer will purchase the product, use the service, or proceed to the opposite type of behaviour such as, for example, rejection.

Criticism against these models includes the fact that they all assume that the consumer passes through the response phases in a linear or chronological order. The consumer proceeds from the cognitive stage, to the affective stage and then to the behavioural stage during certain advertising response occasions, or alternatively, different advertising messages may force the consumer to form firstly an affective response, then a cognitive response and lastly a behavioural response. The process can also advance in the opposite direction. For example, when the consumer is in a hurry, and hastily buys a product without thinking about the purchase or without reacting affectionately towards it, he/she would have proceeded through the behavioural stage first.

When the consumer subsequently uses the product, he/she will gain knowledge and interest in the particular product. It is during such instances that the traditional response hierarchy models do not adequately explain the consumer response process. Similarly, the consumer might not always proceed through all three stages, but might stop at the cognitive or affective stage and never proceed to the behavioural stage. If the advertising message, product or service advertised does not interest the consumer at all, he/she will not proceed to the action or behaviour stage and will certainly not purchase the particular product.

Wilmshurst's (1985:202) criticism is similar to the criticism offered above and he adds that these models assume that the audience remains passive during the response process and is influenced by advertising messages aimed at it. This author argues that the reverse is often true. The audience sometimes actively searches for information regarding a certain product or service. In such instances, the audience does not remain passive.

Even though the traditional response hierarchy models are criticised on certain aspects, it is important to examine each of them separately in order to understand the basic consumer response process adequately.

Figure 3.1 shows the traditional response hierarchy models.

Stages	Models			
	AIDA model <sup>a</sup>	Hierarchy of effects model <sup>b</sup>	Innovation adoption model <sup>c</sup>	Information processing model <sup>d</sup>
Cognitive stage	Attention	Awareness	Awareness	Presentation
		Knowledge		Attention
Affective stage	Interest	Liking	Interest	Yielding
	Desire	Preference	Evaluation	Retention
Behavioral stage	Action	Purchase	Adoption	Behavior

**Figure 3.1: The traditional response hierarchy models (Belch and Belch 2001:148).**

### 3.2.1 The AIDA model

During the 1920s it was realised that the buyer’s point of view should be taken into account when selling takes place. Strong (1925:9) notes that the development of the famous slogan – “attention, interest, desire, action, satisfaction”, illustrates this. Strong (1925) developed the AIDA model of consumer response, basing his theory of the consumer response process on findings by E St. Elmo Lewis (1898), William James, and AF Sheldon (1907). E St. Elmo Lewis (1898) based his development of the slogan “Attract attention, maintain interest, create desire” on the psychology of William James. He later added to the formula, “get action”. In 1907, according to Strong (1925:9), AF Sheldon made the further addition of “permanent satisfaction” as essential to the slogan.

In his development of the famous AIDA model of the consumer response process, Strong (1925:14) analysed purchases and identified mental

processes involved in a purchase when reduced to their simplest elements.

The initial elements were:

- Want
- Solution
- Purchase

In further research, Strong (1925:15) determined that a fourth element should form part of this analysis. The elements were now:

- Want
- Solution
- Purchase
- Satisfaction

Further analysis by Strong (1925:16) produced the following:

- Want
- Commodity
- Trade name (Retail store)
- Purchase
- Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

Strong (1925:17) then realised that adequacy and pleasant feelings should be included in the formula:

- Want
- Commodity (Adequacy established, Pleasant feelings)
- Trade name/Store (Adequacy established, Pleasant feelings)
- Purchase
- Satisfaction

Strong (1925:34) reached the conclusion that *“the process of purchasing, in the broad sense, starts with the rise of a want and ends with the experiencing of the purchased solution”*.

Strong (1925:34) furthermore asserts that the most complex type of selling is that where the salesman brings to the mind of the buyer a want of which he had not been conscious and then sells him a solution to it. This statement by Strong (1925:34) underpins the development of the AIDA model as representing the stages a salesperson takes the consumer through in the personal selling process (Strong 1925; Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006). Strong (1925:348) reached the conclusion that many theories are active in the minds of sellers as to how to influence others to buy. A perusal of the literature on the subject leads him to the conclusion that the following theory can be formulated to explain the consumer response process:

- Attention
- Interest
- Desire
- Action
- Satisfaction

Although Strong (1925) originally included “satisfaction” as the last phase in his theory of consumer response, the term “satisfaction” is omitted in his final version, named the AIDA model of consumer response.

Even though the AIDA model was developed for the personal selling process, it is one of the most well-known and basic consumer response hierarchy models overall. The AIDA model suggests a linear hierarchy (In the advertising theories...[sa]), and asserts that the consumer response process follows the following steps: (1) Attention, (2) Interest, (3) Desire and (4) Action (Strong 1925; Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006; Burnett & Moriarty 1998; Wilmhurst 1985; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993; Davis 1997; Chisnall 1995).

The salesperson should first of all attract the consumer’s attention with the product that he/she wants to sell. Ashcroft and Hoey (2001) explain that this cognitive stage, when market segments get to know that the product or service exists, is the first step in the communication process. Once the

salesperson holds the consumer's attention, the consumer becomes interested in the product. Strong levels of interest should create a desire to own or use the product (Belch & Belch 2001:149). When the AIDA model is applied outside the personal selling process, Ashcroft and Hoey (2001) suggest that the interest and desire phase is the affective stage, when identified markets will be analysed to identify the communications means which will trigger interest, and when benefits to those segments are highlighted. During the last phase of the AIDA model, the salesperson wants the consumer to purchase the product. This phase therefore depicts the behavioural stage, involving inducement to action (Ashcroft & Hoey 2001). It is evidently the most important phase in the response process for the marketer, but could also be the most difficult (Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006; Burnett & Moriarty 1998; Wilmshurst 1985; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993; Davis 1997).

#### *Evaluation of the AIDA model*

It is argued that the AIDA model is an exceptionally uncomplicated and basic model of the consumer response process. Even though it was developed to explain the stages a salesperson must take a consumer through in the personal selling process, it could also represent the basic consumer response processes which consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages. The traditional response hierarchy models have previously been criticised concerning the mechanistic way in which they represent the consumer response process (refer to section 3.2). This criticism is relevant when examining the AIDA model as well. It is believed that the consumer proceeds through more than the mere attention, interest, desire and action phases and that additional phases should be included in the consumer response process. It is furthermore believed that consumers do not necessarily proceed through these suggested phases/stages in a linear fashion. Because this model was developed in 1925, it represents a mechanistic view of the communication process. During these early times, communication experts did not realise that communication is a transactional

instead of a linear process. The AIDA model therefore still represents the linear view of the communication process.

In spite of the criticism against the AIDA model, it is still believed to be useful in adequately explaining and representing the basic consumer response process, and may assist in the creation of effective advertising messages by advertising professionals.

The AIDA model has been further criticised by Hanekom (2006), Lavidge and Steiner (1961) and Belch and Belch (2001). Hanekom (2006:243) argues that this model suggests manipulation by the advertising message, implying that the message will undoubtedly lead to sales. Researchers like Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner (1961) found that the advertising process is much more complicated than mere manipulation and therefore elaborated on the AIDA model by developing the hierarchy of effects model, which is discussed next.

### **3.2.2 The hierarchy of effects model**

The hierarchy of effects model was developed by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) as a paradigm for setting and measuring advertising objectives, and its basic premise is that advertising effects occur over a period of time.

According to Lavidge and Steiner (1961:59), advertising may be thought of as a force which must move people up a series of steps, in the following manner:

- Near the bottom of the steps are potential purchasers who are completely *unaware of the existence* of the product or service in question.
- Closer to purchasing are those who are merely *aware of its existence*.
- Up a step are consumers who *know what the product has to offer*.
- Still closer to purchasing are those who have favourable attitudes toward the product – those who *like the product*.

- Those whose favourable attitudes have developed to the point of *preference* over all other possibilities are up still another step.
- Even closer to purchasing are consumers who couple preference with a desire to buy and the *conviction* that the purchase would be wise.
- Finally, of course, is the step which translates this attitude into actual *purchase*.

These seven steps of Lavidge and Steiner's (1961:59) form the basis upon which they build their hierarchy of effects model. This model assumes that the consumer first becomes aware of the advertising message, gains knowledge, likes the message or product being advertised, prefers it, is convinced and only then purchases it (Hanekom 2006:243-244; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:28; Chisnall 1995:294). This model also states that advertising messages will not lead to immediate purchase action by the consumer, but that the consumer should proceed through all of the six phases, fulfilling each of them before proceeding to the next.

According to Lavidge and Steiner (1961:60), the six steps of the hierarchy of effects model indicate three major functions of advertising:

- The first two, awareness and knowledge, relate to *information or ideas*.
- The second two steps, liking and preference, have to do with favourable *attitudes or feelings* toward the product.
- The final two steps, conviction and purchase, are to produce *action* – the acquisition of the product.

These three advertising functions are directly related to the classic psychological model which divides behaviour into three components or dimensions (Lavidge & Steiner 1961:60). These three components or dimensions underpin all of the traditional consumer response models:

- The cognitive component – the intellectual, mental, or “rational” states.
- The affective component – the “emotional” or “feeling” states.
- The conative or motivational component – the “striving” states, relating to the tendency to treat objects as positive or negative goals.

### *Evaluation of the hierarchy of effects model*

On close examination, it is evident that the hierarchy of effects model also depicts the consumer response phases in a hierarchical fashion, similar to the other traditional response hierarchy models. The model furthermore states that consumers should proceed through each of the phases in a linear or sequential pattern. Criticism on the hierarchy of effects model therefore coincides with the criticism presented previously on the AIDA model. None of these models allows for a different sequence in the consumer response process. It is furthermore argued that not every exposure to an advertising message will lead to either purchase behaviour or any other form of behaviour by consumers.

In addition, Chisnall (1995) criticises the hierarchy of effects model by explicating that this model assumes that attitude change precedes behavioural change. He further argues that this process ignores the complexity of the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, and more particularly the reciprocal relationship between the two.

Although the hierarchy of effects model is criticised for its sequential and hierarchical approach, it offers a useful framework to explain the consumer response process. It is clear that the hierarchy of effects model elaborated on the AIDA model through the inclusion of the awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction and purchase phases. This model can therefore be seen as the first expansion of the AIDA model and depicts the second

development in the chronological advancement of consumer response models.

### 3.2.3 The innovation adoption model

The innovation adoption model evolved from work on the diffusion of innovations by Rogers (1962:81), who initially developed the innovation adoption model as consisting of stages in the adoption process. He identified the following five stages:

- *Awareness stage.* At this stage the consumer is exposed to the innovation but lacks complete information about it. The consumer is thus aware of the innovation but not yet motivated to seek further information.
- *Interest stage.* At this stage, the consumer becomes interested in the new idea and seeks additional information about it. The function of this stage is thus to increase the consumer's information about the innovation.
- *Evaluation stage.* At this stage, the consumer mentally applies the innovation to his present and anticipated future situation, and then decides whether or not to try it. If the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, he/she will try the new innovation.
- *Trial stage.* At this stage, the consumer uses the innovation on a small scale in order to determine its utility in his/her own situation. The main function of this stage is to demonstrate the innovation's usefulness to the individual consumer for possible complete adoption.
- *Adoption stage.* At this stage, the consumer decides to continue with the full use of the innovation.

This model, according to Belch and Belch (2001) and Hanekom (2006), can also represent the stages a consumer passes through in adopting a new product or service. The model depicts the phases of the consumer response

process in a sequential or hierarchical order, in respect of which it coincides with the other traditional response hierarchy models. The major difference between this model and the other traditional response hierarchy models may be found, however, in the behavioural stage. This model assumes that consumers should proceed through each of the awareness, interest and evaluation phases before they proceed to the trial and adoption (behavioural stage) phases. When marketers and advertisers introduce new products, they should ensure that consumers become aware and interested in the product, evaluate it favourably and then try it (Belch & Belch 2001:149). Once they have tried the product and evaluated it positively based on the trial phase, they should adopt the new product or service. It may be argued that this model is utilised in situations where consumers are allowed to test or try a product for a certain period of time. They then make their purchase decisions based on the trial period. These decisions may take the form of either adoption or rejection.

#### *Evaluation of the innovation adoption model*

When the innovation adoption model is critically examined, it illustrates an advancement on the AIDA and hierarchy of effects models. The innovation adoption model namely states that purchase behaviour is not necessarily the result of the cognitive and affective stages of the consumer response process, and it includes a trial phase in the behavioural stage of the consumer response process. It also elaborates on the behavioural stages of the other three traditional response hierarchy models (AIDA, hierarchy of effects and information processing models). The model is criticised for the fact that it depicts the consumer response process in a linear and hierarchical manner though. It is believed that the consumer response process does not necessarily proceed in a sequential manner and that the phases of the innovation adoption model should not be presented in a hierarchical way. It is also believed that this model does not include all the phases consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages. It is argued that consumers pass through more phases than the mere awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption phases depicted by this model.

The final traditional response hierarchy model, the information processing model, follows on the innovation adoption model and is the fourth model in the chronological discussion of consumer response models.

### 3.2.4 The information processing model

The information processing model is an information-processing approach to the social influence process (McGuire 1978:156). McGuire (1978:156) explains the model as follows: *“The individual exposed to a persuasive communication as an information-processing machine which must proceed through a chain of behavioural steps, each probabilistically linked to the preceding one, leading finally to the criterion behaviour (for example, purchase of the advertised product) only if it is not interrupted at any point”*.

This model also assumes that the consumer is part of a persuasive communication encounter (advertising). McGuire (1978:157) explains that the information-processing approach to social influence posits a series of behavioural steps through which the individual must pass if he/she is effectively to be persuaded. McGuire (1978:157) proposes a six-step analysis, as shown in Figure 3.1. These steps constitute a response hierarchy (Belch & Belch 2001). McGuire (1978:157) furthermore argues that *“this analysis views the recipient of the persuasive communication as an information-processing machine or a problem solver, rather than as a recalcitrant resistor or artful evader in the service of needs that have nothing to do with the topic of the advertising campaign”*.

McGuire (1978:159) explains the steps encompassed in his information processing model as follows:

- First there is the question of whether messages urging a purchase are *presented* to the person via the various formal and informal media of communication to which he/she is exposed.

- Given that these messages have been presented, a further question arises as to whether the person *attended* to these messages.
- It is then asked if he/she appropriately *comprehended* the relevant message contents to which he/she attended.
- Given that he/she comprehended the relevant contents of the message, it is next asked if he/she has *yielded* to these correctly comprehended messages.
- If he/she has indeed taken this fourth step of yielding, there is typically the further question of whether he/she has *retained* this new behavioural inclination until the opportunity to make the purchase arose.
- Finally, another step is necessary even after he/she has retained this inclination to buy: has he/she *acted* upon this inclination and made the purchase?

Even though this model includes a new phase in the consumer response process, namely retention, Belch and Belch (2001:149) suggest that the stages of this model are similar to the hierarchy of effects sequence; attention and comprehension are similar to awareness and knowledge, and yielding is synonymous with liking. What makes this model different, is that it includes the retention stage, or the receiver's ability to retain that portion of the comprehended information that he or she accepts as valid or relevant.

This additional retention phase identified by McGuire (1978:158) thus illustrates the elaboration of this model on the other three traditional response hierarchy models and also shows the advancement of the models in a chronological manner. The retention phase identified in this model is important, since marketers and advertisers do not always want consumers to react on advertising messages immediately. They sometimes want consumers to retain information in memory and then to retrieve that information from memory when they are in the shop deciding on which brand to purchase (Belch & Belch 2001). They should thus use that information later when making a purchase decision.

Belch and Belch (2001:150) discuss McGuire's (1978) model, identifying each of the stages of the response hierarchy as a dependant variable that must be attained and that may serve as an objective of the communication process. Each phase of the information processing model can be measured in order to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies designed to move the consumer to purchase.

Belch and Belch (2001: 150), in evaluating McGuire's (1978) model, assert that feedback can be obtained in the response hierarchy. They explain that by evaluating the circulation reach of the advertising message, the exposure/presentation phase of the information processing model is evaluated. Likewise, when listeners, readers and viewers recognise the advertising message, it can be deduced that the attention phase of the information processing model has been successful. The comprehension phase is evaluated by recall tests and checklists, while message acceptance and yielding are calculated by measuring brand attitudes and purchase intent. When consumers can recall the advertising message over time, the retention phase has been accomplished. The last phase, purchase behaviour, can be measured by means of inventories and point-of-purchase consumer panels.

#### *Evaluation of the information processing model*

It is argued that the information processing model is the final advancement in the traditional response hierarchy models' development. This is evident in the identification of the retention phase, which is not part of any of the other traditional response hierarchy models. It is argued that even though the rest of the phases depicted in this model correspond to the other three traditional response hierarchy models (AIDA model, hierarchy of effects model and innovation adoption model), the leap was made towards understanding that consumers do not always proceed through a series of phases towards immediate behaviour. McGuire (1978) realised that consumers sometimes need to retain or store information in memory until they deem it necessary to remember or retrieve this information from memory. Besides the progress

made by this model in understanding the consumer response process, though, the phases identified are still presented in a linear manner. The AIDA model, hierarchy of effects model and innovation adoption model have all been criticised for the same reason. It is argued that consumers do not necessarily proceed through these phases in a linear or sequential manner. It is further argued that the type of advertising message will also determine the order in which the consumer proceeds through this sequence of phases and that, when the advertising message permits, the consumer may even omit a particular phase.

### **3.2.5 Implications of the traditional response hierarchy models**

Belch and Belch (2001) explain the usefulness of the traditional response hierarchy models for promotional planners from different perspectives:

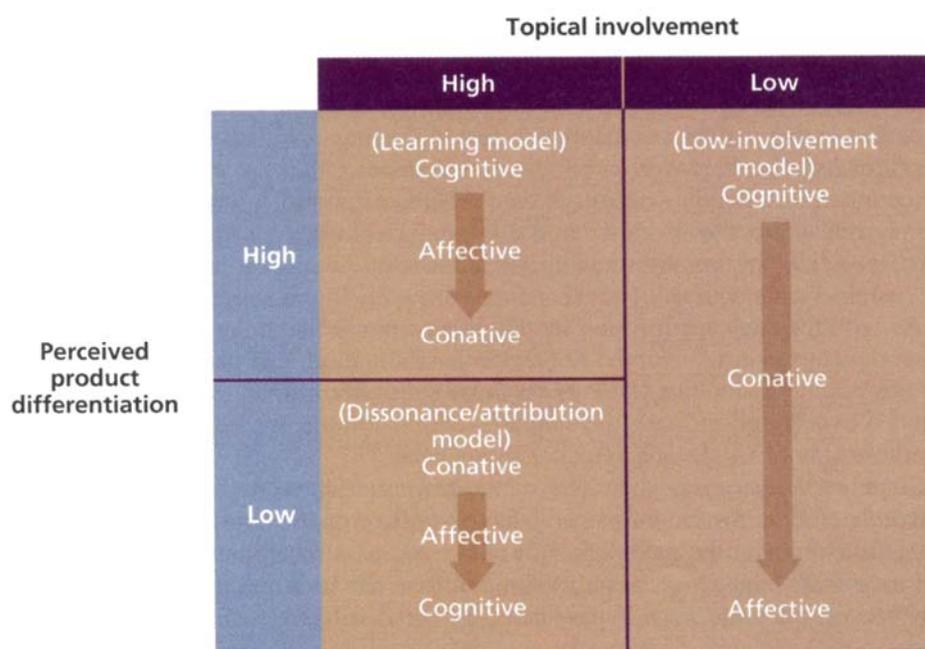
- The traditional response hierarchy models demarcate the series of phases which consumers should proceed through from a state of being unaware of an advertising message, product or service to the actual purchasing phase.
- Consumers may be at different phases in the hierarchy. Therefore, marketers and advertisers should adopt their advertising strategies to fit the target market's needs and wants. Advertisers occasionally want to advertise a product in order to make consumers aware of the existence of the product. They sometimes alternatively want to advertise a product to remind consumers to repurchase the product. In such instances, marketers and advertisers want to reinforce positive perceptions and maintain the awareness level of the brand.
- The traditional response hierarchy models can also be useful as intermediate measures of communication effectiveness. Marketers and advertisers need to know where each target segment is on the response hierarchy. Some audience members may be in the cognitive phase, while others may be in the affective phase. This complicates the advertiser's work considerably. Advertisers should be aware of

audience members' level of response and adopt their communication strategies accordingly.

Over the past two decades, considerable research in marketing, social psychology, and communications has led to the questioning of the traditional cognitive – affective – behavioural sequence of response (Belch & Belch 2001:151; Hanekom 2006:245). In reaction to the questioning of the traditional response hierarchy models, several other configurations of the response hierarchy, such as the alternative response hierarchies, have been theorised (Belch & Belch 2001:151).

### 3.3 ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE HIERARCHIES

Figure 3.2 shows the alternative response hierarchies in the form of the three-orders model of information processing.



**Figure 3.2: Ray's (1973) alternative response hierarchies: the three-orders model of information processing (Belch and Belch 2001:151).**

Ray (1973:149) developed the three-orders hierarchy model of information processing and describes it as follows: *"The basic hierarchy-of-effects model*

*consists of a sequence of mental stages or levels which an audience member is supposed to experience during a communication campaign. The typical sequence is from simple to more complex response stages”.*

Ray's (1973) model identifies three alternative orderings of the three traditional hierarchy stages, based on perceived product differentiation and product involvement (Belch & Belch 2001:151; Hanekom 2006:245). Ray (1973:151-152) named the three alternative response hierarchies the learning hierarchy, the dissonance-attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy.

Ray (1973:149) also used the three major levels corresponding to the typical attitude structure components of *cognitive*, *affective* and *conative*. He stresses that although each of these alternative response hierarchies undoubtedly offer interesting alternatives, the same basic three phases depicted by the traditional response hierarchy models, namely the cognitive, affective and conative or behavioural phases as indicators of the procession of consumers through the response process, cannot be ignored. Ray (1973:150) argues that virtually no one doubts the existence of the cognitive, affective and conative reactions to communication, but that there are two serious quarrels with the hierarchy viewpoint. As a result, he added the elements of *involvement* and *perceived product differentiation* as variables in the consumer response process. These variables change the sequential pattern of the response hierarchy phases according to the level of involvement of the consumer in the purchase of the product, as well as the perceived product differentiation. Based on further research by Ray (1973), it is indicated that the majority of communication response situations are represented by just three orders:

- The learning hierarchy: cognitive-affective-conative
- The dissonance-attribution hierarchy: conative-affective-cognitive;  
and
- The low-involvement hierarchy: cognitive-conative-affective.

The major criticism offered against the traditional response hierarchy models discussed in the previous section, was the sequential and linear pattern in which they illustrate the phases of the consumer response process (refer to section 3.2 for a discussion and critical evaluation of these models). The three-orders model of information processing of Ray (1973), presented as an alternative response hierarchy, addresses this criticism. This model explains that consumers proceed through these phases in a different manner and sequence, depending on whether their involvement in the purchasing of the particular product is high or low and also depending on the differences between diverse brands of the same product.

The three-orders model of information processing by Michael Ray (1973) is divided into three quadrants, each depicting a different alternative response hierarchy. These three quadrants are discussed individually below:

### **3.3.1 The learning hierarchy**

The first alternative response hierarchy in the three-orders model of information processing is the learning hierarchy (Ray 1973:151). According to Ray (1973:151), this hierarchy exists when the audience is *involved* in the topic of the campaign and when there are *clear differences between alternatives*. This learning hierarchy represents a learn-feel-do sequence where members of the audience first become aware, then develop interest, make evaluations, try and then adopt (the adoption process hierarchy) (Ray 1973:151). This process correlates with the phases depicted in the traditional response hierarchy models (Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006). This alternative response hierarchy therefore explains that a consumer first of all learns facts about the product, then develops affection or feelings towards the product, and finally behaves based on the feelings about and knowledge of the product or service advertised. If the consumer, for example, wants to buy a personal computer, printer, camera or car, the phases of the standard learning hierarchy are probable (Belch & Belch 2001:152; Hanekom 2006:24). Belch and Belch (2001:152) add that advertisements for these products are

usually very detailed and provide sufficient information for consumers to base their purchase decisions on.

### *Evaluation of the standard learning hierarchy*

The three-orders model of information processing by Michael Ray (1973), which encompasses the standard learning hierarchy, shows the evolution in the development of consumer response models from 1925 to 1983. It is argued that even though Ray (1973) still suggests a linear or sequential procession through the response phases, he elaborated on the traditional response hierarchy models by including the elements of involvement and product differentiation. He therefore acknowledges the fact that consumers do not proceed through the same response phases when they are exposed to different advertising messages. Their responses depend on the type of product advertised. Even though this is a considerable advancement from the linear perspective depicted by the traditional response hierarchy models, this model still does not take into account the fact that consumers who want to buy cars, radios and computers will not all proceed through the same response phases in the same sequence. Their procession through the phases depends on their knowledge and loyalty towards the product (Ray 1973). Sometimes it is necessary to make consumers aware of a new product, like for example a radio or computer, but sometimes it is necessary to remind loyal consumers to repurchase a product. New purchasers will, for example, proceed from the cognitive, to the affective, to the conative phases, but mature and loyal consumers do not need to proceed through the cognitive phase in order to obtain information and also do not need to proceed through the affective phase in order to form positive attitudes towards the product. They only need to be reminded to repurchase their favourite brand. These consumers will therefore not proceed through the same response phases as new consumers will. The response sequence thus does not completely depend on product involvement and differentiation. It is argued that the standard learning hierarchy does not take this into account.

### 3.3.2 The dissonance-attribution hierarchy

The second alternative response hierarchy which forms part of Ray's (1973) three-orders model of information processing is the dissonance-attribution hierarchy. This hierarchy suggests a "do – feel - learn" sequence and involves situations during which the consumer first behaves or purchases a product, then develops an attitude, emotional reaction or feeling as a result of that behaviour, and then seeks information that supports the behaviour (Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006). The dissonance-attribution hierarchy is thus the exact reverse of the standard learning one. According to Ray (1973:151), dissonance and attribution theorists have posited and examined situations in which behaviour occurs first, then attitude change and finally learning. This obviously suggests a "conative-affective-cognitive" relationship. Ray (1973:152) suggests that this sequence typically occurs in situations in which the audience has been *involved*, but the alternatives *have been almost indistinguishable*.

The consumer needs to reduce feelings of postpurchase dissonance or anxiety resulting from doubt over a purchase (Belch & Belch 2001). This process commences when the consumer has to choose between two alternative brands which are similar in quality but are complex and may have hidden attributes. The consumer makes his/her decision based on a nonmedia source and then needs to support the decision by gathering information on the product in order to develop a positive attitude towards the chosen brand, or alternatively, the consumer may proceed to develop a negative attitude towards the alternative brands (Belch & Belch 2001: 152; Hanekom 2006: 246). The reinforcement process reduces postpurchase dissonance and involves selective learning, whereby the consumer seeks information that supports the choice made and avoids information that would raise doubts about the decision (Belch & Belch 2001:152).

The dissonance-attribution hierarchy therefore suggests attitude formation and information seeking from the mass media after the purchase has been made. Marketers and advertisers need to acknowledge the fact that

consumers change attitudes and seek information about the product after it has been purchased. They consequently need to adapt advertising strategies and messages to reinforce consumers' purchase decisions and to reduce postpurchase dissonance, rather than merely promoting original choice behaviour and attitude change (Belch & Belch 2001).

According to Belch and Belch (2001:152-153), this model may assist marketers and advertisers in realising that advertising and promotion efforts should be developed not just to encourage brand selection, but also to reinforce choices and ensure that a purchase pattern will continue.

#### *Evaluation of the dissonance-attribution hierarchy*

Michael Ray's (1973) dissonance/attribution hierarchy shows a move away from the traditional sequential notion of cognition, affection and conation (behaviour). He suggests alternative orders of information processing or responses, but still represents them in a linear fashion. With the dissonance/attribution hierarchy, he acknowledges the fact that conation or behaviour is not always the last phase in the consumer response process. This hierarchy depicts behaviour as the first phase in the response process and suggests that the formation of feelings and attitudes and the gathering of information follow after purchase behaviour.

It is important to emphasise that this hierarchy shows that the consumer may seek information, specifically from a mass media source, at the end of the consumer response process. Ray (1973) suggests that the consumer may make a purchase decision based on, for example, nonmedia sources like suggestions by friends or family. The consumer therefore does gather information prior to purchasing; the information is just not from a mass media source. It is also proposed that every consumer gathers information from packaging, point-of-sale displays and salespersons during the purchase occasion. It is therefore suggested that this also represents a cognitive phase in the consumer response process, even though information is not gathered from a mass media source. It is furthermore suggested that cognition usually

precedes affection and conation and that this hierarchy could include cognition as a first, as well as a last phase in the consumer response process.

### 3.3.3 The low-involvement hierarchy

The low-involvement hierarchy was developed by Ray, based on Herbert E. Krugman's (1965) research to determine why television advertising seems to have such a strong aggregate effect, although laboratory research often indicates little effect of television advertisements on individual attitude change (Ray 1973:152). Ray (1973:152) concluded that most television viewers are not *involved* with the advertising or the topics. After overwhelming repetition they may, though, make a shift in cognitive structure. They may then be better able to recall the name or idea of a product. Ray (1973:152) concludes that *"the next time they are in a purchasing situation, that name comes to mind, they buy, and attitude is subsequently changed as a result of experience with the product. Thus the low-involvement hierarchy is a cognitive-conative-affective one"*.

The low-involvement hierarchy suggests a "learn – do – feel" sequence of the consumer response process and occurs when there are *minimal differences between alternatives* or when low involvement makes actual differences unimportant to the audience (Ray 1973:152; Belch & Belch 2001: 153-154). This situation thus typically occurs when there is low involvement in the purchasing process and little product differentiation, and when advertising messages are important (Belch & Belch 2001:153-154; Hanekom 2006: 246-247). As a result, consumers will typically first gather information regarding the product from advertising messages; they will then act by purchasing the product; and they will lastly develop feelings and attitudes towards the product.

An important feature of the low-involvement hierarchy is that the consumer engages in passive learning and random information catching rather than active information seeking (Hanekom 2006). The advertiser should take this into account when developing the advertising message. The typical

consumer portrayed in the low-involvement hierarchy will not pay attention to information-intensive messages in the advertisement, but will rather remember the nonmessage elements such as the jingles, characters, symbols and slogans (Hanekom 2006: 246-247). These nonmessage elements are then stored in the consumer's mind and become prominent in the purchase situation (Belch & Belch 2001: 153-154). Consumers will also remember these nonmessage elements better when they are repeated enough. Advertisers thus rely more on the repetition of catchy phrases in the low-involvement situation than on producing information-intensive advertising messages.

#### *Evaluation of the low-involvement hierarchy*

It is argued that Ray's (1973) development of the low-involvement hierarchy shows the realisation that consumers do not always react during the cognitive phase by learning and remembering complicated advertising messages. This hierarchy makes it clear that, during a low-involvement situation, the consumer will learn and remember music, characters and slogans and not necessarily facts about the product being advertised. This situation therefore only refers to low-involvement products such as, for example, margarine, coffee and bubblegum. There is a low risk in buying a particular brand of these products and therefore the consumer does not need to be highly involved in the purchase decision. The main criticism against this hierarchy is the fact that the response phases are still represented in a linear or hierarchical manner. Even though consumers might be in a low-involvement situation, they still might proceed through some of these phases simultaneously or alternatively. Consumers will therefore not always proceed through the cognitive, conative and affective phases in that specific order in a low-involvement situation.

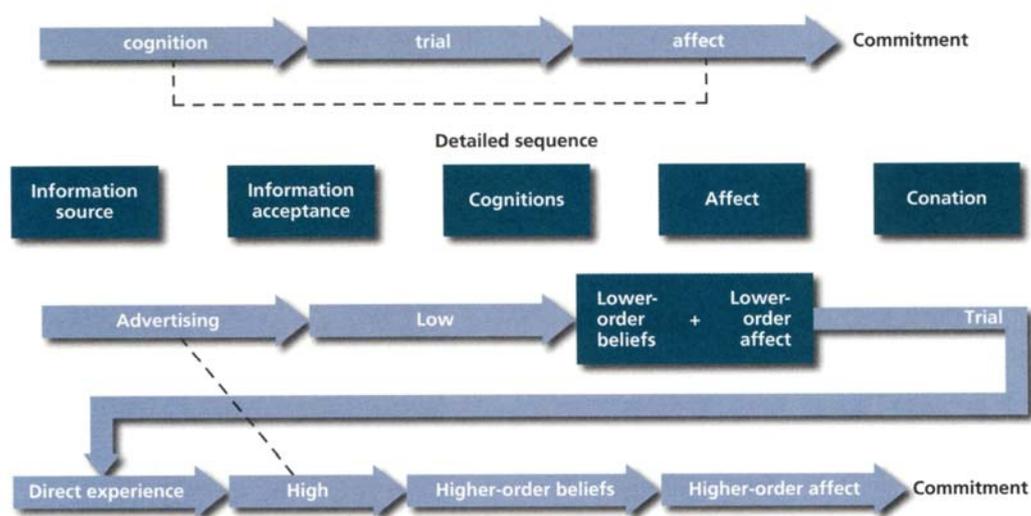
Despite these criticisms, it is found that Ray's (1973) three-orders model of information processing, which encompasses the standard learning hierarchy, the dissonance/attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy, evidently demonstrates an advancement in understanding of the complex

consumer response process. The alternative response hierarchies progressed from the static hierarchical phases depicted by the traditional response hierarchy models to alternative orderings of these phases, depending on two variables, namely topical involvement and perceived product differentiation. This shows that, with the chronological development of the consumer response models, the realisation emerged that consumers do not inevitably proceed through the three response phases (cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural) in a sequence.

The next model, the integrated information response model, elaborates on the alternative response hierarchies.

### 3.4 THE INTEGRATED INFORMATION RESPONSE MODEL

Figure 3.3 shows the integrated information response model.



**Figure 3.3: Smith and Swinyard's (1982) integrated information response model (Belch & Belch 2001:156).**

Even though the alternative response hierarchies are an advancement on the traditional response hierarchy models, researchers recognise that neither the traditional response hierarchy models, nor the alternative response hierarchy

models adequately explain the complex nature of the consumer response process. In reaction to this, Smith and Swinyard (1982) developed the integrated information response model, which integrates different streams of research. This led to a revised interpretation of the advertising response sequence.

The integrated information response model developed by Smith and Swinyard (1982:85-89) suggests several different response patterns that can result from advertising. They explain that different response sequences are likely for low-involvement purchases as opposed to high-involvement purchases.

According to Smith and Swinyard (1982:85), the following response sequence may be evident for low-involvement purchases: cognition – trial – affect – commitment. According to Smith and Swinyard (1982:86), this path of the integrated model can be used to clarify the relationship between affect and purchase. They hypothesise that trial purchase precedes affect, while committed purchase follows affect. The lower order response path, according to Smith and Swinyard (1982:85), suggests that exposure to advertising will normally generate minimal message acceptance. This conclusion is based on the observation that advertising is usually perceived to be a vested interest source and will, therefore, be subjected to high levels of discounting, source derogation, counter-arguing and message rejection. As a result, advertising can normally generate only lower-order beliefs. According to this sequence, advertising messages lead to low information acceptance, lower-order beliefs and low-order affect. Conversely, awareness is built when the advertiser starts with repetitive advertising. Once awareness is built, consumers will most likely engage in a trial purchase to gather information. The direct experience that results from trial purchase leads to high information acceptance and higher-order beliefs and affect, which can result in commitment or brand loyalty (Belch & Belch 2001:154).

Advertising may move consumers directly to purchase, though. This occurs in situations where the perceived risk of buying the product is low, as well as when the perceived involvement is low. When consumers are involved with

the product, in other words, when they perceive the purchase of the particular product as a high risk and when there are many differences between the different brands of the product, they will seek additional information.

Information may be sought from sources such as more advertising messages, word of mouth, salespeople or direct experiences. In such cases, the response sequence is similar to the traditional response hierarchy of effects models (Smith & Swinyard 1982:86). The response process will thus involve a “cognition – affect – commitment” sequence (Smith & Swinyard 1982:86; Belch & Belch 2001:154-156).

The higher-order response path depicted in this model shows that direct experience, and in some instances advertising, is accepted as higher-order magnitudes (Smith & Swinyard 1982:85). These then might result in higher-order beliefs and affect. This strong affect is more likely to result in preferences and committed purchases (Smith & Swinyard 1982:85).

The following aspects, highlighted by Belch and Belch (2001:154) and Hanekom (2006:247), are unique to the integrated information response model:

- This model integrates concepts from both the traditional and the low-involvement response hierarchy perspectives (refer to section 3.2 for a discussion on the traditional response hierarchy models and to section 3.3 for a discussion on the low-involvement response hierarchy).
- It accounts for the effects of direct experience.
- It recognises that different levels of belief strength result from advertising versus personal experience with a product.

The major criticism against the traditional and alternative response hierarchy models of the consumer response process is that they only take into account the effect of advertising messages on consumers. Advertising is just one source of information that consumers use in forming attitudes and/or making purchase decisions. Furthermore, many consumers purchase a brand in

order to obtain firsthand information from trial use of a product and are not necessarily committed to that specific brand (Belch & Belch 2001: 154; Hanekom 2006:247).

Belch and Belch (2001) identify implications of the integrated response model for promotional strategies for low- versus high-involvement products:

- Realistic promotional goals for low-involvement products are advisable, since advertising has a limited ability to form or change higher-order beliefs and affect.
- Low-involvement products could benefit from advertisements oriented to induce trial by creating generally favourable lower-order beliefs.
- Trial would be induced by advertising messages which reduce perceived risk through repetition and familiarity. It would also be induced by those advertising messages which directly advocate trial purchase.
- Advertising messages alone would not be completely sufficient to reach the abovementioned goals. Other marketing strategies designed to facilitate trial should be coupled with the advertising campaign.
- The following could be integrated with advertising messages to induce trial: free samples, coupons, price cuts and effective point-of-purchase displays.
- After trial has taken place, subsequent advertisements might be designed to reaffirm the positive aspects of trial.
- Consumers frequently switch brands because there are no antecedents for commitment (i.e. higher-order beliefs and affect). Brand loyalty could be built by creating advertising messages which will reaffirm positive aspects of trial, and if other promotional aspects are integrated with advertising messages.

High-involvement products require basic attitude change strategies (Belch & Belch 2001:156). It is important, however, to note that the higher-order response sequence focuses attention on message acceptance as a

prerequisite for affect development. It is also pointed out by Smith and Swinyard (1982) that communication strategies for high-involvement products may be difficult to implement, since media advertising often has little effect on higher-order attitude formation or change. They therefore suggest that advertising messages should rather lead to the urge for product demonstrations by qualified and knowledgeable salespeople. Convincing personal communication sources, such as sales personnel, are more likely to change higher-order beliefs and affect and lead to purchase (Belch & Belch 2001:157).

### *Evaluation of the integrated information response model*

The integrated information response model illustrates the progress made in understanding the consumer response process. It is argued that even though the traditional response hierarchy models and alternative response hierarchy models adequately explain the consumer response process which takes place during certain consumer exposure occasions, they do not include the additional concepts incorporated in the integrated information response model.

These additional concepts include the realisation that not only advertising messages have an influence on consumer response and the formation of attitudes. Belch and Belch (2001:157) similarly explain that an important implication of the integrated information response model is that consumers are likely to integrate information from advertising, other sources and direct experiences in forming judgements about a brand. These authors continue to explain the importance of considering how consumers integrate advertising with other brand information sources, both before and after trial purchase.

In evaluating the integrated information response model, another important aspect emerges. This model elucidates that many purchase occasions occur because consumers need more information, and not necessarily because they are committed or loyal to that specific brand.

The fact that consumers utilise information from more sources than only advertising messages and seek more information regarding products clearly distinguishes the integrated information response model from the traditional response hierarchy models, as well as from the alternative response hierarchy models.

### **3.4.1 Implications of the alternative response models**

Belch and Belch (2001:157) hold the opinion that the various response models offer an interesting perspective on the ways consumers respond to advertising and other forms of marketing communication. These models provide insight into promotional strategies marketers might pursue in different situations. When these alternative models are reviewed in terms of the response process, it is clear that the standard learning model does not always apply. Belch and Belch (2001:157) argue that the notion of a highly involved consumer, who engages in active information processing and learning and acts on the basis of higher-order beliefs and a well-formed attitude, may be inappropriate for some types of purchases. Repetitive exposure to advertising may result in general awareness, and attitude may develop only after purchase. Belch and Belch (2001:157) continue to argue that the integrated information response model suggests that consumers develop brand preferences primarily on the basis of their direct experiences with the product. The role of advertising may therefore be to induce trial in order for consumers to experience the product and as a result develop a preference for the specific product.

Marketers and advertisers should evaluate the following when they plan their advertising campaigns (Belch & Belch 2001:157):

- involvement levels,
- product differentiation,
- consumers' use of various information sources, and
- levels of experience with the product.

The marketer and advertiser should thus know which response process consumers will proceed through when they are exposed to specific advertising messages.

Once marketers and advertisers know which response process consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages, they are able to design their communication strategies to benefit the organisation, advertising campaign and product or service advertised (Belch & Belch 2001:157).

### 3.5 THE FCB PLANNING MODEL

Figure 3.4 shows the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid.

	Thinking	Feeling
High involvement	<p><b>1. Informative (thinker)</b> Car-house-furnishings-new products model: Learn-feel-do (economic?)</p> <p><b>Possible implications</b> Test: Recall Diagnostics Media: Long copy format Reflective vehicles Creative: Specific information Demonstration</p>	<p><b>2. Affective (feeler)</b> Jewelry-cosmetics-fashion apparel-motorcycles model: Feel-learn-do (psychological?)</p> <p><b>Possible implications</b> Test: Attitude change Emotional arousal Media: Large space Image specials Creative: Executional Impact</p>
Low involvement	<p><b>3. Habit formation (doer)</b> Food-household items model: Do-learn-feel (responsive?)</p> <p><b>Possible implications</b> Test: Sales Media: Small space ads 10-second I.D.s Radio; POS Creative: Reminder</p>	<p><b>4. Self-satisfaction (reactor)</b> Cigarettes-liquor-candy model: Do-feel-learn (social?)</p> <p><b>Possible implications</b> Test: Sales Media: Billboards Newspapers POS Creative: Attention</p>

**Figure 3.4: Vaughn's (1980) Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) grid (Belch and Belch 2001:159)**

The traditional response hierarchy models, the alternative response hierarchies, as well as the integrated information response model have been analysed and discussed. The conclusion was reached that these models adequately explain the consumer response process during certain exposure occasions. Even though these models provide comprehensive explanations of the consumer response process, consumer behaviour and advertising, researchers realised that the concept of involvement should be an integral component in understanding consumer response. Involvement is viewed by Belch and Belch (2001:157) as a variable that can help explain how consumers process advertising information and how this information might affect message reception.

Because of these developments in consumer response research, several other consumer response models have been developed. These models, according to Belch and Belch (2001:158), consider involvement levels as well as other factors, including response processes and motives that underlie attitude formation and subsequent brand choice. One of these models is the FCB planning model, developed by Vaughn (1980) of the Foote, Cone and Belding advertising agency.

According to Vaughn (1980:27), in order to develop the FCB planning model, the following outline was pursued:

- *Traditional advertising theories* prevalent in the 1950s were reviewed as background.
- *Consumer behaviour models* representing the 1960s trend toward comprehensive, sequential theories are discussed.
- *Recent developments* in high/low involvement and right/left brand theories were introduced. With the FCB planning model, Vaughn (1980) and his associates incorporated the concepts of thinking and feeling and combined them with high and low involvement. The thinking and feeling concepts are based on theories regarding brain

specialisation, or brain lateralisation (Belch & Belch 2001:158; Hanekom 2006:248; In the advertising ... [sa]; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:22). These right/left brain theories suggest that the left side of the brain is more capable of rational, cognitive thinking, while the right side is more visual and emotional and engages more in the affective (feeling) functions (Belch & Belch 2001:158).

- *An FCB model* is presented, which organises advertising effectiveness theory for strategy planning.

Vaughn (1980:30) asserts that *“in order to provide a structure that will integrate the traditional theories and LEARN-FEEL-DO hierarchy models with consumer involvement and brain specialization theories, a new FCB approach to advertising strategy is called for. This requires building a matrix to classify products and services”*.

In general, the FCB model states that consumer entry into a product should be determined for *information* (learn), *attitude* (feel) and *behaviour* (do) issues to develop advertising. The fundamental hypothesis of the FCB model can, according to Vaughn (1980:32), be formulated as follows:

*“An advertising strategy is determined by specifying (1) the consumer’s point-of-entry on the LEARN-FEEL-DO continuum and (2) the priority of learn versus feel versus do for making a sale”*.

The FCB model, according to Vaughn (1980:30), mainly consists of *“thinking”* and *“feeling”* and *“high”* and *“low”* involvement. There are, according to the FCB model, purchase decisions where thinking is most involved and others where feeling dominates. This means, according to Vaughn (1980:30), that there are some situations that require more involvement and others that require less. Thinking and feeling are a continuum in the sense that some decisions involve one or the other and many involve elements of both. High and low involvement is also a continuum, and the vertical side of the matrix displays this.

The FCB planning model dimensionalises attitudes in terms of whether they are based on affect or cognition and discriminates between affective and cognition-based attitudes using the think-feel dimension (Dube, Chattopadhyay & Letarte 1996). The FCB model also couples involvement levels with information processing styles (rational versus emotional) or think/feel dimensions as the factors deciding which response hierarchy sequence would be followed and for classifying product categories (Mortimer 2002; FCB grid...[sa]; Vaughn's model...[sa]). The FCB planning model is therefore an adaptation of the basic think – feel – do model, except that it accommodates both high and low involvement and is thus based on the involvement theory as well (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:108; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:22).

Four quadrants are developed in the FCB matrix (Vaughn 1980:30):

- The *informative planning strategy (Quadrant 1: High Involvement/Thinking (Informative))*. Vaughn (1980:30) depicts this planning strategy as portraying the consumer who thinks about purchasing a specific product like a car, house or furniture. This consumer is therefore highly involved in the purchasing decision and follows the standard learning hierarchy response sequence. There is a large need for information, according to Vaughn (1980:30), because of the importance of the product and thinking issues related to it. This sequence involves a “*learn – feel – do*” response process, where rational thinking and the economic model prevails (Vaughn 180:31; Belch & Belch 2001:159; Hanekom 2006:248). Vaughn (1980:31) suggests recall and diagnostics tests to determine the effectiveness of advertising messages regarding the informative planning strategy. He continues to suggest advertising messages with long copy formats and reflective vehicles when advertising to the consumer depicted in this planning strategy. The creative side of the advertising message should provide specific information and demonstrations.

- The *affective strategy* (Quadrant 2: *High Involvement/Feeling* (*Affective*)). According to Vaughn (1980:31), these product decisions are involving, but specific information is less important than an attitude or holistic feeling. The affective strategy depicts the consumer who wants to buy products such as jewellery, cosmetics, fashion apparel or motorcycles. These products are highly involving and feeling products. The consumer typically proceeds through a “*feel-learn-do*” response sequence which is based on the *psychological* model (Vaughn 1980:31). When the effectiveness of advertising messages for these products needs to be determined, attitude change and emotional arousal are tested. Messages in the media will typically consist of large spaces and image specials, while the creative aspects of the advertising messages will concentrate on the executional aspects, as well as those aspects which create impact.
- The *habit formation strategy* (Quadrant 3: *Low Involvement/Thinking* (*Habit Formation*)). According to Vaughn (1980:31), product decisions in this area involve minimal thought and a tendency to form buying habits for convenience. This strategy represents the consumer who wants to buy products such as food and household items. Consumers are not much involved in purchasing these products and do not think thoroughly when buying them. Belch and Belch (2001:159) and Hanekom (2006:249) explain that these products are bought as part of a routinised and responsive behaviour pattern, and learning occurs most often after a trial purchase. The response process for these products is consistent with a behaviouristic learning-by-doing model and therefore represents the “*do-learn-feel*” response sequence which is compatible with the *responsive* theory. The only way to determine the success of the advertising messages for these products is by taking sales figures into account. When advertising for these low-involvement/thinking products, small-space advertisements, 10-second IDs, radio and point-of-sale displays are effective. The creative side of the advertising message should focus on reminding the consumer to buy the specific product.

- The *self-satisfaction strategy* (Quadrant 4: *Low involvement/Feeling (Self-Satisfaction)*). According to Vaughn (1980:32), this low-involvement area seems to be reserved for those products that satisfy personal tastes, and imagery and quick satisfaction are involved. This strategy includes products such as cigarettes, liquor and candy. Consumers are not highly involved in purchasing these products, but the products do elicit feelings from the consumer. The consumer who is depicted in this strategy can be labelled as a reactor, and he/she proceeds through the response process in a “do – feel – learn” sequence, since product experience is an important part of the learning process. According to Vaughn (1980:32), this strategy corresponds with the *social* theory. According to Belch and Belch (2001:159) and Hanekom (2006:249), appeals to sensory pleasures and social motives are important when advertising these products, as well as strategies to catch consumers’ attention. In order to test the effectiveness of advertising strategies for these products, Vaughn (1980:32) suggests an analysis of sales figures. He furthermore suggests the use of billboards, newspapers and point-of-sale displays when advertising these products. Belch and Belch (2001:159) explain that some minimal level of awareness (passive learning) may precede purchase of both types of low-involvement products, but deeper, active learning is not necessary. This is consistent with the low-involvement hierarchy (learn – do – feel).

The FCB planning model became celebrated as a good model for identifying the right approach a selling message should take, because of its simplicity. By estimating how a product relates to a consumer in terms of emotion-rationality and low/high involvement, advertisers could focus on the steps a consumer will take when purchasing this product and develop appropriate messages (FCB grid...[sa]).

Vaughn (1980:32) suggests that the options of the FCB planning model should not be restricted to the four possibilities presented by this matrix. Two other hierarchy models are available:

- Between quadrants 1 and 3, a “*learn – do – feel*” sequence might apply as consumers go directly from information to trial.
- Between quadrants 2 and 4, a “*feel – do – learn*” model suggests acting upon an initial feeling and purchasing.

### *Evaluation of the FCB planning model*

It is argued that Vaughn’s (1980) FCB planning model demonstrates a progression made in understanding the consumer response process.

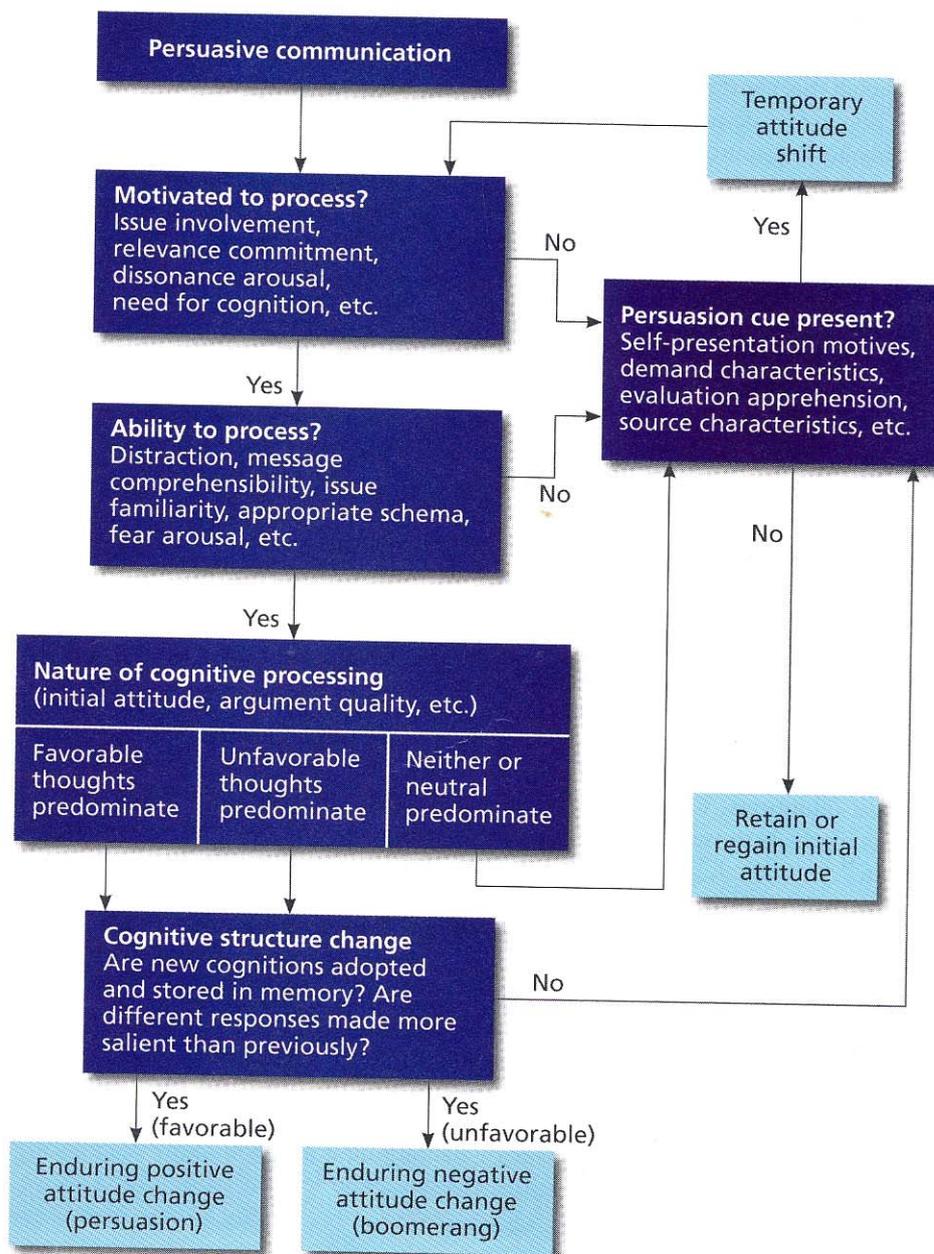
The FCB planning model introduces new variables which assist in understanding and examining the consumer response process. These variables include involvement, and thinking and feeling dimensions. Although the alternative response hierarchies also include the involvement variable, they do not include it in combination with the thinking and feeling dimensions. The main focus of the FCB planning model is on the type of product the consumer wants to obtain, that is the *consumer-product relationship*.

When evaluating the FCB planning model, it should be taken into account that this model also presents the consumer response process in a sequential manner. This has been the major criticism offered on the traditional response hierarchy models and the alternative response hierarchies and even though the FCB model includes additional variables which influence the order of the consumer response process, this process is still represented in a sequential and hierarchical manner. This model thus takes into account that the consumer proceeds through a different sequence while evaluating advertising messages for different products, but concurs with the traditional response hierarchy models, as well as the alternative hierarchy models, in its assumption that consumers proceed through the response process in a sequence or specific order. It should additionally be noted that not all consumers share the same feelings towards the same products. Some consumers, for example, feel affectionate towards jewellery and proceed

through a “feel – learn – do” response process, while others will react and respond in a totally different way. To conclude, consumers are unique and will proceed through the consumer response process in a unique way.

### 3.6 THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

Figure 3.5 shows the Elaboration Likelihood model



**Figure 3.5: Petty and Cacioppo’s (1983) Elaboration Likelihood Model (Belch & Belch 2001:162)**

The major criticism against the previous models is that none of these models takes the differences in consumer response to persuasive messages, like advertising messages, into account. The next model under discussion, the elaboration likelihood model, integrates some of the factors that may account for different types and levels of cognitive processing of a message, by identifying a relationship between involvement and cognitive processing (Belch & Belch 2001:161; Mortimer 2002). This model particularly addresses the different ways in which consumers process and respond to persuasive messages (Belch & Belch 2001:162; Hanekom 2006: 250).

The elaboration likelihood model was developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1983). They developed this model to explain the process by which persuasive communications, like advertising messages, lead to persuasion by influencing consumers' attitudes. Petty and Cacioppo (1983) explain the concept of elaboration as the processing of relevant information, and with this model suggest a differential processing response to persuasive communication. Elaboration is thus the effort we put in to make sense of an incoming stimulus in the light of what we already know (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:24).

The major constituent of the model is the identification of two routes of persuasion, namely the central and peripheral routes, each characterised by a different likelihood of elaboration (Kitchen 1999:176). According to Petty and Cacioppo (1983), attitude formation or the change process depends on the amount and nature of elaboration, or processing, of relevant information that occurs in response to a persuasive message. When the consumer thoroughly thinks and carefully deliberates the arguments and persuasive elements in the advertising message, *high elaboration* takes place. This is the '*central route*' of persuasion, involving a person's careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented in support of an advocacy (Kitchen 1999:176; Assael 1998:158; Mowen 1990; Cacioppo & Petty 1989). According to Kitchen (1999:176), "*this central route to persuasion relies upon the individual elaborating upon the message and reaching a reflective and*

*considered weighing of the evidence to come to an evaluated conclusion”.*

Cacioppo and Petty (1985) assert that when conditions foster people's motivation and ability to engage in issue-relevant thinking, the elaboration likelihood is high. This means that people are likely to:

- attend to the appeal;
- attempt to access relevant associations, images and experiences from memory;
- scrutinise and elaborate upon the externally provided message arguments in light of the associations available from memory;
- draw inferences about the merits of the arguments for a recommendation based upon their analysis of the data extracted from the appeal and accessed from memory; and
- consequently derive an overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, the recommendation.

When the central route to persuasion is thus pursued, the consumer is typically active and involved in the communication process. The consumer has a high ability to attend to, comprehend and evaluate the advertising message. When the central route to persuasion occurs, the consumer pays close attention to the advertising message and analyses persuasive arguments. It is therefore deduced that a high level of cognitive response activity or processing occurs. The consumer's evaluation of the quality of the arguments presented in the advertising message determines the persuasive ability of the advertising message. Positive cognitive responses lead to favourable changes in cognitive structure, which lead to a positive attitude change or persuasion. The opposite also occurs. When the cognitive processing is predominantly negative and results in counterarguments and source derogations, the changes in cognitive structure are unfavourable and result in negative attitude change.

On the other hand, *low elaboration* takes place when the consumer does not think or argue about persuasive advertising messages, but makes inferences

based on positive or negative cues in the message (Belch & Belch 2001: 162; Hanekom 2006: 250). This is the *peripheral route* and occurs when the motivation or ability to elaborate is relatively low (Kitchen 1999:176; Assael 1998:158).

When the peripheral route to persuasion is followed, it is believed that the consumer lacks the motivation or ability to process information and is not likely to engage in detailed cognitive processing. In this case, the consumer relies on peripheral cues that may be incidental to the main arguments. The consumer therefore does not evaluate the information presented in the advertising message and his/her reaction depends on how he/she evaluates the peripheral cues.

According to the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo 1983; Cacioppo & Petty 1985; Cacioppo & Petty 1989; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993; Belch & Belch 2001), elaboration likelihood is a function of the following two elements:

- (1) *Motivation*. Consumers' motivation to process the message depends on factors such as involvement, personal relevance and individuals' needs and arousal levels.
- (2) *Ability*. Ability depends on the individual's knowledge, intellectual capacity and opportunity to process the message.

#### *Evaluation of the elaboration likelihood model*

The elaboration likelihood model by Petty and Cacioppo (1983) shows improvements on the traditional response hierarchy models, the alternative response hierarchy models, the integrated information response model and the FCB planning model. These improvements are represented by the awareness and understanding that different consumers react differently to advertising messages. This has been a major criticism against the other models of consumer response, and the elaboration likelihood model is therefore an advancement. Although the elaboration likelihood model emphasises the concepts of attitude, motivation and ability, as well as the

differences in the central and peripheral routes to persuasion, this model does not address the consumer response process as such. In evaluating this model, criticism can be offered against the lack of different consumer response phases/stages. This model concentrates only on the routes to persuasion and how attitudes are altered because of motivation and ability. In the context of this study, the elaboration likelihood model offers valuable information regarding persuasion during the advertising response occasion, but does not address the phases or stages of the response process, which are central issues to this study.

### **3.6.1 Implications of the elaboration likelihood model**

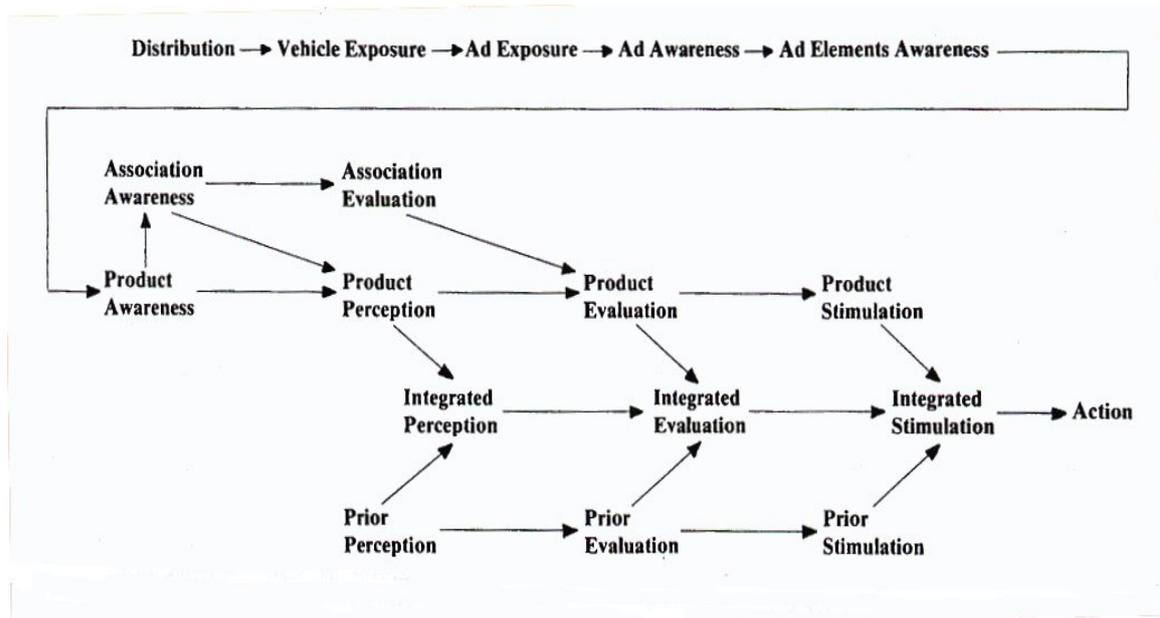
Belch and Belch (2001:163-164) address certain implications of the elaboration likelihood model. They explain that this model has important implications for marketing communications, in particular with respect to involvement. If involvement in the advertising message is, for example, high, the advertisement should contain strong arguments that are difficult for the message recipient to refute or counter-argue. If the involvement level of the consumer is low, he/she will probably attend to the peripheral cues in the advertising message and ignore the more detailed and information-intensive content.

Belch and Belch (2001: 164) finally suggest that the most effective type of message depends on the route to persuasion that the consumer follows.

The model discussed next, the association model of the advertising communication process, improves on the traditional response hierarchy models and incorporates all of the measures of research used in advertising.

### 3.7 THE ASSOCIATION MODEL OF THE ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Figure 3.6 shows the association model of the advertising communication process.



**Figure 3.6: Preston's (1982) association model of the advertising communication process (Preston 1982)**

In 1982, Preston introduced the association model of the advertising communication process. Preston's (1982) purpose with this model was to extend and improve on traditional response hierarchy models like the AIDA model (refer to section 3.2 for a detailed discussion and evaluation of the traditional response hierarchy models). The main reason behind the development of this model was to incorporate all the measures of research commonly used in advertising. The association model of the advertising communication process is related to advertising research and identifies individual steps for each of the standard measures that are popularly used. In the new model, each type of research measure is recognised by a designation of the distinct step of consumer response that it indexes (Preston 1982). The

individual steps in the association model of the advertising communication process are discussed below.

### **3.7.1 Distribution, vehicle exposure and ad exposure**

Preston (1982) discusses these steps together, since the roles of distribution and vehicle exposure are to serve as substitute indicators for ad exposure. Strictly speaking, the first step in the advertising response process is ad exposure, because when advertisements are successfully distributed and broadcasted, the consumer is not necessarily exposed to the advertising vehicle. Preston (1982) argues that the reverse is also true. If the advertising vehicles are exposed, the advertisements will not necessarily be. He therefore acknowledges that evaluators will usually not regard distribution and vehicle exposure as being part of the advertising response process, because they involve no impact of the advertisement upon the consumer.

This may be correct, but Preston (1982) asserts that such analysis does not recognise the practical problem of the research used to measure ad exposure. Ad exposure can only be measured directly in the case of outdoor and point-of-purchase advertising. These advertisements are complete and consumers distribute themselves to these advertisements rather than the reverse. In the case of other media, researchers do not measure ad exposure directly but infer it from research on distribution and vehicle exposure. Preston (1982) reaches the conclusion that although ad exposure is the first step in the advertising response process, distribution and vehicle exposure are the only variables that researchers are able to measure. They therefore estimate ad exposure from research on both of these variables.

### **3.7.2 Ad awareness**

According to Preston (1982:4), the several steps of awareness involve actual noticing by the consumer, which cannot be assumed from mere ad exposure. The ad awareness step indicates that the consumer becomes aware of the advertisement, and does not indicate an awareness of different elements in

the advertising message. Preston (1982:4) furthermore emphasises that ad awareness is not an automatic result of ad exposure.

### **3.7.3 Ad elements awareness**

The previous step in the consumer response process, according to Preston (1982), indicated that the consumer becomes aware of the advertisement as a whole. During the ad elements awareness step, the consumer becomes aware of the different elements or parts of the advertisement. Some of these elements, which depict or refer to the product or to things associated with the product, are regarded as important enough by Preston (1982) to be identified as separate steps. These steps will subsequently be discussed in sections 3.7.4 - 3.7.9. The remaining elements in the advertisements are mostly those elements used by the advertiser to catch the consumer's attention. The purpose of the attention-getting elements is that the advertiser hopes that the consumer will be so interested in the advertising message that he/she will shift his/her attention to the elements relevant to the product being advertised. There are also elements in most advertisements which represent no significant purpose on the advertiser's part. Such elements include filler content or content included by accident (such as people in the background of a photo). Preston (1982) continues that in some advertisements none of these elements may be evident, and in general this step may be regarded least important in the complete model. In certain advertisements, though, it will affect response to the overall advertisement.

### **3.7.4 Product awareness**

Preston (1982) regards product awareness as a separate step in the consumer response process. The reason for this is that consumers can be either aware of the advertisement as a whole or of different elements of the advertisement. Advertisers ultimately want consumers to be aware of the specific product or brand being advertised. Occasionally, consumers are aware of the advertisement as a whole, or of the different elements portrayed in the advertisement, but not of the product or brand being advertised.

Preston (1982) therefore regards the product awareness step as a separate step in the consumer response process and as a separate type of awareness.

### **3.7.5 Association awareness**

During the association awareness step, associations are established between the product and whatever items the advertiser chooses. During this step, Preston (1982:5) believes that the following occur:

- the product is described
- the product's attributes are identified
- claims are made about the product
- the people using the product are depicted
- benefits are discussed.

As previously mentioned, associations are made between the product and whatever items the advertiser chooses. These items may include the product's own physical or performance attributes, or anything apart from the product that the advertiser chooses to associate with it (Preston 1982:5). Preston (1982:5) explains that the association model is so named because of a conviction that choosing what to say about the product is the most critical step in the advertising process. He continues to explain that the value of what the advertiser associates with the product determines the success in obtaining intended sales response.

During the association awareness step, the following might occur: (a) consumers do not see the associated items, (b) consumers see that the advertisement is for a specific product, but will not notice what is said about the product, and (c) consumers might perceive what is said inaccurately. Preston (1982) separates the association awareness step from the product awareness step for these reasons.

### **3.7.6 Association evaluation**

Preston (1982: 5) explains that when advertisers associate the products being advertised with various items, they intend that the consumer regard these items positively. This is not always true, though. Some consumers will make a positive association between the product and items (elements) depicted in the advertisement, others a negative one and in some cases consumers may even perform a neutral association evaluation. Association evaluation is the step of making that decision. The consumer can base his/her association evaluation on the evaluation offered and urged by the advertisement. The consumer can then either see or not see that evaluation. If the consumer sees the evaluation offered by the advertisement, he/she will either see it as the advertiser intended or otherwise. Another way for consumers to evaluate associations involves having an evaluation as a prior state of mind, based on earlier encounters with the associated item (Preston 1982:5). In such cases, the consumer will ignore the advertisement's evaluations and base his/her association evaluations on an already-held evaluation when he/she sees the item linked with the product.

### **3.7.7 Product perception, prior perception and integrated perception**

Preston (1982:6) explains product perception as *"the total picture of the product that the consumer acquires from the ad"*. This process is cognitive and non-evaluative. This step involves more than product awareness, which involves merely noticing that the product was a subject of the advertisement. This step therefore represents the sum of association awareness and association evaluation. Product perception represents an integrated summation of association awareness and association evaluation. Total product perception is related to the prior perception and integrated perception steps of the association model of the advertising communication process.

Prior perception, according to Preston (1982:6), represents a summation of all the consumer's perceptions of the product acquired prior to his present

confrontation with the advertisement. These prior perceptions come from all prior personal experiences, previous advertisements and all other past inputs. If consumers' prior perception is negative, advertisers will strive to produce a product perception that will be different in a favourable way. Preston (1982: 6) explains that consumers handle these differences by combining product and prior perception into an integrated perception. Integrated perception is the overall picture of the product in consumers' minds which they will use as a basis for further response. Taking this into account, it is not sufficient for the advertiser to merely create product perception. The advertisers should rather create product perception which is influential in determining integrated perception.

### **3.7.8 Product evaluation, prior evaluation and integrated evaluation**

When consumers formulate their product perception, they also formulate their product evaluation (Preston 1982:6). This product evaluation is based on the direct advertising input. Consumers usually hold a prior evaluation of the product, based on past inputs and personal experiences, and form their integrated evaluation based on prior evaluation and product evaluation. Preston (1982:6) asserts that the product evaluation represents what consumers see the advertisement as communicating to them about feeling, while the integrated evaluation represents how they decide to feel.

### **3.7.9 Product stimulation, prior stimulation and integrated stimulation**

This is the last set of steps in Preston's (1982:7) model preceding the action step. These steps describe the process of acquiring an internal stimulus or motivation toward the final step of action. An integrated stimulus is created based on product stimulation, which is derived from direct advertising input, and prior stimulation. According to Preston (1982:7), the advertiser should create a favourable product stimulation which will be emulated in the integrated stimulation.

### **3.7.10 Action**

Integrated stimulation, positive or negative, will now prompt the last step, namely the action step (Preston 1982:7). The action step is typically demonstrative of sales and is researched through market research measures.

#### *Evaluation of the association model of the advertising communication process*

Preston's (1982) association model of the advertising communication process elaborates on the traditional response hierarchy models, especially their prototype, the AIDA (Preston 1982), as well as on the alternative response hierarchy models and the integrated information response model. The association model of the advertising communication process includes new steps and new terminology (Preston 1982), and it offers a rationale for including these new steps. Preston (1982:10) argues that it is important to include these steps in a model of the response process, since they indicate and differentiate the types of research methods used in advertising.

The hierarchy of effects models are, according to Preston (1982:10), the inspiration for the association model. Each of their steps is retained in the latter. These models can be criticised, though, as has earlier been done, by citing that none of them is comprehensive enough to accommodate all the types of consumer response and related research used regularly by advertisers. Another reason why Preston (1982:10) developed the association model of the advertising communication process is thus because the previous hierarchy of effects models have limited scope and do not, for example, include steps prior to awareness. The association model includes the distribution, vehicle exposure and ad exposure steps as antecedents to advertising awareness. Yet another important reason for developing the association model of the advertising communication process is because research criteria are emphasised in this model. It is therefore important when advertising theory and research are seriously considered (Preston 1982:10).

The main criticism against the model coincides with criticism offered against most of the traditional and alternative response hierarchy models. The response sequence is still depicted in a linear manner, and few variables which could influence the response sequence are taken into account. This model is an advancement, though, since it provides for steps prior to the awareness steps. That makes this model unique.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, secondary research objective 5 was addressed by discussing, analysing and evaluating the major consumer response models. This chapter shows the progression from the uncomplicated, linear depiction of the consumer response phases identified by the AIDA model (Strong 1925), to the complex elaboration likelihood model by Petty and Cacioppo (1983). The latter integrates some of the factors that may account for different types and levels of cognitive processing of a message, by identifying a relationship between involvement and cognitive processing.

The progressive discussion of the consumer response models included a discussion on the following models:

- AIDA (Strong 1925)
- Hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge & Steiner 1961)
- The innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962)
- The information processing model (McGuire 1978)
- The three-orders model of information processing (Ray 1973)
- The integrated information response model (Smith & Swinyard 1982)
- The FCB planning model (Vaughn 1980)
- The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo 1983)
- The association model of the advertising communication process (Preston 1982)

It is concluded that, even though the traditional response hierarchy models are severely criticised because of their linear and mechanistic illustration of the consumer response process, they are relevant in explaining certain consumers' response processes during certain advertising exposure occasions. The alternative response hierarchy model, the three-orders model of information processing, improved on the traditional response hierarchy models, but is also only valid during certain response occasions. Even though the integrated information response model, the FCB planning model, the elaboration likelihood model and the association model of the advertising communication process have received many positive evaluations, the conclusion is reached that neither of them can adequately explain the consumer response process under all circumstances. It is thus necessary to develop a comprehensive set of consumer response phases which may or may not all be used during advertising exposure occasions.

In the next chapter, the theory of consumer response is explained. In the chapter thereafter, theoretical criteria are developed for the general consumer response process. These theoretical criteria are taken from all the consumer response models. They will represent some of the response phases which online consumers may proceed through from a state of being unaware of an advertising message or product to purchase behaviour. Consumers may proceed through all the response phases, or may omit some.

## CHAPTER 4: THE THEORY OF CONSUMER RESPONSE

*The marketer must enter the communication situation with knowledge of the target audience and how it is likely to react to the message. This means the receiver's response process must be understood, along with its implications for promotional planning and strategy.*

(Belch & Belch 2001)

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a particular area in the general theory of consumer response, namely various consumer response phases. The emphasis is on the general phases of the consumer response process. These are adequately explained by the facets model of effective advertising by Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006). The facets model of effective advertising was developed by these authors to explain advertising message effects found in the various types of consumer responses produced by the advertising message. In the previous chapter, all the major consumer response models were discussed, analysed and evaluated. They adequately explain the consumer response process during specific exposure occasions and include different variables to explain a variety of consumer responses unique to certain circumstances, but none of them can explain the consumer response process in general, nor does any of them include all the possible responses. The models focus on specific response sequences which are influenced by different variables, and are therefore simplistic in their focus on specific advertising exposure occasions. They do not explain the overall and general consumer response process adequately. The facets model of effective advertising by Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) provides a more suitable foundation on which to explain general consumer responses.

This chapter commences by explaining the three basic consumer response levels, namely the cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural levels. These basic consumer response levels provide an overview of the broad levels

which consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages, but do not include the detailed consumer response phases.

The discussion then proceeds to explain detailed consumer response phases, based on Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising. This model evidently includes the three basic consumer response levels (cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural), but elaborates further by including additional phases. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) argue that effective advertising creates six types of consumer response. These six effects and the categories of effects to which they belong are used as a framework for discussing the consumer response process in general. The following is included in this discussion:

<b>Perception</b>	<b>Cognition</b>	<b>Affective/ Emotion</b>	<b>Association</b>	<b>Persuasion</b>	<b>Behaviour</b>
<i>Exposure</i>	<i>Needs</i>	<i>Wants</i>	<i>Symbolism</i>	<i>Attitudes</i>	<i>Try and buy</i>
<i>Attention</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Conditioned</i>	<i>Arguments</i>	<i>Contact</i>
<i>Interest</i>	<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Liking</i>	<i>learning</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Prevention</i>
<i>Awareness</i>	<i>learning</i>		<i>Brand</i>	<i>Conviction</i>	
<i>Memory: Recognition</i>	<i>Differentiation</i>		<i>transformation</i>	<i>and</i>	
	<i>Memory: Recall</i>			<i>preference</i>	
				<i>Brand loyalty</i>	
				<i>Involvement</i>	

This chapter also includes a discussion on other prominent authors' (Kitchen 1999; Burnett & Moriarty 1998; Assael 1998; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993, Foxall et al 1998; Schiffman & Kanuk 1997) theoretical discussions on the consumer response process, decision-making and information-processing process, and consumer psychological processes. The theoretical psychological elements identified by Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) are, for example, included and are entwined with Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising since they overlap and are considered important by all of these authors. In addition, an extra consumer response phase, the decision-making phase, is added to the discussion of Wells,

Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising, based on Kitchen's (1999) discussion of consumer response. Although the focus of this chapter in particular, but also the study in general, is on the consumer response process, a discussion is included on some of the phases of the decision-making and information-processing processes and the consumer psychological processes, because these phases/stages coincide with the consumer response process and also depict the phases that consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising and marketing communication messages.

In order to understand the theory and models of consumer response, it is furthermore essential that a fundamental understanding of some important theories should be acquired (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993). These theories include discussions on perception, memory, involvement, attitudes, cognitive dissonance and conditioning and will consequently be discussed as part of the consumer response process.

Secondary research objective 6 aims to identify and analyse the consumer response process which consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages. Percy and Rossiter (1980:6), for example, identify four general communication responses to advertising messages. These authors explain that consumers will first become aware of the advertising message. The cognitive phase follows, during which the consumer's responses associate a product or service with a characteristic or attribute that can positively influence purchase. Next, the affective phase follows, which represents the consumer's emotional evaluation of a product or service. The last phase is the conative phase, during which purchasing or any type of action takes place. This is a simplistic and basic explanation of the consumer response process and coincides with the subsequent explanation of the basic consumer response levels.

In the next section, the fundamental consumer response levels are discussed in terms of the cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural response levels.

## **4.2 CONSUMER RESPONSE LEVELS**

As individuals, we all live, think, function and communicate differently. It is argued that because we tend to react and respond differently in communication encounters, it is difficult to accurately predict the precise response process which each consumer proceeds through when being exposed to marketing communication and advertising messages.

Even though this is a compelling argument, it is possible to predict general levels of consumer response. These broad levels do not necessarily follow each other in a sequential pattern, but it is believed that all consumers move through these levels when being exposed to advertising and marketing communication messages (Belch & Belch 2001:151; Strong 1925; Lavidge and Steiner 1961; Rogers 1962; McGuire 1978; Foxall, Goldsmith and Brown 1998; Foxall 1996:39).

Belch and Belch (2001:151) and Foxall et al (1998) identify these basic levels as the cognitive, affective and conative or behavioural levels, below:

### **4.2.1 The cognitive level**

During the cognitive stage of advertising response, the consumer becomes aware of the advertising message and that the particular brand or service exists. Subsequently, he or she obtains knowledge, information and comprehension about the product or service. Consumers furthermore acquire information about the product's attributes, characteristics and benefits as depicted in the advertising and marketing communication message. This stage therefore represents what the receiver knows or perceives about the particular product, service, brand or advertising and marketing communication message (Belch & Belch 2001:151).

The consumer cognitively responds to the marketing mix or advertising messages by forming and modifying beliefs on the basis of original

information (Foxall et al 1998) and evidently learns about the product or service.

#### **4.2.2 The affective level**

The affective level follows on the cognitive level and refers to the consumer's feelings, emotions and affect level (like or dislike) for the particular brand, service or advertising and marketing communication message (Belch & Belch 2001:151). Foxall et al (1998) also explain that the consumer responds affectively to each alternative means of satisfying his or her wants after he/she cognitively responded to the advertising message. The consumer therefore establishes a positive or negative attitude towards the advertising message or product being advertised.

These statements by Belch and Belch (2001:151) and Foxall et al (1998) are in contrast to Anand, Holbrook and Stephens's (1988:386) argument that the affective level does not necessarily follow on the cognitive level and that these systems or phases may involve separate and partially independent systems. On the other hand, authors like Lazarus (1982; 1984) are in agreement with Belch and Belch (2001) and Foxall et al (1998) and argue that affect depends on cognition that may occur at the unconscious level. It can therefore be argued that cognition, affect and even conation do not necessarily follow a preset sequence, but that these levels follow each other, regardless of their order. Although the affective level is positioned among the general consumer response levels, stronger levels of feeling (affect) such as desire, preference or conviction are also included here. This level is thus depicted as the *emotional or poignant level*.

#### **4.2.3 The conative or behavioural level**

Following the shaping of consumers' feelings and emotions toward a particular advertising or marketing communication message, product or service, is the level at which they behave in a certain way towards the product, service or advertising message. The conative or behavioural level

therefore refers to the consumer's action towards the brand. This level may include actions like trial, purchase, adoption or rejection (Belch & Belch 2001:151; Foxall et al 1998).

The traditional response hierarchy models like the AIDA model (Strong 1925), hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge & Steiner 1961), innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962) and information processing model (McGuire 1978) assume a similar ordering of these three basic levels (refer to Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on the traditional response hierarchy models). The consumer thus firstly becomes aware of the advertising message or product, then pays attention, gains knowledge and lastly understands the meaning of the message as well as the product attributes during the cognitive level. During the affective level, the consumer becomes interested in the advertising message and product and then likes, desires, prefers, evaluates and finally convicts it. During the last basic level, the consumer proceeds to take a certain type of action. This can be to either purchase the product, try it out, adopt the service, product or advertising message, or proceed to any other type of action or behaviour (Belch & Belch 2001:151).

In summary, the basic or general consumer response levels include the cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural levels in no particular order. These levels explain the basic levels of response which the consumer proceeds through during advertising message exposure occasions. These levels do not, however, explain the detailed and complicated response phases which can be part of the broader, general cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural levels. Therefore, a detailed discussion on the consumer response process follows, based on the facets model of advertising effectiveness (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006), as well theoretical discussions on the consumer response process, decision-making process, information-processing process and consumer psychological processes by Kitchen (1999); Burnett and Moriarty (1998); Assael (1998); Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Foxall et al (1998) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997). The theoretical psychological elements identified by Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) are also included.

### 4.3 THE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS

It was argued in the previous section that the consumer progresses through three basic response levels when exposed to advertising and marketing communication messages. Although these levels explain the basic consumer response levels, other phases/stages can be added to each of the levels to explain the complete consumer response process. Foxall et al (1998:28), for example, add additional phases by explaining the information-processing procedure which consumers proceed through when being exposed to advertising or marketing communication messages. The information-processing procedure can be compared to the consumer response process, in that both of these procedures include phases which consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising messages. Foxall et al (1998:28) include the following phases in the information-processing procedure:

- *Receiving* information from the environment (advertising messages)
- *Interpreting* this information according to experience, opinions, personal goals, personal characteristics and social position
- *Searching* for additional information to clarify the want or need so aroused
- *Evaluating* the alternative competing brands available to satisfy this want or need
- *Developing* the beliefs, attitudes and intentions that determine whether a purchase takes place and, if so, which brand is selected
- *Acting* upon these intrapsychic forces to actually purchase and use the product/brand
- *Re-evaluating* initial attitudes and intentions in light of the satisfaction engendered by consuming the product
- *Storing* the new attitudes and intentions in the mind for future reference.

Other authors build on the basic consumer response phases/stages explained by the traditional hierarchy of effects and think-feel-do models of Strong (1925), Lavidge and Steiner (1961), Rogers (1962) and McGuire (1978). For instance, Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) add additional categories of consumer response to advertising through the facets model of effective advertising. They identify six categories of advertising effects which identify six types of consumer responses or phases (refer to sections 4.3.1 – 4.3.7).

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising provides a basis from which to discuss the consumer response process. Their model will be elaborated on by adding discussions of other authors' (Burnett & Moriarty 1998; Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993; Assael 1998; Kitchen 1999, Foxall et al 1998; Schiffman and Kanuk 1997) perspectives on the consumer response process. The facets model of effective advertising will thus be used as a framework, but other stages/phases identified by authors such as Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) are added to assist in the presentation of a comprehensive discussion on consumer response phases. This discussion includes the following broad consumer response phases, each of which is discussed in the subsequent section:

- perception
- cognition
- affective/emotion
- association
- persuasion
- behaviour

#### **4.3.1 Perception**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006), Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Kitchen (1999), Burnett and Moriarty (1998), Assael (1998), Foxall et al (1998) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) all regard perception as an important initial phase in the consumer response process.

Perception is variously defined as *“the process by which we receive information through our five senses and assign meaning to it”* (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:104; Burnett & Moriarty 1998) or as *“the link between the mind and the environment”* (Sinclair and Barenblatt 1993). Kitchen (1999:162) refers to perception as comprehension and uses these terms interchangeably. He explains it as *“being concerned with interpretation, essentially how consumers comprehend their world”*. Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:146) concur with Kitchen (1999) in that they emphasise the fact that perception is all about interpretation and how the individual’s world is being observed. Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:146) thus define perception as *“the process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world.”* The Dictionary of Sociology (2005) simply explains it as *“the faculty of acquiring sensory experience”*.

From these definitions it can be deduced that perception is a process through which our mind receives information through our senses from the environment. It is the brain’s task to take raw material and use it to make sense of the environment through the process of perception.

To apply this to the advertising and marketing environment, the advertising message should engage the sensory receptors, that is, eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin (Lang 2000; Statt 1997). Sensation is therefore the process with which perception begins (Foxall et al 1998; Schiffman & Kanuk 1997).

It is argued, based on the interpretation of the above-mentioned definitions, that all stimuli which people are faced with every day of their lives are not automatically perceived, organised, interpreted and internalised. We selectively decide which faces, conversations, buildings and advertisements we want to pay attention to and remember.

Foxall et al (1998:52) explain the process of interpretation as being dependent on the socio-psychological meanings that the individual attaches to the object perceived (the stimulus). It is therefore evident that stimuli will be interpreted

according to previous experiences and individual characteristics, motivations and needs.

Kitchen (1999:162) adds that perception involves the interpretation of meaning from stimuli and symbols and that although there will be common elements, interpretations are personal. It can therefore be deduced from all of these authors' explanations that no two consumers will interpret an advertising message in the same way, since they interpret stimuli that reinforce and enhance their personal view of their world, themselves and the goods and services they buy (Foxall et al 1998:52).

This statement is emphasised by Burnett and Moriarty (1998:185) when they explain that perceptions are shaped by the following:

- the physical characteristics of the stimuli
- the context
- the individual perceiving the stimuli.

Some stimuli can be perceived totally and others partially, and some accurately and others inaccurately.

Assael (1998:84) continues to explain perception in terms of the conditions under which stimuli are more likely to be perceived, namely:

- when they conform to consumers' past experiences
- when they conform to consumers' current beliefs about a brand
- when they are not too complex
- when they are believable
- when they relate to a set of current needs
- when they do not produce excessive fears and anxieties

#### 4.3.1.1 *Selective perception*

Even though it is essential for any advertiser or marketer that consumers notice the advertiser or marketer's complete advertising message, consumers select certain advertising messages and only pay attention to some of them. This process is called *selective perception* and is the **first phase** in the perception process. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:19) understand *selective perception* to mean "the mind's ability to screen out stimuli which are of no use to us and absorb those that are".

Selective perception takes place because consumers want to achieve a state of psychological equilibrium. They want to, in other words, reach a state that lacks conflict and avoids contradictory information (Assael 1998:84-85). Consumers thus only want to notice, retain and internalise those advertising messages which confirm their beliefs and experiences.

The process of *perceptual distortion* can be closely linked to the process of selective perception. Statt (1997:49) understands *perceptual distortion* as the process whereby consumers distort their perception to fit what they expected to see. The consumer will, during such a process, perceive things that aren't there or perceive things different from the way they really are.

Assael (1998:220-221) continues to explain selective perception and asserts that consumers will receive information most relevant to their needs. He describes this as *perceptual vigilance*. When a consumer wants to buy a product which requires high involvement, perceptual vigilance will ensure that the consumer only attends to and retains relevant information. If the consumer wants to buy a product which requires low involvement, he/she would exercise perceptual vigilance in order to screen out information to minimise information processing.

Another term highlighted by Assael (1998:221) which is explanatory of selective perception is *perceptual defence*. This process protects the consumer from threatening or contradictory stimuli, and therefore the consumer perceives information to conform to his/her beliefs and attitudes. Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:164) also emphasise that consumers distort

information that is not consistent with their needs, values and beliefs and thus emphasise the importance of perceptual defence for advertisers and marketers.

To recapitulate, consumers want consistency between information they have already internalised and new information. They seek *perceptual equilibrium* to balance existing information and perceptions with newly acquired information and perceptions. The three cognitive theories below explain the principles of selective perception and perceptual equilibrium (Assael (1998:221).

- *Sherif's social judgement theory* (Sherif and Hovland 1964). This theory pronounces that consumers process information to ensure consistency by either rejecting contradictory information (contrast) or interpreting acceptable information to fit more closely with their views (assimilation) (Assael 1998).
- *Heider's balance theory* (Heider 1958). The Austrian-born US psychologist Fritz Heider (1896-1988) developed the balance theory, with the US psychologist Theodore Mead Newcomb (1903-1984) contributing to its further development in 1953. The Dictionary of Psychology (2001) explains balance theory as "*a cognitive consistency theory of person perception and attitude change in which the elements, often depicted as vertices of a triangle, are a person (p), another person (o), and an attitude object (x), the relations between the three elements, represented by the sides of the triangle, being either positive or negative according to p/s attitudes and beliefs*". This model represents p/s cognitions, and it can exist in a state of either balance, if none of the relations is negative or if two are negative, or imbalance, if just one of the relations is negative. In a later version of the theory, the state of the model with three negative relations is considered to be ambiguous or non-balanced. According to the theory, an imbalanced state of the model, with just one negative relation, is dynamically

unstable and has a tendency to become balanced, which means that one or more of the relations tends to change.

When the balance theory is applied to the advertising and marketing communication contexts, it becomes clear that when information about an object conflicts with consumers' beliefs, they will achieve balance by changing their opinion about the object, the source of information, or both. Assael (1998:221) explains that the result is a balance in beliefs about the information and the object.

- *Cognitive dissonance theory*. The Dictionary of the Social Sciences (2002) defines cognitive dissonance as “*the state of tension or displeasure that follows from the experience of contradictory or difficult to reconcile beliefs, perceptions, or thoughts – in short, cognitions*”. According to the cognitive dissonance theory, the least resistant cognition is sacrificed or modified in order to relieve cognitive stress. Social psychologists Leon Festinger and JM Carismith elaborated on this concept, with their work sharing the underlying principles of cognitive dissonance theory with several theorists' distinct theories on social psychology, such as Fritz Heider's balance theory (discussed above), Theodore Newcomb's symmetry models, MJ Rosenberg's affective cognitive consistency theory, Charles Osgood and Percy Tannenbaum's congruity principle and Milton Rokeach's Values-Attitudes-Behaviour model.

When the cognitive dissonance theory is applied to the advertising and marketing communication contexts, it explains the occurrence of consumers' balance-seeking procedure in the psychological set by looking for supporting information or by distorting contradictory information. This process commences when conflict arises after the consumer has bought a particular product (Assael 1998:222-223).

It is evident that each of these theories explains how consumers seek certain information and reject other information in order to regain a state of balance or

equilibrium. Consumers will therefore selectively perceive certain advertising messages and will not pay attention to conflicting or totally irrelevant messages. This poses a threat to advertisers and should thus be considered when they plan their advertising strategies. If consumers only perceive advertising messages which are relevant to their wants and needs, advertisers should ensure that advertising messages reach the correct market segment and therefore those consumers who are mainly open to persuasion.

It is important to note at this point that perceptual disequilibrium can also be the result of conflicting information. If consumers did not take note of information which is in conflict with their existing information, they would attempt to rationalise purchases every time they were dissatisfied with it and would never switch brands. Consumers will therefore also accept discrepant information about brands (Assael 1998:223).

#### 4.3.1.2 *The organisation phase*

Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:19) and Burnett and Moriarty (1998:186) continue to identify the phases of perception and explain that after the selective perception phase (phase one), the *organisation phase* (**phase two**) follows. Information will only become useful to the consumer after he/she has organised it from raw data into something useful. According to Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:19), incoming stimuli are therefore categorised, grouped and then integrated with information already existing in the brain.

#### 4.3.1.3 *Interpretive phase*

Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) and Burnett and Moriarty (1998) continue to explain the perception process by identifying a **third** phase. They explain that since perception is selective and subject to organisation, it is also *interpretive*. Because all people differ according to their values, norms, interests, motives and background, they will all interpret stimuli differently (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:19-20; Schiffman & Kanuk 1997:168; Chisnall 1995).

The components of perception are discussed next, based on Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising.

#### *4.3.1.4 Key components of perception*

Besides the three phases of the perception process as explained by Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Burnett and Moriarty (1998:186), Assael (1998) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997), Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) identify the key components of perception and their roles in effectiveness as exposure, selection and attention, interest and relevance, awareness and recognition (refer to section 3.1 (Introduction) for a graphic depiction of the key components of perception).

- **Exposure**

It is generally believed that exposure to traditional advertising messages is accidental. In other words, consumers do not necessarily search for advertising information, but are constantly bombarded with it. Thus, consumers do not have any choice but to notice advertising messages. Even though this convincing argument is generally accepted, authors like Assael (1998), Ferguson (1999:149) and Mowen (1990:47) believe that consumers choose which advertising messages they want to be exposed to and then selectively pay attention to those messages with which they agree.

Consumers will pick and choose the stimuli they are exposed to and avoid exposure to stimuli that are unimportant and uninteresting. This process is called selective exposure (Mowen 1990:47).

It is nevertheless important for any advertiser and marketer to ensure frequent exposure to advertising and marketing communication messages, since the effectiveness of media plans is evaluated based on the exposure levels they actually achieve after the advertising has run (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:105). It is therefore important for advertisers and marketers that consumers receive advertising information through one or more of the

receptor organs – eyes, nose, ears and skin – which should be in physical contact with some stimulus containing the information (Foxall et al 1998:79).

Although Burnett and Moriarty (1998) and Assael (1998) do not discuss the consumer response process per se, they discuss the consumer decision-making process and include discussions on the steps in information processing. These discussions correspond with the consumer response process and these authors therefore include exposure as one of the first phases in the information processing or, in the context of this study, consumer response process.

Burnett and Moriarty's (1998) and Assael's (1998:83-84) discussions thus concur with Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) discussions when they clarify that consumers should be exposed to the advertising stimulus, or if that is impossible, at least be attracted to the stimulus. Consumers will first of all recognise that they need a particular product or need to make use of a particular service. Once they have recognised the specific need, they will search for and process information that is relevant to that need, thereby exposing themselves to the advertising message. Consumers thus have the ability to selectively decide which stimuli they want to be exposed to and which not. They will, as a result, choose to be exposed to advertising messages which support recent purchase decisions in an attempt to justify them, or they will ignore information that is in conflict with their needs or beliefs (Assael 1998).

Once consumers have been exposed to an advertising message, they will proceed to the following phase in the consumer response process, namely selection and attention.

- **Attention**

Attention is defined by Assael (1998:219) as *“the momentary focusing of a consumer's cognitive capacity on a specific stimulus”*.

Attention is selective, according to Kitchen (1999:161), Burnett and Moriarty (1998:184) and Mowen (1990:56), because the human brain cannot cope with the multitude of messages which it is exposed to every day. The term selective attention is used to describe this process. Selective attention is defined in the Dictionary of Psychology (2001) as *“focusing concentration on a single stimulus or class of stimuli to the exclusion of others”*. The US psychologist William James (1842-1910) pointed out that this ability must be acquired. Advertisers need consumers to attend to advertising messages, though, or as Burnett and Moriarty (1998:184) explain it, to devote mental resources to stimuli in order to process them. This implies that consumers need to become aware of and reflect on an advertising message, otherwise no further information processing occurs and the message is lost.

Mowen (1990:56) adds the term involuntary attention, which occurs when a consumer is exposed to something surprising, novel, threatening, or unexpected. When the consumer cannot control his/her response, it is called orientation reflex. Stimuli towards which consumers cannot control their responses elicit what are called autonomic responses (Mowen 1990:56).

In the preceding section, it was explained that consumers progress through three basic levels/phases (in no particular order) when they are exposed to advertising messages (refer to section 4.2). These levels/phases include the cognitive, affective and conative levels/phases. Kitchen's (1999) discussion of consumers' selection and attention phases in the response process coincides with this discussion.

According to Kitchen (1999:161), consumers are receptive to messages which are cognitively engaging and which satisfy their informational goals (cognitive needs). But they are also receptive to messages that they associate with pleasure, their fantasies and rewards. Kitchen (1999:161) explains that these messages fulfil consumers' hedonistic (self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking and self-gratifying) needs. These hedonistic needs coincide with the affective phase which consumers proceed through when being exposed to an advertising message.

It can be concluded that it is not good enough to merely expose consumers to advertising messages. Marketers and advertisers alike want consumers to select certain advertisements and to pay attention to the messages being disseminated. Advertising has the ability to bring visibility to a product (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:105). By paying close attention to the advertising message, the product becomes visible and recognisable to the consumer.

Marketers and advertisers therefore want consumers to be exposed to the advertisement, but want them to additionally select to watch or hear the message and then to pay attention to it. Yet even this is not enough. Consumers should also be interested in the advertising message, and therefore the message should be relevant to the consumer.

- **Interest**

If an advertising message is not personally relevant to a consumer and if the message does not connect with the consumer on some personal level, he/she will not be interested in the advertising message or product being advertised (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:105). *Interest* means that the consumer or receiver of the message has become mentally engaged in some way with the advertisement, advertising message or product. A well-designed advertising message will not only attract interest, but will also hold the audience's interest. As soon as the consumer is interested in the advertising message, it will appeal to his/her self-interest and will therefore be relevant.

Another dimension of interest is cognitive dissonance. Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory as explained in section 4.3.1 (perception), is thus also relevant to this discussion on interest. Cognitive dissonance clarifies the concepts of selective perception, perceptual equilibrium and cognitive dissonance. According to Wilmshurst (1985:206), it is a well-known fact that the way people see something depends on what they expect to see. This simply means that dissonance or imbalance will be the result if advertising messages do not correspond to the consumer's knowledge (cognitions) and

also when an individual holds two attitudes, ideas or beliefs which are not in harmony with each other (Foxall et al 1998:122). The underlying explanations of cognitive dissonance elucidate that consumers will try to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance, because dissonance is psychologically uncomfortable. If dissonance is present in the consumer, he/she will try to reduce it and avoid situations which are likely to increase dissonance (Chisnall 1995:28).

It is argued therefore that if the advertising message is not relevant or does not concur with the consumer's existing frame of knowledge, a state of mental 'consonance' or equilibrium will not be possible. The consumer is less likely to be interested in the advertising message, since it upsets the patterns of knowledge (cognition) that he/she has learned to find acceptable. Advertisers thus need to avoid dissonance, that is, information which is inconsistent with the existing pattern of knowledge and need to present messages which reinforce the existing patterns of knowledge (Wilmshurst 1985:206-207).

- **Awareness**

According to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:105), awareness is an indicator of perception. Consumers should be aware of the advertising message or product and know that they have heard it before or realise that they know about the brand. *Awareness* therefore results when an advertisement initially makes an impression (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:105). Consumers sometimes do not remember the advertising message in detail or the unique features of the product, but they are aware of the message and the brand. Awareness is important, but is not as much desired as a behavioural response such as trying or buying a product. Awareness can be considered to be a low level of response, or a weak response.

- **Memory: Recognition**

The role of memory, according to Burnett and Moriarty (1998:187), is two-fold. Memory needs to initially hold information while it is being processed throughout the sequence. A stimulus should first of all be held in the sensory memory for an extremely brief time in order for it to be perceived at all. Next, the memory stores the information for future, long-term use. In order for an advertising message to be effective and to impact on consumers' decisions and behaviour, they need to learn, remember and retrieve the advertising message and product or service being advertised (Kitchen 1999:164).

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:106) identify two memory factors, *recognition* and *recall*. When consumers remember seeing an advertisement, they are able to recognise the advertisement or product being advertised. When consumers are able to recall an advertising message or product, they remember what the advertising message said. *Recognition* is therefore a measure of perception and *recall* a measure of understanding (refer to section 3.3.2 for a detailed discussion on memory: *recall*) (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:106).

It can be deduced that the latter memory response is desired by advertisers. They would not want the consumer to merely remember and recognise the advertising message, but would want him/her to recall the underlying message in the advertisement. The advertiser will thus know that the consumer understands the message and might react positively on it.

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) are in accord with Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) that memory is an important component of the consumer response process. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) explain memory in terms of recognition and recall, though, while Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) and Burnett and Moriarty (1998:187) explain it in terms of three stages of information processing.

The *first*, according to Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:20), is the stage when information is initially received via the senses. Stimuli are therefore heard,

seen, smelt, felt or tasted. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:187) call this the encoding stage and explain that a person will not be able to remember anything if information is not put into a form that the memory system can use. At this sensory stage, the perceived inflowing stimulus is given an early analysis (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:20), encoded, and stored automatically without conscious effort, but rehearsal is necessary to ensure that these processes occur (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:187). Rehearsal means that material is mentally repeated.

During the *second* stage, the information is retained and stored. Information is saved for future use. This information will in future be related and linked with newly acquired information. The term selective retention refers to the phenomenon whereby people forget much of what they perceive (Ferguson 1999:155). Consumers have to process a lot of information and consequently dump a lot of information in the subconscious mind. Consumers will most likely retain and remember only that information which can be integrated with existing knowledge and information and therefore create a sense of equilibrium in the system.

The information is *thirdly* transferred, tagged and rendered retrievable. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:187) explain that mere rehearsal of information is sometimes not sufficient. Elaborate rehearsal, which involves thinking about the information and relating it to other already stored information, may be necessary. Before information is therefore retained and stored, it should be linked with already known information. Only then will the consumer be able to retain and retrieve the information.

### **4.3.2 Cognition**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:106) unequivocally state that perception is the first effect of an advertising message and occurs before any other effect can happen. According to their facets model of effective advertising, cognition is the next rational consumer response phase, but they advise in no uncertain

terms that even understanding, feeling, association, believing or acting may follow perception.

*Cognition* refers to how consumers respond to information, learn and understand something. It is a rational response to a message. Before a consumer can understand the advertising message or features of a product, he/she should have a need for something or a need to know something. Once the information in response to that need is gathered, it leads to understanding (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:108). The information is therefore filed in memory, but can be recalled when needed.

The key components of cognition and their roles in effectiveness, according to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:108), are now discussed.

#### *Key components of cognition*

- **Needs and wants**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:108) define *needs* as “*something you think about*” and *wants* as “*something that is based on feelings and desires*”.

These authors explain needs as a cognitive component in the advertising response process. Once advertisers identify the needs of consumers, they can present their advertising message based on cognitive responses and elements and will therefore explain what the product can do for the consumer. The objective is to provide cognitive information which will address the needs of the consumer. Once this information is perceived by the consumer, he/she will expectantly understand the advertising message and product features and proceed into the next consumer response phase/stage, which might be the affective or emotional phase.

Burnett and Moriarty (1998) discuss the consumer decision-making process and include elements in this particular process which are also included in and descriptive of the consumer response process. For example, they include a discussion on the recognition of needs and problems as the first phase in the

consumer decision-making process. This discussion is presented from the consumer's perspective, while Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) discussion above focuses on the importance for the advertiser to recognise consumers' needs and to fulfil those needs with appropriate advertising messages and products.

According to Burnett and Moriarty (1998:179-182), consumers' unsatisfied needs create tension and thus the motivation to act in a certain way. This is useful to advertisers, since they can improve advertising strategies by recognising unsatisfied needs and by concentrating on these needs, create tension and then inspire consumers to buy the product or use the particular service. Consumers can experience rational as well as emotional motives and will act based on these motives (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:182).

- **Informative information**

Advertisers usually provide informative information in an advertising message when the product being advertised is complex (appliances, cars, insurance, computers, software etc). Informative information is also provided when the product has a high price and the consumer takes a risk in buying the particular product (e.g. motorboats, vacations, medical procedures etc.). Advertising messages can, according to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:108), also include information about product features such as size, price, construction and design.

- **Cognitive learning**

The Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science and Medicine (1998) defines *cognitive learning* as “a type of learning which mainly uses cognitive processes, such as perception and reasoning, and in which the contribution of the learner is emphasised”. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:167) define the broader concept of learning as “a process of taking in information, processing it along with existing information, and producing new knowledge”, while

Assael (1998:105) defines it as “a *change in behaviour occurring as a result of past experience*”. Statt (1997:77) similarly defines learning as “*the relatively permanent process by which changes in behaviour, knowledge, feelings or attitudes occur as the result of prior experience*”.

The Oxford Companion to the Mind (1987) explains that the study of learning has been prominent in psychology for more than 80 years. Since the pioneering work of Ivan Pavlov and EL Thorndike, its importance has consistently been reflected empirically through experimental investigations and conceptually through interpretative theories.

Two different schools of thought effectively explain the process of learning: the *behaviourist school* and the *cognitive school* (Assael 1998). These two schools of thought coincide with Wells, Moriarty and Burnett’s (2006:108) identification of two primary routes of learning: *conditioned learning* and *cognitive learning*.

- The **behaviourist school** is concerned with *conditioned learning* and therefore observing changes in an individual’s responses as a result of exposure to stimuli (Assael 1998:106). Behaviourist psychologists have developed two types of learning theories in the behaviourist school: *classical conditioning* and *instrumental conditioning*. The behaviourist school’s description of learning coincides with Wells, Moriarty and Burnett’s (2006:108) description of *conditioned learning*, which takes place when one thing is linked with another. This leads to a process of association and is established through repetition. This type of learning is discussed in detail in section 3.3.4. During this discussion, classical conditioning and instrumental conditioning are explained. In short, classical conditioning views behaviour as the result of a close association between a primary stimulus and a secondary stimulus, while instrumental conditioning views behaviour as a function of the consumer’s assessment of the degree to which purchase behaviour leads to satisfaction (Assael 1998).

- The focus of this section is on **cognitive learning**, and Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) explain that the *cognitive school* views *cognitive learning* as occurring when facts, information and explanations are presented and ultimately lead to understanding. Assael (1998) agrees and explains that cognitive learning coincides with the cognitive school's view that learning is all about problem-solving and that it focuses on changes in the consumer's psychological set as a result of learning, while Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) understand cognitive learning as learning based on mental activity. Human beings mostly make use of cognitive learning, since it requires a process of problem-solving. When the process of problem-solving takes place, consumers have some control over their environment and use mental processes to produce a desired response.

When a consumer wants to buy a car, for example, he/she seeks all information possible and tries to learn everything possible before buying the car. The advertiser will typically use demonstrations, facts and comparisons to provide the type of information needed. In this scenario, cognitive learning would have taken place, since the consumer learned information as a result of facts, information and explanations having been presented by the advertising message.

- **Differentiation**

In order for an advertising message to be effective, the consumer needs to be able to differentiate between different brands. Whenever the consumer understands the explanation of the competitive advantage of a product, differentiation is possible (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:108). The consumer therefore needs to be able to understand the advertising message and the features of the product, and has to be able to differentiate between the different brands by comparing them.

- **Memory: Recall/Retrieval**

It has been stated that when a consumer can recognise an advertising message or product, it is a measure of perception (refer to section 3.3.1.1). This type of memory is called recognition. However, when the consumer can *recall* the advertising message or product, it is a measure of learning or understanding (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:108). Burnett and Moriarty (1998:187) call this process retrieval, the process by which information is recovered from memory.

Lang (2000) also describes the retrieval process and explains that it is the process of reactivating a stored mental representation of some aspect of the message. She defines retrieval as *“the process of searching the associative memory network for a specific piece of information and reactivating it in working memory”* (Lang 2000: 50).

Associations or links are formed in the memory when the consumer can, for example, connect individual memories to other related memories by associations. The consumer should therefore link old and new advertising or product information. The better the old advertising information can be linked with new advertising information, the better the information is stored and the easier this information can be retrieved. Retrieval is, according to Lang (2000), an ongoing process during message reception.

Whenever there is a cognitive response to an advertising message, the memory trace is deeper than mere perception and recognition. Any advertiser or marketer wants the consumer to remember the advertising message or product being advertised. When consumers therefore remember the advertising message, they not only remember seeing the advertisement, but they remember the copy points, which is the information provided about the product (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:108). When the consumer can assign meaning to the elements of message content and form new representations which themselves can be stored in memory, it is called comprehension, according to Foxall et al (1998:82). During the process of comprehension, the mind retrieves information from memory. If the consumer

can recall advertising information, in other words retrieve information from memory, he/she must have thought about the message either while it was presented or afterwards.

Application of information is an important phase in the *memory retrieval* process, since it is the process during which the information retrieved from memory is used. Consumers should thus retrieve information regarding products, services and messages in order to apply it to solve a problem or meet a particular need (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:187).

Even though consumers might recall the advertising message and be able to apply it to solve a problem or meet a particular need, they might not always have enough information to make adequate decisions. In such cases, they will search for additional information. Such a search is likely, according to Assael (1998:85), when consumers:

- believe that alternative brands being considered are inadequate
- have insufficient information about the brands under consideration
- receive information from friends or media sources that conflicts with past experiences and current information
- are close to deciding on a particular brand and would like to confirm expectations regarding its performance.

#### **4.3.3 The affective or emotional response**

*Affective responses* refer to feelings and describe something that stimulates wants, touches the emotions, and creates feelings (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:109). Consumers should like an advertising message or brand before they will pay attention or search for more information.

Next follows a discussion on the following key components of affective response and their roles, based on Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising:

- wants
- emotions
- liking.

#### *Key components of affective (emotional) response*

- **Wants**

While needs have been shown to be more cognitive, *wants* are portrayed as being influenced more by emotion or desire (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:109). Whenever a consumer wants something, he/she desires it. This desire is based on emotions like wishes, longings and cravings. Impulse buying is an example of emotional buying or the result of wanting something and not rationally thinking about buying the particular product.

- **Emotions**

There has long been a debate among advertisers about the most effective way of persuading consumers through advertising messages. It used to be generally accepted that rational approaches are the most effective, but more recent research by advertising scholars has determined that emotion may have more impact than rational approaches (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:109). Advertisers use emotional appeals like humour, fear and love to obtain emotional responses.

- **Liking**

Liking a brand is the best predictor of consumers' behaviour (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:110). Responses may vary from a consumer liking the brand or the advertising message; to liking the advertising message and not even remembering the brand being advertised. The opposite is also possible. The consumer might like the brand being advertised, but not the advertisement. However, the main objective for any advertiser is that consumers will enjoy

the advertisement, remember the brand that was advertised, and then take action to obtain the specific product.

#### **4.3.4 Association**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:110) define association as *“communication through symbolism”*. They furthermore explain it as *“the process of making symbolic connections between brand and characteristics, qualities or lifestyles that represent the brand’s image and personality”*. This definition simply explains that the brand should be related to something that the consumer values or likes. The brand then takes on symbolic meaning through such associations.

Symbolism and conditioned learning are used to make associations in a consumer’s mind between a brand and certain desired qualities that define the brand and make it distinctive. When this connection is made, the brand takes on meaning and is transformed from a generic product to a brand with a unique image.

The following key components of association and their roles in effectiveness are discussed next:

- symbolism
- conditioned learning
- brand transformation.

##### *Key components of association*

- **Symbolism**

When a brand stands for a certain quality, the association takes on a symbolic meaning (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:110). Advertisers attempt to build a

relationship between the consumer and a brand, based on the symbolic meaning of the brand.

- **Conditioned learning**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:110) explain conditioned learning as “*the way in which association implants an idea in a consumer’s mind*”. These authors regard conditioned learning as important, since it explains much of the impact of advertising. Advertisements are sometimes designed to elicit a cognitive response, but in some instances they are designed to teach consumers about a product or service in a noncognitive or irrational way. Advertisers want consumers to produce a network of noncognitive associations.

Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:27-28), Burnett and Moriarty (1998:168), Assael (1998), Foxall et al (1998), Statt (1997), Ferguson (1999:157), Mowen (1990) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) identify two types of conditioning: classical conditioning and instrumental conditioning.

According to these authors, *classical conditioning* refers to situations in which responses are automatic or involuntary. They explain it as a response which is learned as a result of the pairing of two stimuli. The response that will be elicited because of classical conditioning or conditioned learning is named a conditioned response.

The basic phenomenon of *classical conditioning* was identified by Ivan Pavlov, when he demonstrated empirically the ways in which dogs develop acquired reflexes (The Oxford Companion to the Mind 1987). As a result of the temporal association with a stimulus which already elicits a response, a previously neutral stimulus comes to elicit a similar, conditioned response. For example, a bell paired with food elicits conditioned salivation. According

to the Oxford Companion to the Mind (1987), Pavlov regarded conditioned behaviour as a reflection of higher nervous activity set in train by stimuli.

Assael (1998:107) elaborates by explaining that classical conditioning is when a secondary stimulus is paired with a primary stimulus that already elicits a particular response. As a result of this pairing, an association is formed.

Assael (1998:107) continues to explain that, eventually, the secondary stimulus will elicit the same reaction as the primary stimulus. The ultimate outcome is thus that the consumer should establish a link between an unconditioned and conditioned stimulus and therefore engage in learning through association.

McSweeney and Bierley (1984) explain that in order for advertisers to use classical conditioning concepts to influence consumers, the following conditions should apply:

- There should be no other stimuli that could overshadow the unconditioned stimulus.
- Unconditioned stimuli should have no previous associations to other brands or product categories.
- The unconditioned stimulus should not be overly familiar and should be presented alone.
- Classical conditioning is more effective when the conditioned stimulus is new.

*Instrumental conditioning* (or operant conditioning) refers to the type of conditioning resulting from either reward or punishment (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:27-28; Assael 1998; Statt 1997) and is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of English (2005) as “a learning process in which behaviour is modified by the reinforcing or inhibiting effect of its consequence”. Instrumental conditioning is used interchangeably with operant conditioning, and the latter is defined by the Dictionary of Zoology (1999) as “conditioning in which an animal forms an association between a particular behaviour and a result that reinforces the

*behaviour, its behaviour being operant (or instrumental) in producing the result*". This definition can be applied to consumers as well. Therefore, when instrumental conditioning takes place, a response is learned or strengthened because it has been associated with certain consequences (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:168). Positive responses to actions are known as positive reinforcement. When the response is a punishment, it is called negative reinforcement. Stimuli can also be ignored. This is then called passive avoidance.

Assael (1998:112) furthermore explains that instrumental conditioning also requires the development of a link between a stimulus and a response. This is different from classical conditioning in the sense that the individual determines the response that provides the greatest satisfaction. No previous stimulus-response connection is therefore required, since response is within the conscious control of the individual.

In the next section, brand transformation and the communication dimensions of branding are outlined as part of instrumental conditioning and shown to use the same six effects that are presented in the facets model of effective advertising.

- **Brand transformation**

Brand transformation is when the brand takes on meaning and becomes something that can be differentiated from other products (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:111). According to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:111), there is no common set of terms to describe the effects of communication on the branding process. They outline the communication dimensions of branding by using the same six effects that are presented in the facets model of effective advertising, and explain that all six of these facets of a brand are driven by communication:

- *Brand identity.* The brand must be distinctive, recognisable and memorable because of its name, logo, colours, typeface, design and slogan.
- *Brand position.* The brand position states what the brand is all about, how it is positioned in the marketplace and what it stands for.
- *Brand personality.* This affective dimension to the meaning of the brand creates the idea that the brand takes on familiar human characteristics, such as friendliness, trustworthiness and snobbery.
- *Brand image.* This is the mental impression that the consumer constructs for a product by understanding the symbolism and associations that create the brand image.
- *Brand promise.* Brand promise establishes a familiar image and an expectation level based on familiarity, consistency and predictability.
- *Brand loyalty.* Consumers have unique relationships with the brands they buy. This builds a connection over time and eventually results in brand loyalty.

Following on association, persuasion is the next important phase of consumer response identified by Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) in their facets model of effective advertising.

#### **4.3.5 Persuasion**

Persuasion is defined by Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:113) as *“the conscious intent on the part of the source to influence or motivate the receiver of a message to believe or do something”*. Advertisers thus try to change consumers’ attitudes and behaviours in order to induce action like buying.

##### *Key components of persuasion*

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:113) explain persuasion according to the facets model of effective advertising, identifying the following key components:

- **Attitudes**

*Attitudes* are of great importance in understanding the consumer response process (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993; Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006; Wilmshurst 1985; Burnett & Moriarty 1998; Assael 1998; Foxall et al 1998 and Schiffman & Kanuk 1997).

Although there are more than 100 definitions of the term (Statt 1997:193), Gordon Allport (1935) over 70 years ago formulated the most frequently used description of attitudes as being learned predispositions. It is therefore a learned tendency to respond to an object or class of objects in a consistently favourable or unfavourable way.

A number of more recent authors, such as Foxall et al (1998:102) and Ferguson (1999:118), define attitudes in a similar way, merely adapting and elaborating on Allport's (1935) definition, while others have come up with completely original descriptions.

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:114), for example, explain an attitude as *"the mental readiness to react to a situation in a given way"*, while Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) explain it as *"a positive or negative disposition towards an object or towards an action relating to that object"*. Wilmshurst (1985:205) holds a similar opinion towards the meaning of attitudes and defines it as *"a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable direction towards a given attitude object"*. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:168-169) explain it along the same lines, emphasising the fact that it is a disposition which can be favourable or unfavourable.

In interpreting these definitions, it becomes clear that an attitude can be either positive or negative. Positive, negative, and neutral attitudes will all induce either action or a lack of action. If an advertiser or marketer can change consumers' attitudes positively towards a product or brand, consumers will be compelled to act based on that specific attitude.

Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:22), Burnett and Moriarty (1998:169), Assael (1998) and Statt (1997:195) view attitudes as consisting of three components: cognition, affect and conation (refer to section 3.2 for a comprehensive discussion on these three basic levels of consumer response). Cognition means to learn, affect to feel, and conation, to do or to act. These authors' explanation of attitudes therefore coincides with the preceding discussion of consumer response levels (refer to section 4.2).

In this section it was explained that consumers proceed through three basic response phases, namely the cognitive, affective and conative phases.

The *cognitive component* of attitudes includes the beliefs and knowledge about the object of the attitude (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:169). It therefore refers to consumers' beliefs about a brand and the characteristics they ascribe to it (Assael 1998:284-285).

The *affective component* of an attitude concerns consumers' feelings about the object and their overall evaluation of the brand. According to Assael (1998:285), the affective component of attitudes is central to the study of attitudes, since it summarises consumers' predisposition to a favourable or unfavourable attitude to the brand or advertising message. These brand and message evaluations are determinants of behaviour.

The *behavioural component* of an attitude is regarded as actions taken towards the object. This can be in the form of buying the product, recommending an organisation to friends or requesting information (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:169; Assael 1998:285).

These components of attitudes basically explain that the consumer learns about the product or service, develops a positive or negative feeling towards it, and then acts in accordance with that feeling (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993).

Wilmshurst (1985) and Statt (1997:202-203) go on to propose that, besides the three components identified by Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Burnett and

Moriarty (1998:169) and Assael (1998), attitudes can be changed by the following means:

- *Reasoned argument* can lead the audience to judge the suggested conclusion as 'true' or 'false'.
- *Positive emotional appeals* (for example, 'Stop smoking and you will feel fitter and food will taste better').
- *Negative emotional appeals* (for example, 'If you don't stop smoking, your lungs may end up looking like this').
- *Mere exposure*. Consumers can, for example, form positive attitudes towards a specific product even if they have only been exposed to the advertising message.
- *Persuasive communication*. Attitudes can be changed when the consumer is exposed to persuasive advertising messages.
- *Cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance theory was discussed in section 3.3.1, but is worth mentioning here as one of the means by which attitudes can be changed. Because consumers want to reach a state of psychological balance, they will alter conflicting attitudes to reduce the resultant tension.

Attitudes are thus a learned predisposition and are formed based on the consumer's specific behaviour (Schiffman & Kanuk 1997:237). It is also evident that attitudes have consistency; Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:237) explain that although attitudes may change from time to time, consumer's actions will be consistent with their attitudes. Another aspect deduced from the above explanation of attitudes is that they occur within a situation. Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:237) explain that circumstances always influence the relationship between an attitude and behaviour.

- **Arguments**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:114) define an argument as being "*based on a cognitive strategy which uses logic, reasons and proofs to make a point*

*and build conviction.*” When consumers watch advertisements that use arguments as a method of persuasion, the advertising message should be clear in order for the consumer to understand the argument and the reasoning behind the point. Only then can a conclusion be reached and can the consumer be persuaded to act, based on the arguments presented in the advertising message.

- **Motivation**

Motivation can be something like a desire, aspiration or stimulus that compels consumers to act in a certain way. It is explained in a more complex manner by Burnett and Moriarty (1998:166) when they define it as “*an inner drive or pressure to act in order to eliminate tension, to satisfy a need or want, to solve a problem, or to restore a sense of equilibrium. A need or desire must be aroused to serve as a motive*”. Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:83) agree that a state of tension within an individual, caused by an unfulfilled need, motivates the individual to act in a certain way. Mowen (1990:145), again, understands motivation to mean “*an activated stage within a person that leads to goal-directed behaviour*”.

Advertisers use sales promotion techniques like gifts, prizes and contests to motivate consumers to purchase certain products (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:114). It is argued that the stronger the motivation, the more likely it is that the consumer will proceed to action such as buying the product or using the service.

Burnett and Moriarty (1998:166) differentiate between two motives: *rational motives* and *emotional motives*. *Rational motives* are drawn from a reasoning process that the consumer perceives as being rational to his/her peers, prior to purchasing a product. *Emotional motives* can be latent in the sense that the consumer is not consciously aware of them. Emotional motives emerge without the consumer thinking or considering the social consequences. When motives are manifest, on the other hand, consumers are aware of them, but unwilling to acknowledge them (Burnett & Moriarty 1998:166-167).

- **Conviction and preference**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:114) explain that effective persuasion results in *conviction*, which means the consumer believes something to be true. Belief might lead to *preference* for a particular product and in the end to action. It is held, though, that consumers will not believe advertising and marketing communication messages if the source is not credible. Consumers tend to disbelieve advertising messages because they know the source is biased and wants to persuade them to act in a certain way. As a result, advertisers have started using doctors, actors and other believable characters in advertising messages. Consumers believe these characters to be credible and will therefore be persuaded more easily.

- **Brand loyalty**

If consumers prefer a particular brand over another or repeatedly purchase that specific brand, it can be deduced that they are loyal to that specific brand. Brand loyalty, according to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:114), is a response that is built on customer satisfaction. If consumers try a product and like it, then they will become more likely to buy it again.

- **Involvement**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:116) describe involvement as “*the degree to which you are engrossed in attending to an ad or making a product decision*”, while Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:21) describe it as “*the degree to which a product requires limited or complex processes of decision making*”.

Advertisers distinguish between products, messages and media on the basis of the level of involvement they require from the consumer. As soon as

advertisers and marketers can get consumers to be involved in the advertising message, they have unlimited attention from them and therefore persuasion is more likely. It is important to note that involvement is not possible if the advertising message is irrelevant to the consumer. The product being advertised should therefore also be important to the consumer. Celsi and Olson (1988:211) agree that a consumer's level of involvement with an object, situation or action is determined by the degree to which he/she perceives that concept to be personally relevant. A concept can be regarded as personally relevant if consumers perceive it to be self-related or in some way instrumental in achieving their personal goals and values. Celsi and Olson (1988:211) introduce a new concept, namely felt involvement. They define this as "a consumer's overall subjective feeling of personal relevance". These authors use the term felt involvement to emphasise the experiential, phenomenological nature of involvement.

Putrevu and Lord (1994) continue to explain involvement in terms of cognitive and affective involvement. They explain that *cognitive involvement* includes utilitarian or cognitive motives and *affective involvement* includes value-expressive or affective motives. Put in simple terms, whenever consumers are cognitively involved with the advertising message, they will intensely process product-feature information with the left brain and whenever they are affectively involved with the advertising message, they will process symbolic quality and image dimensions with the right brain. Cognitive dimensions, according to Putrevu and Lord (1994) therefore include product importance and perceived risk, and affective dimensions include hedonistic values.

Another prominent indicator of involvement is risk. Whenever the decision involved in buying a particular product is risky for the consumer, the involvement in the advertising message will be higher (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993:21).

Decision-making is believed to be the next rational phase in the consumer response process, even though it is not explicitly included in Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising. A discussion on

decision-making now follows on the one on persuasion and precedes the last phase in the facets model, namely behaviour.

#### 4.3.6 Decision-making

Although Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) do not include decision-making as an explicit component in their facets model of effective advertising, it is believed that it should follow on persuasion and precede behaviour. The fact that decision-making was omitted from the facets model can be criticised, since it is believed that after consumers have been persuaded that they need or want the product or service being advertised, they will first make a cognitive decision based on numerous advertising stimuli and then proceed to a certain type of action or behaviour.

Kitchen (1999:166) identifies a number of heuristics which explain the manner in which consumers make decisions. He explains that any consumer wants to choose the best brand possible. This is done in the following ways:

- **Affect referral.** This is a simple strategy in which consumers retrieve their attitudes towards alternative brands from memory. They will choose the brand associated with the most positive attitudes. This process is usually not this simple and therefore Kitchen (1999:166) explains the next strategy, namely, compensatory heuristic.
- **Compensatory heuristic.** Brands have different strengths and weaknesses. Consumers need to decide which attributes and benefits are of most value to them and which they would like to base their buying decisions on.
- **Conjunctive heuristic.** This is a non-compensatory strategy. According to Kitchen (1999:166), a consumer will set standards on all key choice criteria and a brand will only continue to be considered if it meets or exceeds these standards.

After the decision-making process, it is believed that the consumer will proceed to take action. He/she will thus commence to behave in a certain way towards the brand.

#### **4.3.7 Behaviour**

The ultimate goal of any advertising message is to get consumers to behave or act in a certain way. This action may include buying the product, using the service, visiting a store, calling a toll-free number or clicking on a website. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:116) identify a number of types of action in addition to trying or buying the product. The components of the behaviour response are discussed next.

##### *Key components of behaviour*

- **Try and buy**

Any advertiser or marketer wants to ultimately sell the advertised product to the consumer. Consumers are therefore persuaded to buy products or use services, or at least to try them.

- **Contact**

The aim of advertising messages occasionally is to persuade consumers to make contact with the advertiser via a toll-free number, e-mail address, website or response card which should be sent back. Contact can therefore also be an indicator of successful advertising.

- **Prevention**

Social response advertising usually makes use of counter-arguments that involve negative messages about an unwanted behaviour and create the proper incentive to stimulate the desired behaviour.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

This chapter addressed secondary research objective 6 by explaining the theory of consumer response and analysing and explaining the consumer response levels and consumer response process. The theory of consumer response is explained, based on the cognitive, affective and conative (behavioural) phases or stages of consumer response. Even though these phases/stages do not adequately explain the extensive consumer response process, they adequately explain the general consumer response levels. It is thus deduced, based on the above discussion of these response levels, that all consumers usually proceed through these response levels when they are exposed to advertising and marketing communication messages.

It is important to note that consumers do not necessarily follow the sequential pattern of cognition, affection and conation. These phases may follow each other in a different sequence during different situations and in different communication encounters. What is interesting, though, is that these general consumer response levels coincide with the traditional hierarchy models' depiction of the consumer response process. The traditional hierarchy models include the AIDA model (Strong 1925), hierarchy of effect model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961), innovation adoption model (Rogers 1962) and information processing model (McGuire 1978), as discussed in Chapter 3. Since these models adequately explain the basic consumer response process, they will, along with the other models of consumer response, be used as a foundation to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

This chapter furthermore provided a detailed discussion on the consumer response process according to the facets model of effective advertising developed by Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006). This model adequately explains the additional phases of the consumer response process which are

not included in the discussion on the three basic levels of consumer response (cognition, affection and conation). Elements of the consumer response process, such as perception, cognition, affection/emotional response, association, persuasion, decision-making and behaviour, were identified as important consumer response phases and consequently examined.

In the next chapter, these elements will be used to develop theoretical criteria for the consumer response process, which in turn will aid in the development of the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

## CHAPTER 5: THEORETICAL CRITERIA FOR WEB-BASED COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION AND THE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS

*A science without a theory is blind because it lacks that element which alone is able to organise facts and give direction to research. Even from a practical point of view the mere gathering of facts has very limited value. It cannot give an answer to the question that is most important for practical purposes – namely, what must one do to obtain a desired effect in given concrete cases? To answer this question it is necessary to have a theory, but a theory which is empirical and not speculative. This means that theory and facts must be closely related to each other.*

(Lewin 1936)

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:102) affirm that advertisers have been attempting for years to answer the question: How does advertising work? Advertisers need to know what impact advertising has on the receiver of the message. The impact of advertising messages is found in the various types of consumer responses produced by the advertising message (Wells, Moriarty & Burnett 2006:102). The primary research objective of this study is to develop a theoretical framework for the *online* consumer response process. This theoretical framework will attempt to answer Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) question of how advertising works in the context of the online environment. In order to answer this question, theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process should be developed.

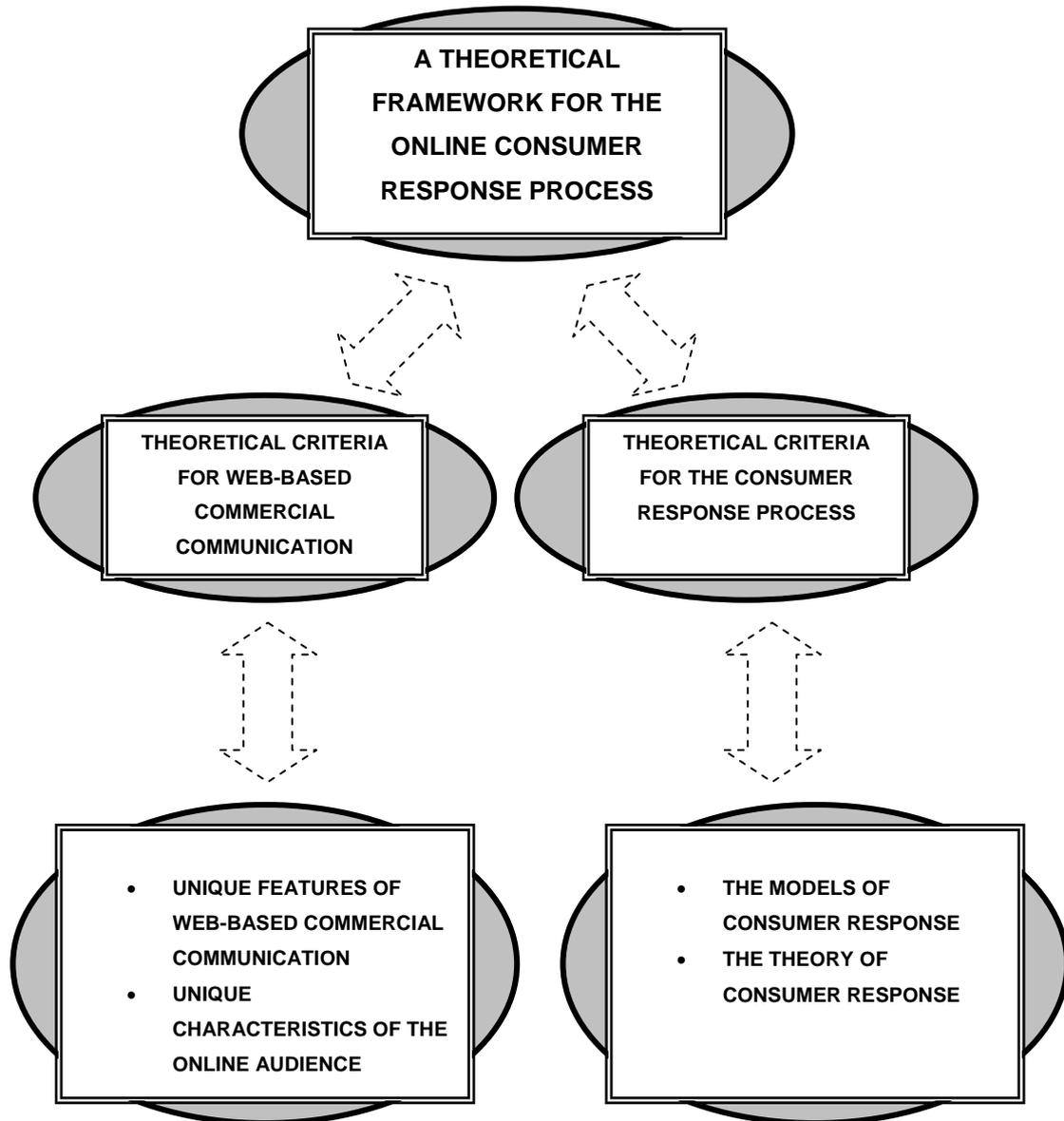
To develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process in Chapter 6, theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process are identified in this chapter. These criteria are based on the discussions on WBCC in Chapter 2, the consumer response models in Chapter 3 and the theory of the consumer response process in Chapter 4.

This chapter commences with an outline of theoretical criteria for WBCC based on the most important features of WBCC and the online consumer audience, and then concludes with the identification of theoretical criteria for the traditional consumer response process.

## **5.2 THEORETICAL CRITERIA FOR WEB-BASED COMMERCIAL COMMUNICATION**

With the dearth of literature on WBCC, and more particularly any discussion on the online consumer response process, this study sets out to develop and propose a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process. Theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process therefore needs to be identified. The theoretical criteria proposed for WBCC are derived from the unique features of WBCC and the online audience as indicators of phases encompassed in the online consumer response process. The theoretical criteria for the consumer response process are furthermore derived from the models of consumer response, as well as the theory of consumer response.

Figure 5.1 contextualises the elements which contribute to the development of the theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process. It furthermore contextualises the theoretical criteria which contribute to the development of the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.



**Figure 5.1: The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process, theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process in context**

The primary objective of this study is to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process based on the unique features and theoretical criteria for WBCC, as well as on the theoretical criteria for the traditional consumer response process.

In order to propose and develop theoretical criteria for WBCC, the following concepts need to be highlighted briefly (refer to Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on these concepts):

- Before explaining the importance of WBCC as a predictor of the distinctive response processes encompassed in the online consumer response process, the *concept of WBCC* should be explained. This concept was developed in Chapter 2 and is repeated here, since it serves as explanation for the complete text:

*Web-based commercial communication is the integration of information-intensive persuasive and influential online advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional, and organisational messages which are accessed voluntarily by, and which have the intent of progressing globally diverse consumers through certain response phases to the point of purchasing or proceeding with a certain action.*

It is evident from the definition of WBCC that all advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional and organisational messages are integrated in the online environment and are not clearly distinguishable from each other.

- It is imperative to study the *Internet* and the *WWW* as communication media for the context of this chapter. The uniqueness thereof is briefly explained here, since concepts from these communication media will serve as indicators of theoretical criteria for WBCC. Authors like Todd (1999), Ainscough (1996), Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002), Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000) and Ihator (2001) namely emphasise the ability of the Internet to allow *access to and the organisation, exchange,*

*sharing* and *displaying* of information at high speed and on a global level. Because of this revolution in the way information is displayed and accessed, organisations are being forced to alter their internal and external communication strategies, theories, paradigms and models. This statement serves as an indication of the uniqueness of WBCC on the Internet and WWW and irrefutably implies unique consumer response phases.

The focus of this section is on **WBCC**, and the unique nature thereof should thus be emphasised:

- Because the process of WBCC is a process of exchange between the organisation and the consumer, it suggests a *dialogue* and *multi-directional communication* instead of uni-directional communication. WBCC messages should be *consistent* across cultures and time zones, as well as across the organisation's overall communication strategy in order to support a unified organisational corporate brand. WBCC should furthermore be *inclusive* and should reach all audiences, both internal and external, on a *continuous* basis (Kiani 1998; Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002; Vescovi 2000; Ihator 2001; Rowley 2004; Koekemoer 1998; Peters 1998).
- Ainscough (1996), when discussing the unique nature of WBCC, suggests that information on the WWW can be transferred across the country or around the world in a matter of seconds. The WWW, and therefore WBCC, is also *interactive*. This unique feature is an advantage of WBCC on the WWW over traditional communications media. The fact that marketers and advertisers are able to amend their marketing communication messages at the last minute suggests the *dynamic* nature of the WWW. Advertisers therefore do not need to take lead time into consideration and they can constantly update and expand their online marketing communication messages at relatively low cost and investment in equipment. The capability of the WWW to incorporate not only text and pictures in websites, but also *sound and*

*video*, makes WBCC unique in its influence on the online consumer response process.

- Rowley (2001) adds to Ainscough's (1996) discussion of the unique nature of WBCC by explaining that anyone can view communication at any time and in any location and that the possibility of individually identifying and *targeting* consumers exists. Because WBCC is primarily text-based, the medium is essentially *cognitive*. This unique feature of WBCC also serves as a theoretical criterium for WBCC and will assist in identifying phases in the online consumer response process.
- As a result of the unique nature of WBCC and specifically its information-intensiveness, consumers have received more *control* over communication interactions with the organisation. Kiani (1998) and Raman and Leckenby (1998) add that the consumer has to actively and voluntarily find or visit the marketer or advertiser's online message. Therefore, marketers and advertisers need to actively attract users. Consumers are usually accidentally exposed to traditional advertising messages, but exposure to WBCC is *deliberate* and *desired* by the consumer. The consumer also chooses the amount of exposure and therefore controls the communication encounter by freely seeking information he/she desires and ignoring other information (Gordon & De Lima-Turner 1997; Ranchhod, Gurau & Lace 2002 and Vescovi 2000). The *freedom of choice* lies with the consumer, thus further distinguishing WBCC from traditional advertising messages. Consumers also need to be competent computer users and require *general literacy* in order to be able to access, browse and understand WBCC messages. This literacy issue is also emphasised because of the *information-intensive* nature of WBCC (Kiani 1998). The focus of WBCC is not on visual persuasion, as in the offline environment, but on information delivery.

- Rowley (2004) states that the objective of any online community is to create value for all stakeholders. Once online consumers are segmented into communities of interest, *personalisation of communication* and a continuing relationship with the consumer is possible. It is thus possible to create value. Janal (1995) adds that WBCC message formats are *consistent*. Consistency should also be evident between the online and offline advertising environments.

It has been established that the Internet is a new and different communication medium and that WBCC on the Internet is therefore also different from traditional marketing communication. It is thus expected that communication processes associated with the Internet, WWW and WBCC will also differ from traditional marketing communication.

The following are unique features of **WBCC** (discussed in detail in Chapter 2), and will assist in deriving and identifying additional levels and phases for the online consumer response process:

- *Interactivity*. For the purposes of this study, the concept of interactivity is segmented into two types: (1) interactive WBCC takes place when the consumer simply interacts with the content of the web pages, linking with other web pages and actively searching for information regarding the organisation and (2) the opportunity for the consumer to engage in two-way communication with the organisation.
- *Flexibility*. Direct feedback can be received from consumers in the virtual environment. WBCC is therefore much more flexible than a physical advertisement, since it can gather fresh and updated information.
- *Addressability*. The identification of online consumers is possible in the online environment because of the Internet's ability to 'memorise' information. Marketers and advertisers can then customise their

WBCC message to reach and influence certain specific online consumers.

- *Swiftness of the communication process.* Speed is one of the major advantages of WBCC, with consumers expecting quick feedback on requests and suggested improvements.
- *Active attraction of consumers to WBCC.* Consumers do not automatically or accidentally visit a website and are thus not accidentally exposed to WBCC. Consumers should be attracted to websites and WBCC messages by means of creative and original approaches.
- *Active engagement of consumers' interest and participation in WBCC messages.* Consumers should be interested in a website and WBCC messages. They will then interact with the messages, and this will ultimately lead to a transaction. This can happen by providing consumers with convenience-oriented content, communities of interest and links to other sites.
- *Ensuring that consumers return to a website.* WBCC messages should be engaging and interesting enough for consumers to feel the need or urge to return to a website and consume more of the available WBCC.
- *Customised interactions.* Marketers and advertisers can customise WBCC messages for an individual or specific audience segment. Because marketers and advertisers have access to consumers' demographic, sociographic and psychographic information, they can tailor-make WBCC especially for them.
- *Accentuation of information delivery.* WBCC is rich in quality and information. The emphasis in the online environment is less on visual

persuasion and more on information. Consumers are able to search for and find information on the organisation whenever they want.

- *Effective target marketing.* The best way to segment audiences in the online environment is to base the segmentation process on their interests and in the process develop communities of interest. Because it is possible to locate consumer information in the online environment, it is possible to reach specific segments of the target audience by customising messages according their individual characteristics.
- *Information empowerment and uncertainty reduction.* In the online environment the organisation is empowered in the sense that it can offer information directly to the consumer without interference from any third party or gatekeeper. The organisation can thus reduce uncertainty by directly reacting on and explaining information to consumers.
- *Purchase facilitation.* By offering product and purchase details, identifying the nearest dealer, quoting prices and offering consumers the choice of buying whenever they are considering making the purchase, the Internet can facilitate transactions.
- *Ease of use.* Because the Internet is easy to use and consumer-friendly, many consumers prefer to access WBCC messages and product information online.
- *Online relationship-building.* WBCC's unique feature of interactivity enables marketers and advertisers to build and manage relationships. Relationship marketing focuses on communication with the consumer rather than to the consumer. This approach emphasises the importance of feedback and two-way communication, which is easy and obtainable in the online environment.

The preceding discussion specifies theoretical criteria for WBCC as indicators of unique phases of the online consumer response process. This discussion is based on the unique features of WBCC. The next section adds to the identification of theoretical criteria for WBCC by discussing the unique ***characteristics of the online audience***. Since the online audience differs in many ways from the traditional consumer audience, it is assumed that these differences will also assist in identifying theoretical criteria for WBCC and unique phases in the online consumer response process (refer to Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on the characteristics of the online consumer audience). The unique characteristics of the online audience include the following:

- *Communities of interest.* A new form of segmentation is taking place in the online environment. This new approach suggests that organisations organise electronic communities to meet multiple social and commercial needs. Consumers are then segmented into communities of interest by classifying them into categories such as communities of transaction, communities of interest, communities of fantasy and communities of relationship.
- *The audience is connected to the organisation.* All organisational stakeholders are connected via the Internet. Consumers are now connected to the organisation and are engaged on a one-to-one basis by the organisation.
- *Members of the audience are connected to each other.* Organisational stakeholders are able to debate organisational activity without the organisation's knowledge. Consumers can talk to each other by means of e-mail, Usenet groups, e-mail listservs, portal discussion areas and consumer forums.

- *Audience members have access to other information.* Audience members have access to a diversity of communication sources and can access different online sources within minutes and even seconds.
- *Audience members pull information.* Consumers pull information by deliberately seeking information in the online environment. Internet traffic pull is the provision of information to individuals at their request. They pull information by using links to directories and other sites.
- *Literacy.* In the information age, new types of literacy like electronic 'document' literacy and 'tool' literacy are required. Consumers are not able to use the internet as information source if they do not have the necessary computer literacy to access this information source.
- *Audience members as information and communication regulators.* Audience members want control over the who, what, where and how of information exchange and initiate their own contacts, control information flow and seek out marketers and products rather than the other way round.
- *Search for enjoyment.* Online consumers search for enjoyment and excitement when they engage with WBCC. The more the consumer enjoys the interaction on a website, the more likely it is that he/she will return to that specific website.
- *Online audience's search for uses and gratifications.* This characteristic of the online audience is closely linked with their search for enjoyment. Consumers will continuously use a website when they receive some type of reward or gratification.

The characteristics of the online consumer audience serve as indicators of theoretical criteria for WBCC. The theoretical criteria for WBCC as indicators

of unique phases of the online consumer response process are indicated in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1: A summary of the theoretical criteria for WBCC**

<b>THEORETICAL CRITERIA</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Accessibility</b>	The Internet and WWW allow access to information at a high speed
<b>Exchange and sharing</b>	On the Internet it is possible for consumers to exchange and share information with all stakeholders, including the organisation and other consumers
<b>Dialogue</b>	WBCC is two-way (between consumer and organisation)
<b>Multi-directional communication</b>	Communication between all stakeholders is possible
<b>Consistency</b>	WBCC messages should be communicated in a consistent manner to all organisational stakeholders in order to disseminate a unified corporate brand
<b>Inclusivity</b>	WBCC should reach all organisational stakeholders
<b>Continuity</b>	WBCC messages should be disseminated on a continuous basis
<b>Interactivity</b>	Consumers are able to interact with web content as well as with the organisation
<b>Dynamic flexibility</b>	WBCC messages can be continuously altered within seconds
<b>Targeting and addressability</b>	It is possible to target specific segments of the audience in the online environment
<b>Cognitive</b>	WBCC is essentially text-based and therefore cognitive
<b>Control</b>	Consumers are in control of the exchange of web-based commercial communication messages with the organisation

<b>Deliberate and desired exposure</b>	Consumers deliberately decide whether they want to expose themselves to WBCC messages
<b>Freedom of choice</b>	Consumers choose the amount of their exposure to WBCC, as well as when, how and to what
<b>Literacy</b>	In order to access and understand WBCC messages, consumers should not only be generally literate, they should also be computer literate
<b>Information-intensivity and accentuation of information delivery</b>	WBCC messages focus on informative and not visual persuasion
<b>Personalisation and customisation of WBCC messages</b>	It is possible to personalise and customise WBCC messages for specific consumers, based on demographics, sociographics and psychographics
<b>Swiftness</b>	The WBCC process and dialogue take place rapidly
<b>Active attraction and repeated access</b>	Consumers should be attracted to WBCC messages in a creative and active manner
<b>Active engagement and participation</b>	WBCC messages should be creative and attractive and ensure that consumers return to the website for further information
<b>Information empowerment and uncertainty reduction</b>	Consumers are empowered by information about the organisation and uncertainty is reduced because of the availability of information
<b>Purchase facilitation</b>	WBCC facilitates purchase by providing information on prices, outlets and transactions
<b>Ease of use</b>	It is easy to access the Internet and use WBCC messages
<b>Online relationship-building</b>	Relationship-building via the Internet is possible because of the unique feature of interactivity

<b>Communities of interest</b>	Consumers can be organised into communities of interest based on interests, needs and desires
<b>Audience connectivity</b>	Audience members are connected to the organisation and to each other via the Internet
<b>Audience access to other information</b>	Interactivity on the Internet allows consumers access to multiple online information sources
<b>Audience information regulation</b>	Audience members decide when they want information, what information they want, how much they want and how they want it
<b>Search for enjoyment and gratification</b>	Consumers want to enjoy searching for information and they want to receive some type of reward for accessing information

### **5.3 THEORETICAL CRITERIA FOR THE GENERAL CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS**

The following discussion of the consumer response models and the general theory of consumer response is presented in a summarised format, based on the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4. Theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process are identified in terms of said models.

#### **5.3.1 Traditional response hierarchy models**

The four best-known traditional response hierarchy models are the AIDA model by Strong (1925); the hierarchy of effects model by Robert Lavidge and Gary Steiner (1961); the innovation adoption model by Rogers (1962); and the information processing model by William McGuire (1978) (for a detailed discussion and evaluation of these models, refer to section 3.2). These models are founded on the premise that the consumer proceeds through three basic consumer response phases, namely the *cognitive*, *affective* and *conative (behavioural)* phases. These basic phases assume a *learn-feel-do sequence*. When these models are combined, they posit the following phases as components of the consumer response process:

- *Cognitive phase.* During the cognitive phase, the consumer response process consists of *attention, awareness, knowledge, presentation* and *comprehension*. During this phase the consumer gathers information about, becomes conversant with and proceeds to understand the advertising message.
- *Affective phase.* During this phase, consumer response phases include *interest, desire, liking, preference, conviction, evaluation, yielding* and *retention*. The affective phase thus depicts the *emotional* phase of the consumer response process.
- *Conative/behavioural phase.* The consumer now proceeds to take some type of action. Phases which can be included here are *action, purchase, trial, adoption* and *behaviour*.

### 5.3.2 Alternative response hierarchies

The alternative response hierarchy models are represented by Ray's (1973) three-orders model of information processing. This model identifies three alternative orderings of the three traditional hierarchy stages, based on perceived product differentiation and product involvement. It describes the same consumer response phases depicted by the traditional response hierarchy models, namely the cognitive, affective and conative/behavioural phases, but adds the elements of involvement and perceived product differentiation as variables which supposedly influence the order of the consumer response hierarchy. The three-orders model of information processing consists of the standard learning hierarchy, the dissonance/attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy, as discussed point-wise below.

- *The standard learning hierarchy.* When consumers are *highly involved* in the advertising message and purchase of the product and when there is *high differentiation* between different brands of the same product, they will proceed through a *learn-feel-do sequence* of

consumer response phases. Consumers will thus proceed firstly through the *cognitive phase*, then the *affective phase* and lastly the *conative/behavioural phase*.

- *The dissonance/attribution hierarchy*. This hierarchy will be apparent when the consumer is highly involved in the advertising message or purchase of the product, but perceived product differentiation is low. This hierarchy suggests a *do-feel-learn sequence* of consumer response phases and thus assumes that the consumer will proceed through the *conative/behavioural phase* first, then through the *affective phase* and lastly through the *cognitive phase*.
- *The low-involvement hierarchy*. This hierarchy suggests that consumer involvement and perceived product differentiation are low. The consumer will thus follow a *learn-do-feel sequence* and will proceed through the *cognitive phase* first, then through the *conative/behavioural phase* and lastly through the *affective phase*.

### **5.3.3 The integrated information response model**

The integrated information response model by Robert Smith and William Swinyard (1982) identifies different response sequences for low-involvement purchases and high-involvement purchases (for a detailed discussion on the integrated information response model, refer to section 3.4).

- For *low-involvement purchases*, the following response sequence may be evident: *cognition – trial – affect – commitment*.
- For *high-involvement purchases*, *messages acceptance* is a prerequisite for *affect* development.

### **5.3.4 The FCB planning model**

The FCB planning model was developed by Richard Vaughn (1980) and couples involvement levels with information processing styles (rational versus emotional), or think/feel dimensions, as the factors deciding which response

hierarchy sequence would be followed and for classifying products categories (for a detailed explanation of the FCB planning model, refer to section 3.5). With the FCB planning model, Vaughn (1980) incorporated the concepts of *thinking* and *feeling* and combined them with *high* and *low involvement*.

The FCB planning model suggests four advertising planning strategies:

- *The informative planning strategy.* This planning strategy depicts the consumer who *thinks* about purchasing products like cars, houses, furniture and new products. This consumer will proceed through a *learn-feel-do sequence* and will be *highly involved* in the purchasing decision.
- *The affective strategy.* This planning strategy depicts the consumer who is *highly involved* in the purchasing decision of products like jewellery, cosmetics, fashion apparel and motorcycles. This consumer will *feel* more about the purchase of these products than thinking about the purchases and will follow a *feel-learn-do sequence*.
- *The habit formation strategy.* This planning strategy involves the consumer who *thinks* about the purchase of products like food and household items and his/her *involvement is low*. This consumer will follow a *do-learn-feel sequence*.
- *The self-satisfaction strategy.* This strategy involves the consumer who *feels* about the purchase of the product rather than thinking about it. His/her *involvement is low* and they will follow a *do-feel-learn sequence* when purchasing products like cigarettes, liquor and candy.

### **5.3.5 The elaboration likelihood model**

The elaboration likelihood model was developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (1993). This model identifies the relationship between *involvement* and *cognitive processing*. It therefore addresses the different ways consumers process and respond to persuasive messages. The concept of elaboration is explained as processing of relevant information, and with this

model a differential processing response to persuasive communication is suggested. This model identifies two routes of persuasion:

- *Central route of persuasion.* *High elaboration* takes place when the consumer thoroughly *thinks* about and carefully *deliberates* on the arguments and persuasive elements in the advertising message.
- *Peripheral route of persuasion.* *Low elaboration* takes place when the consumer does not think or argue about persuasive advertising messages, but makes *inferences* based on positive or negative cues in the message.

Elaboration likelihood is the function of two elements, namely *motivation* and *ability*.

### **5.3.6 The association model of the advertising communication process**

Preston's (1982) association model of the advertising communication process improves on the traditional response hierarchy models (for a detailed discussion on the association model of the advertising communication process, refer to section 3.7). The following steps in the response process are distinguished:

- *Distribution, vehicle exposure and ad exposure.* This model assumes that distribution and vehicle exposure are prerequisites for ad exposure.
- *Ad awareness.* Ad awareness assumes that the consumer *notices* the whole advertisement.
- *Ad elements awareness.* During this step, the consumer becomes aware of the different elements of the advertisement.
- *Product awareness.* During this step, the consumer becomes aware of the product or brand being advertised.

- *Association awareness.* The consumer becomes aware of the associations between the product being advertised and different elements in the advertisement.
- *Association evaluation.* Consumers can make a positive, negative or even neutral association between the product being advertised and the elements or items displayed in the advertisement.
- *Product perception, prior perception and integrated perception.* Consumers will base their integrated perception of a product on prior perception (perception which the consumer holds because of previous encounters with the product) and product perception (the perception that the consumer holds towards the product itself). Integrated perception is the overall picture of the product in the consumers' minds which they will use as a basis for further response.
- *Product evaluation, prior evaluation and integrated evaluation.* Product evaluation is based on the direct advertising input. Consumers hold a prior evaluation of the product, based on past inputs and personal experiences, and form their integrated evaluation based on the prior evaluation and product evaluation.
- *Product stimulation, prior stimulation and integrated stimulation.* These steps describe the process of acquiring an internal stimulus or motivation toward the final step of action. An integrated stimulus is created based on product stimulation, which is derived from direct advertising input, and prior stimulation, which is based on previous stimulation.
- *Action.* Positive stimulation will prompt the last step, namely the action step.

### **5.3.7 The general consumer response process**

The general consumer response process is described based on Wells, Moriarty and Burnett's (2006) facets model of effective advertising. This model includes the following phases/steps in the consumer response process:

**Perception.** Perception is regarded as an important initial step in the consumer response process. Perception is a process of interpretation of stimuli through the five senses. The following elements form part of perception:

- *Selective perception.* This is the process whereby the mind screens out information which is of no use to us.
- *Perceptual distortion.* Consumers distort their perception to fit what they expected to see.
- *Perceptual vigilance.* This is a process whereby consumers receive only information which is most relevant to their needs.
- *Perceptual defence.* This process protects the consumer from threatening or contradictory stimuli, and therefore the consumer perceives information to conform to his/her beliefs and attitudes.
- *Perceptual equilibrium.* This is the process whereby consumers seek consistency between information they have already internalised and new information.
- *Perceptual organisation.* Information will only become useful to a consumer once he/she organises it from raw data into something useful.
- *Perceptual interpretation.* All consumers interpret stimuli differently, based on their values, norms and interests.

The following are key components of perception:

- *Exposure.* Consumers need to be exposed to advertising messages.
- *Attention.* The consumer selectively decides which advertising messages he/she wants to pay attention to.
- *Interest.* Advertising messages should be relevant to the consumer in order for him/her to be interested in the messages.
- *Awareness.* Awareness is an indicator of perception. Consumers should be aware of the advertising message or product and know that they have heard or seen it before or that they know about the brand.

- *Memory: recognition.* Consumers should be able to recognise the advertising message, the advertising elements and the product being advertised. Information is firstly received via the senses. This is called the *encoding* stage. Information is then *retained and stored* and lastly *transferred, tagged* and rendered *retrievable*.

**Cognition.** Cognition refers to how consumers respond to, learn and understand information. The key components of cognition are:

- *Needs.* Cognitive information is provided in the advertisement in order to satisfy consumers' needs.
- *Information.* Advertisers provide cognitive information in an advertisement when the product being advertised is complicated.
- *Cognitive learning.* This type of learning occurs when facts, information and explanations are presented and ultimately lead to understanding.
- *Differentiation.* The consumer needs to be able to differentiate between the different brands.
- *Memory: Recall.* When the consumer can recall the advertising message, the consumer has learned and understood the advertising message and product being advertised.

**Affective/emotional response.** Affective responses refer to feelings and describe something that stimulates wants, touches the emotions and creates feelings. The key components of the affective/emotional response are:

- *Wants.* Want are influenced by emotion or desire. The desire is based on feelings such as wishes, longings and cravings.
- *Emotions.* Advertisers use emotional appeals like humour, fear and love to obtain emotional responses.
- *Liking.* The consumer should like the advertisement as well as the brand being advertised.

**Association.** The brand should be related to something that the consumer values or likes, and then it will take on a symbolic meaning for the consumer. The key components of association are:

- *Symbolism.* When the brand stands for a certain quality, the association takes on a symbolic meaning.
- *Conditioned learning.* *Classical conditioning* refers to situations in which responses are automatic or involuntary. *Instrumental conditioning* refers to the type of conditioning resulting from either reward or punishment.
- *Brand transformation.* Brand transformation is when the brand takes on meaning and becomes something that can be differentiated from other products.

**Persuasion.** Advertisers try to change consumers' attitudes and behaviours in order to induce action like buying by means of persuasion. The key components of persuasion are:

- *Attitudes.* Positive, negative and neutral attitudes can induce action or a lack of action. The *cognitive component* of attitudes includes beliefs and knowledge about the object of the attitude. The *affective component* of attitudes is about the feelings about the object and consumers' overall evaluation of the brand. The *behavioural component* of attitudes is regarded as actions taken towards the object.
- *Arguments.* When consumers watch advertisements that use arguments as a method of persuasion, the advertising message should be clear in order for the consumer to understand the argument and the reasoning behind the point.
- *Motivation.* Motivation can be something like a desire, aspiration or stimulus that compels consumers to act in a certain way. *Rational motives* are drawn from a reasoning process that the consumer perceives as being rational to his/her peers, prior to purchasing a product. *Emotional motives* can be latent in the sense that the

consumer is not consciously aware of them. *Manifest motives* are motives which consumers are aware of but are unwilling to acknowledge.

- *Conviction and preference.* Effective persuasion results in conviction, which means the consumer believes something to be true. Belief might lead to preference for a particular product and, in the end, to action.
- *Loyalty.* Consumers are loyal to a brand when they prefer a particular brand over another or repeatedly purchase that specific brand.
- *Involvement's role in persuasion.* Involvement in an advertising message or product is determined by the relevance of the message or product to the consumer. *Affective involvement* includes value-expressive or affective motives and *cognitive involvement* includes utilitarian or cognitive motives.

***Decision-making.*** After the consumer has been persuaded that he/she needs or wants the product or service being advertised, he/she will first make a cognitive decision based on numerous advertising stimuli and then proceed to a certain type of action or behaviour. *Affect referral* refers to the process whereby consumers retrieve their attitudes towards alternative brands from memory. *Compensatory heuristic* is when consumers have to decide which attributes and benefits are of most value to them and which they would like to base their buying decisions on. *Conjunctive heuristic* is a non-compensatory strategy.

***Behaviour.*** The components of behaviour are:

- *Try and buy.* Consumers are persuaded to buy products or use services, or at least to try them.
- *Contact.* Advertisers want consumers to make contact with them.
- *Prevention.* Social response advertising usually makes use of counter-arguments that involve negative messages about an unwanted behaviour and create the proper incentive to stimulate the desired behaviour.

The theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process as indicators of phases of the online consumer response process are tabled below (Table 5.2). It is emphasised that these theoretical criteria are derived from the consumer response models, as well as from the discussion above on the general consumer response process. The hypothesized theoretical criteria in the table thus include phases from different models. It is important to note that there is a degree of overlap between the different phases, as well as between the theoretical criteria.

**Table 5.2: Theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process**

<b>THEORETICAL CRITERIA</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Cognition (cognitive (learning) phase)</b>	During the cognitive phase, the consumer response process consists of <i>attention, awareness, knowledge, presentation and comprehension.</i>
<b>Affection (affective/emotional (feeling) phase)</b>	During this phase, consumer response phases include <i>interest, desire, liking, preference, conviction, evaluation, yielding and retention.</i>
<b>Conation (conative/behavioural (do) phase)</b>	During this phase, the consumer proceeds to take some type of action. Phases which can be included here, are <i>action, purchase, trial, adoption and behaviour.</i>
<b>Commitment</b>	The consumer becomes committed and loyal to the brand
<b>Message acceptance</b>	The consumer decides to pay attention to the message and accepts the claims offered
<b>Elaboration</b>	Processing of relevant information, thinking about and deliberating on arguments in advertisements
<b>Distribution</b>	This is part of the pre-exposure phase when distribution of the advertising medium should ensure consumer exposure
	Consumers should be successfully exposed

<b>Vehicle exposure</b>	to advertising vehicles
<b>Advertisement exposure</b>	The consumer is exposed to the advertising message
<b>Advertisement awareness</b>	The consumer becomes aware of the advertisement as a whole
<b>Advertisement elements awareness</b>	The consumer becomes aware of specific elements in the advertisement
<b>Product awareness</b>	The consumer becomes aware of the product being advertised
<b>Association awareness</b>	The consumer becomes aware of the associations between the product being advertised and certain elements in the advertisement
<b>Association evaluation</b>	The consumer makes a positive, negative or neutral evaluation of the associations between the product and different elements in the advertisement
<b>Product perception, prior perception and integrated perception</b>	The consumer forms a positive, negative or neutral integrated perception of the product and advertising message based on previously held perceptions/beliefs and perceptions of the product.
<b>Product evaluation, prior evaluation and integrated evaluation</b>	The consumer forms an integrated evaluation based on prior evaluation and product evaluation
<b>Product stimulation, prior stimulation and integrated stimulation</b>	An integrated stimulation towards action is formed based on product stimulation because of direct advertising message stimulation and prior stimulation
<b>Perception</b>	<p>The process of interpretation of stimuli through the five senses. Perception encompasses the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Selective perception</i></li> <li>• <i>Perceptual distortion</i></li> <li>• <i>Perceptual vigilance</i></li> <li>• <i>Perceptual defence</i></li> <li>• <i>Perceptual equilibrium</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Perceptual organisation</i></li> <li>• <i>Perceptual interpretation</i></li> <li>• <i>Exposure</i></li> <li>• <i>Attention</i></li> <li>• <i>Interest</i></li> <li>• <i>Awareness</i></li> <li>• <i>Memory: recognition: encoding, retaining, storing, transferring, tagging and retrieving.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Cognition</b>	<p>Cognition refers to how consumers respond to, learn and understand information and encompasses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Needs</i></li> <li>• <i>Information</i></li> <li>• <i>Cognitive learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Differentiation</i></li> <li>• <i>Memory: Recall</i></li> </ul>
<b>Affective/emotional responses</b>	<p>Affective responses refer to feelings and describe something that stimulates wants, touches the emotions and creates feelings, and encompasses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Wants</i></li> <li>• <i>Emotions</i></li> <li>• <i>Liking</i></li> </ul>
<b>Association</b>	<p>The brand should be related to something that the consumer values or likes and then it will take on symbolic meaning for the consumer. Association encompasses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Symbolism</i></li> <li>• <i>Conditioned learning: Classical conditioning, Instrumental conditioning</i></li> <li>• <i>Brand transformation</i></li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Persuasion</b></p>	<p>Advertisers try to change consumers' attitudes and behaviours in order to induce action like buying by means of persuasion.</p> <p>Persuasion encompasses the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Attitudes: cognitive component, affective component, behavioural component</i></li> <li>• <i>Arguments</i></li> <li>• <i>Motivation: Rational motives, Emotional motive, Manifest motives</i></li> <li>• <i>Conviction and preference</i></li> <li>• <i>Loyalty</i></li> <li>• <i>Involvement's role in persuasion: Affective involvement, cognitive involvement</i></li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Decision-making</b></p>	<p>The consumer decides whether he/she wants to accept the advertising message and buy the product or not:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Affect referral</i></li> <li>• <i>Compensatory heuristic</i></li> <li>• <i>Conjunctive heuristic</i></li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Behaviour</b></p>	<p>The consumer proceeds to take some sort of action and does one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Try and buy</i></li> <li>• <i>Contact</i></li> <li>• <i>Prevention</i></li> </ul>

The theoretical criteria for WBCC indicated in Table 5.1, as well as the theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process indicated in Table 5.2, serve as indicators of the levels and phases encompassed in the online consumer response process.

## **5.4 CONCLUSION**

This chapter addresses secondary research objectives 7 and 8 by indicating and developing theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process, based on discussions on the unique features of WBCC and the online audience in Chapter 2, as well as on advertising response models and the general consumer response process in Chapters 3 and 4. These theoretical criteria are used as indicators of unique phases of the online consumer response process in order to develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS**

*The seeds of great discoveries are constantly floating around us, but they only take rest in minds well prepared to receive them.*

(Cannon 1945)

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

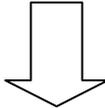
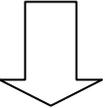
In the previous chapter, the theoretical criteria for WBCC, as well as the theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process were identified. The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process which is developed in this chapter consists of eight different online response levels which the consumer proceeds through when exposed to WBCC. While consumers proceed through the eight different levels of online consumer response, they also simultaneously proceed through various online consumer response phases encompassed in each of the eight online consumer response levels. The online consumer response levels therefore consist of different online consumer response phases.

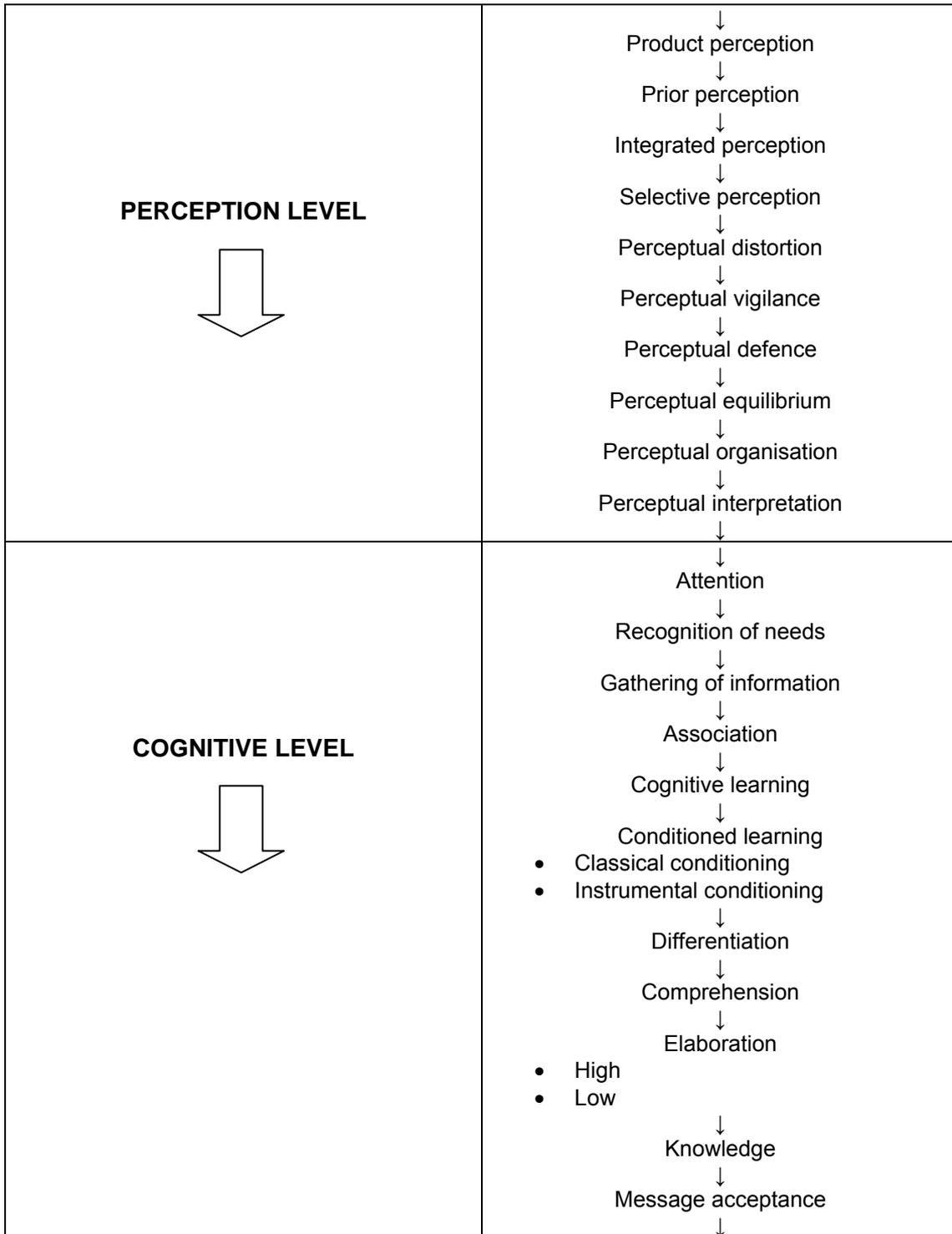
The online consumer response levels do not necessarily follow each other in the proposed sequence, but may overlap with some even being omitted during certain response situations. Variables such as consumer involvement levels, rational and emotional dimensions, topical involvement, perceived product differentiation, type of product and personality traits will influence consumers to proceed through the eight levels of online consumer response in different sequences.

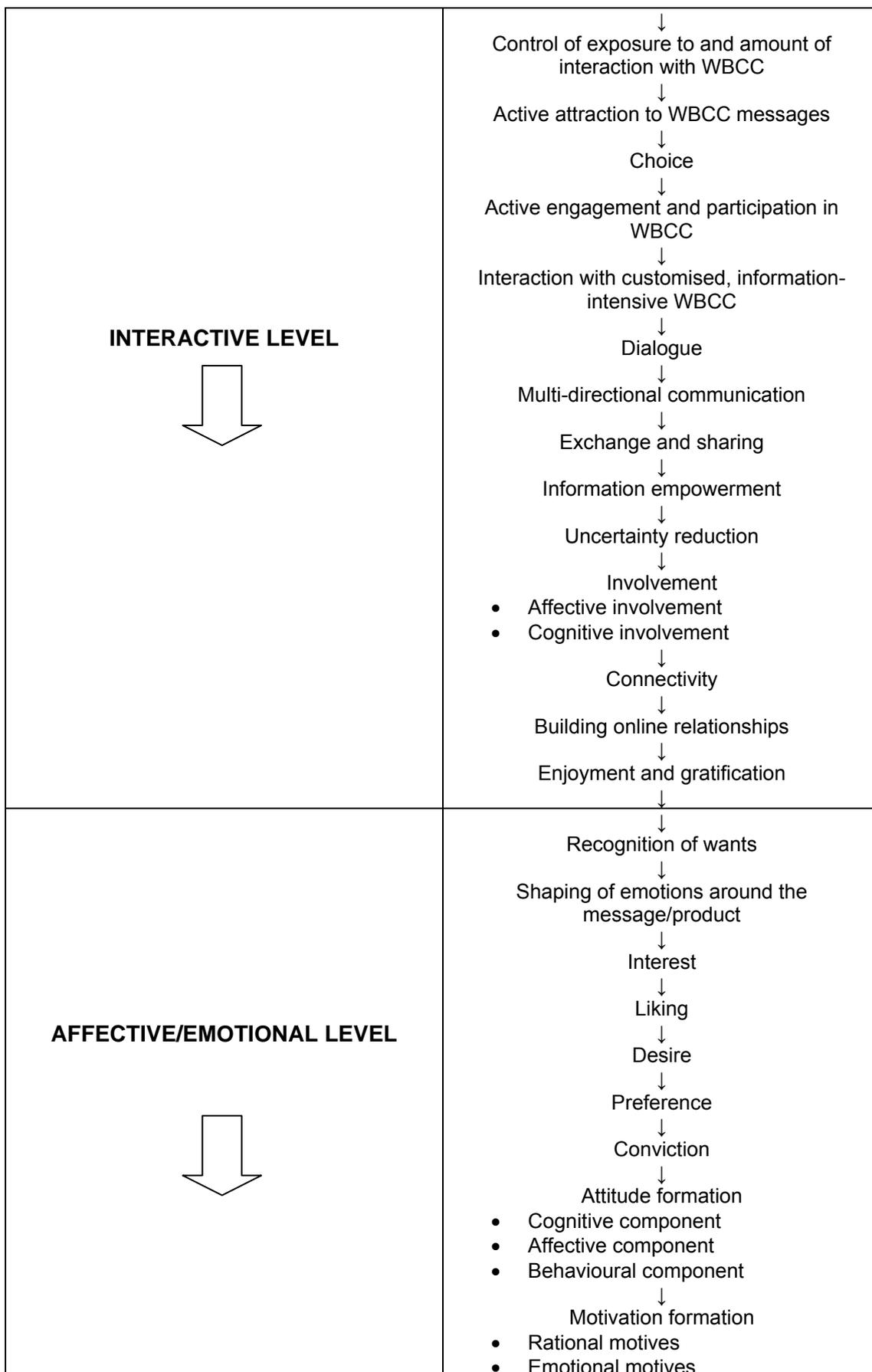
Based on the identified theoretical criteria for WBCC and the general consumer response process, the primary research objective of this study and the main aim of this chapter are to propose and develop the levels and phases for the online consumer response process.

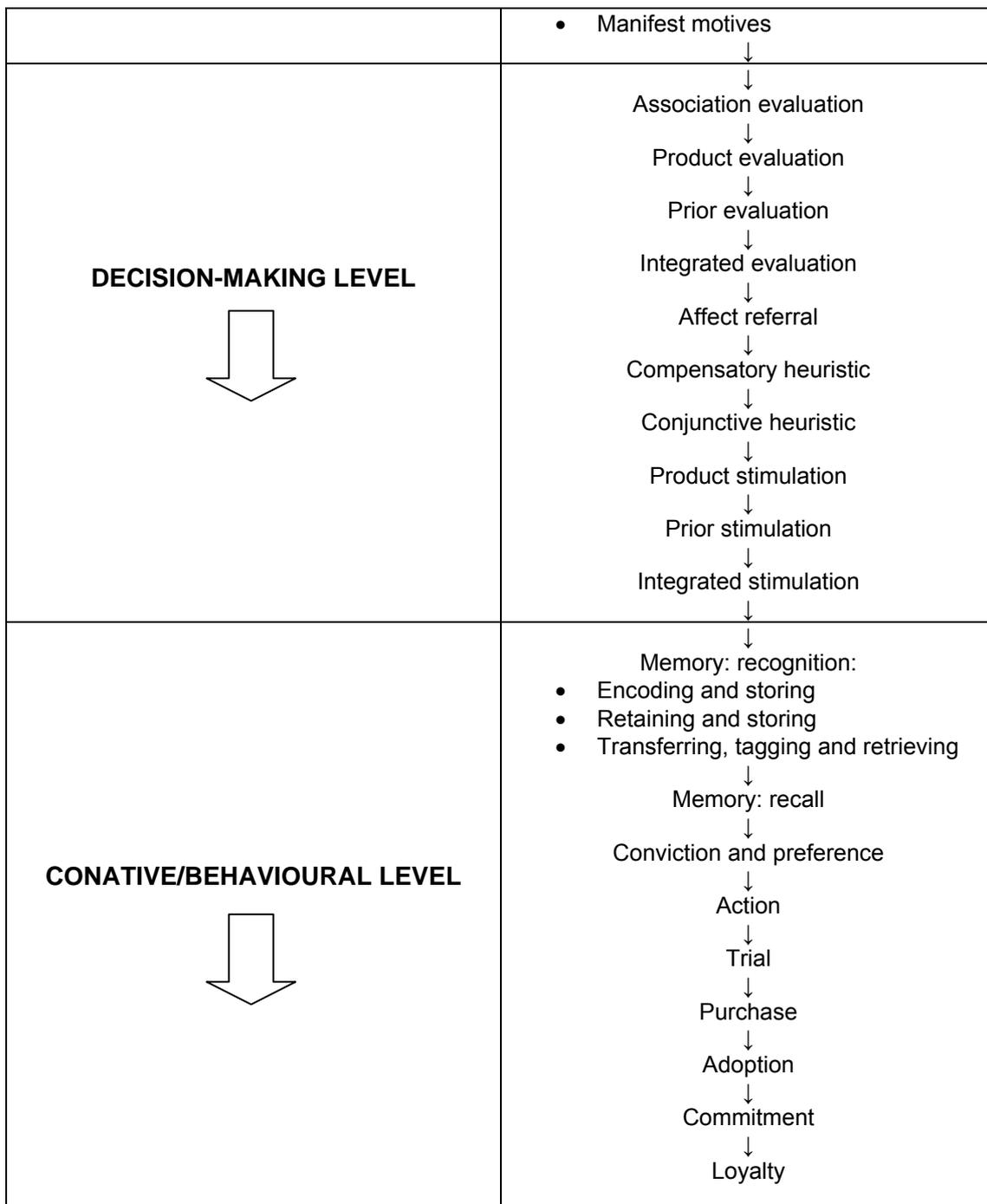
## 6.2 A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS

Figure 6.1 shows eight online consumer response levels, consisting of various online consumer response phases. Consumers proceed through these levels and phases when exposed to WBCC.

ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE LEVELS	ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PHASES
<p data-bbox="341 831 679 864"><b>PRE-EXPOSURE LEVEL</b></p> 	<p data-bbox="890 813 1273 846">Literacy (general and computer)</p> <p data-bbox="1046 869 1117 902">↓</p> <p data-bbox="1046 925 1117 958">Intent</p> <p data-bbox="1046 981 1117 1014">↓</p> <p data-bbox="978 1037 1185 1070">Voluntary access</p> <p data-bbox="1046 1093 1117 1126">↓</p>
<p data-bbox="376 1249 644 1283"><b>EXPOSURE LEVEL</b></p> 	<p data-bbox="978 1099 1185 1133">↓</p> <p data-bbox="978 1155 1185 1189">Vehicle exposure</p> <p data-bbox="1046 1211 1117 1245">↓</p> <p data-bbox="887 1267 1278 1301">Deliberate and desired exposure</p> <p data-bbox="1046 1323 1117 1357">↓</p> <p data-bbox="903 1379 1262 1413">Information pull and regulation</p> <p data-bbox="1046 1435 1117 1469">↓</p> <p data-bbox="978 1491 1185 1525">WBCC exposure</p> <p data-bbox="1046 1547 1117 1581">↓</p> <p data-bbox="1010 1603 1153 1637">Awareness:</p> <ul data-bbox="858 1659 1246 1727" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="858 1659 1126 1693">• WBCC awareness</li> <li data-bbox="858 1693 1246 1727">• WBCC elements awareness</li> <li data-bbox="858 1727 1137 1760">• Product awareness</li> <li data-bbox="858 1760 1182 1794">• Association awareness</li> </ul> <p data-bbox="1046 1816 1117 1850">↓</p>







**Figure 6.1: A theoretical framework for the online consumer response process**

This theoretical framework forms the basis for the discussion of the online consumer response process in the next section.

## 6.3 THE ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS

Based on the depiction of online consumer response levels and phases in Figure 6.1, the online consumer response process may be said to include the following eight consumer response levels, which are discussed in more detail in this section:

- Pre-exposure level
- Exposure level
- Perception level
- Cognitive level
- Interactive level
- Affective/emotional level
- Decision-making level
- Conative/behavioural level.

The traditional consumer response process usually commences with an exposure or cognitive level (Strong 1925; Lavidge & Steiner 1961; Rogers 1962; McGuire 1978; Belch & Belch 2001; Hanekom 2006; Mortimer 2002; Koekemoer 2004; Burnett & Moriarty 1998), but it is argued in this study that the online consumer response process necessitates an additional *pre-exposure level*. This pre-exposure level is not evident in any traditional consumer response model or description of the general consumer response process. The significance of this pre-exposure level for the online consumer response process is explained in the next section.

### 6.3.1 Pre-exposure level

Discussion on a pre-exposure level of consumer response is non-existing in consumer response literature, but for the purposes of this study on the online consumer response process, it is imperative that it be included. The pre-exposure level can be defined as follows:

*During the pre-exposure level of the online consumer response process the online consumer proceeds through literacy, intentional and voluntary access phases during which he/she prepares for exposure to and interaction with WBCC messages, since exposure is not accidental, but deliberate and desired.*

In the offline environment, consumers are usually accidentally and unintentionally exposed to advertising messages (Raman and Leckenby 1998), but it is argued that in the online environment, consumers proceed through a number of phases before they are exposed to WBCC messages.

Exposure to the Internet and WWW is predominantly a cognitive process. Therefore consumers deliberately and consciously decide to expose themselves to the vehicle/medium, as well as to the WBCC message. Since exposure is intentional, consumers can, in many instances, prepare themselves for their encounter with this information-intensive medium/vehicle. Therefore, consumers may proceed through a number of pre-exposure phases before they are even exposed to the Internet, WWW or WBCC message.

It is argued that consumers typically proceed through the following three online consumer response phases during the pre-exposure level of the online consumer response process:

- **Literacy**

Although literacy is also a prerequisite for understanding advertising messages in some of the traditional advertising and marketing communication media, consumers do not necessarily proceed through a literacy phase before they gain access to traditional media. Even an illiterate person can be exposed to traditional advertising and marketing communication messages and still understand the messages in certain types of offline media.

This situation differs in the online environment, where the consumer needs to proceed through a *literacy phase* before he/she can even attempt to access the Internet as WBCC medium. Consumers are unable to access, operate, interact with and understand WBCC messages if they are not alphabetically literate, but also if they are not 'document' and 'tool' literate (Ihator 2001). In the online environment, consumers should be '*document*' literate in order to be able to interpret and use information from different kinds of nonprose formats, such as forms, charts, graphs, maps and other visual displays; as well as '*tool*' literate in order to be able to utilise the Internet as a medium for WBCC (Ihator 2001).

- **Intent**

Raman and Leckenby (1998) state that consumers are usually accidentally exposed to traditional advertising messages, but exposure to WBCC is deliberate and desired by the consumer. Gordon and De Lima-Turner (1997), Ranchhod et al (2002) and Vescovi (2000) furthermore suggest that the online consumer actively chooses whether or not to approach organisations through their websites and thereby exercise control over their exposure to WBCC messages.

It is deduced from the arguments formulated by these various authors that online consumers proceed through an *intentional* phase during which they intend to access the Internet and WBCC messages. Exposure to the WWW and WBCC messages is thus not accidental, but intentional, and therefore it is argued that consumers proceed through a pre-exposure level during which they intend to utilise the Internet to access information.

- **Voluntary access**

This phase of the pre-exposure level is closely linked to the previous phase, intent, where the emphasis was placed on consumers' intention to access information on the Internet and WWW. Authors like Todd (1999), Ainscough

(1996), Ranchhod et al (2002), Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000) and Ihator (2001) emphasise the ability of the Internet to allow the accessing of information at high speed and on a global level. Any consumer is able to access any amount of information whenever he/she so chooses. It is therefore argued that access to the WWW and WBCC messages is voluntary and that the online consumer proceeds through the voluntary access phase of the pre-exposure level of online consumer response. Voluntary access is usually not possible with traditional media, and therefore this phase is included as a unique phase of the pre-exposure level of the online consumer response process.

Access to the Internet and therefore WBCC messages is *voluntary*, since the consumer actively chooses whether he/she wants to access the information. Kiani (1998) and Raman and Leckenby (1998) also emphasise the fact that consumers can *voluntarily access* and visit the Internet and WBCC messages. Voluntary access is the last phase of the pre-exposure level of the online consumer response process. Once the consumer has proceeded through this phase, he/she proceeds to the next level of online consumer response, namely the exposure level.

### **6.3.2 Exposure level**

During the exposure level, the online consumer is exposed to the WBCC message and becomes *aware of it*. During this level, the consumer proceeds through the five consumer response phases discussed below:

- **Vehicle exposure**

When consumers proceed from the pre-exposure level to the exposure level, they are firstly exposed to the WBCC message *vehicle*. Preston (1982) asserts that vehicle exposure serves as an indicator of advertisement exposure. Consumers therefore need to be exposed to the vehicle (medium) before they can be exposed to the advertising message. When Preston's (1982) statement is applied to the online environment, it can be argued that, in the online environment, consumers should be exposed to the Internet before

they can be exposed to WBCC messages. It is evidently impossible to be exposed to a WBCC message if exposure to the Internet (vehicle) does not precede this process.

- **Deliberate and desired exposure**

In the online environment, exposure is not accidental, as is the case in many offline exposure encounters. Consumers actively choose whether they want to access the Internet and WBCC messages. Raman and Leckenby (1998) unequivocally agree and state that consumers are usually accidentally exposed to traditional advertising messages, but exposure to WBCC messages is *deliberate* and *desired* by the consumer. Despite the choice of exposure, the consumer also chooses the amount of exposure and decides what to watch, when and how much. Gordon and De Lima-Turner (1997), Ranchhod et al (2002) and Vescovi (2000) suggest that consumers are free to seek information they desire and ignore other information.

- **Information pull and regulation**

Barker et al (2006) describe Internet traffic pull as the provision of information to individuals at their request. It is argued that during the online consumer response process, the consumer deliberately accesses the Internet in search of information and then *pulls* information from the organisation and *regulates* the amount and frequency of exposure. Ranchhod et al's (2002) explanation that consumers deliberately seek information in the online environment coincides with this argument. Barker et al (2006) elaborate by stating that consumers do this by pulling information through links to directories and other sites. Audience members thus pull the information that suits their needs and interests and do not need to accept every message an organisation wants to send to them (Ranchhod et al 2002). This phase is included as a unique phase in the online consumer response process, since it is not evident in traditional consumer response literature.

- **Web-based commercial communication message exposure**

It is argued that after the consumer has deliberately been exposed to the Internet as WBCC vehicle and has started to pull and regulate information, he/she is *exposed to WBCC*. Although Preston (1982) believes that consumers are not necessarily exposed to the advertising vehicle in the offline environment, it is argued that consumers are necessarily first exposed to the Internet as communication vehicle in the online environment. This specific exposure is mainly deliberate and intentional, because the consumer actively searches for information on a product, service or the organisation, but it can, in some instances, be accidental. The accidental exposure to WBCC messages can be in the form of pop-up banners or online advertisements of a similar nature.

- **Awareness**

The next phase is the awareness phase, which is divided into various categories of awareness by Preston (1982). These comprise Ad awareness, Ad elements awareness, product awareness and association awareness. If applied to the online consumer response process, it can be seen as:

- *WBCC message awareness*. The WBCC message awareness step involves actual noticing of the WBCC message as a whole by the consumer, which cannot be assumed from mere exposure.
- *WBCC elements awareness*. The consumer becomes aware of the different *elements* in the WBCC message which form part of the message and are used to catch the consumer's attention. The purpose of the attention-getting elements is that the advertiser, marketer or organisation hopes that the consumer will be so interested in the advertising message that he/she will

shift his/her attention to the elements relevant to the product being advertised.

- *Product awareness.* The consumer now becomes aware of the product, service or organisation being advertised. Consumers can be aware of the message as a whole or of the different elements in the message, but not of the product or service being advertised. Marketers and advertisers ultimately want the consumer to be aware of the product being advertised. Product awareness is therefore regarded as a separate phase in the consumer response process.
- *Association awareness.* During the association awareness phase, associations are established between the product and whatever items the advertiser or marketer chooses. These items may include the product's own physical or performance attributes or anything apart from the product that the advertiser chooses to associate with it.

### **6.3.3 Perception level**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:104) and Burnett and Moriarty (1998) explain perception as *“the process by which we receive information through our five senses and assign meaning to it”*. At the perception level, it is proposed that the online consumer will proceed through ten phases as described below:

- **Product perception**

The consumer firstly forms a *perception* regarding the *product*, service or organisation being advertised. Preston (1982) explains that product perception is *“the total picture of the product that the consumer acquires from the ad”*. Preston (1982) bases his opinion regarding product perception on perception in the offline environment, but it is applied to the online consumer response process for the purposes of this study. This perception formation does not necessarily only include the product, but may also include perception

formation regarding the organisation and services provided by the organisation.

- **Prior perception**

During this phase, the online consumer remembers all the previous perceptions he/she acquired of the product prior to the exposure to the specific WBCC message. Preston (1982) explains that these *prior perceptions* can come from all prior personal experiences, previous advertisements and all other past inputs. It is most likely that the online consumer's prior perception will be based on offline advertising messages.

- **Integrated perception**

During this phase, the consumer forms an *integrated perception* of the product based on prior perception and the perception he/she is forming while interacting with the WBCC message. Preston (1982) explains integrated perception as "*the overall picture of the product in the consumer's mind which he/she will use as basis for further response*". The online advertiser and marketer should create product perception which is influential in determining the integrated perception.

- **Selective perception**

Although it is important for online advertisers and marketers that the online consumer notices and forms a perception of the complete WBCC message, consumers select certain WBCC messages and only pay attention to some of them or to some of the elements depicted in the WBCC message. This is referred to as selective perception. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:19) explain selective perception as "*the mind's ability to screen out stimuli which are of no use to us and absorb those that are*".

- **Perceptual distortion**

During the *perceptual distortion* phase, the online consumer may ignore some information or alter the meaning of some of the messages in order to perceive a message which is close to what he/she expected to see. Statt (1997:49) understands the process of perceptual distortion as being “*the process whereby consumers distort their perception to fit what they expected to see*”.

- **Perceptual vigilance**

This phase is closely linked with the perceptual distortion phase. *Perceptual vigilance* means that the consumer will only receive and perceive information which is relevant to his/her needs (Assael 1998). Assael (1998: 220-221) explains that when the consumer wants to buy a product which requires high involvement, perceptual vigilance will ensure that the consumer only attends to and retains relevant information.

- **Perceptual defence**

During this phase, the consumer perceives information to conform to his/her beliefs and attitudes and therefore *protects* or *defends* him/herself from threatening or contradictory stimuli. Assael (1998:221) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:164) emphasise that, during this phase, consumers distort information that is not consistent with their needs, values and beliefs.

- **Perceptual equilibrium**

During this phase, the consumer seeks out information which will ensure a state of *psychological equilibrium* (Assael 1998). Assael (1998:84-85) explains that the consumer wants to reach a state that lacks conflict and avoids contradictory information. The online consumer can only reach the ideal psychological and perceptual equilibrium if he/she filters out contradictory information during the perceptual equilibrium phase of the perception level of the online consumer response process.

- **Perceptual organisation**

During the perceptual organisation phase, the consumer organises raw data into something useful. Incoming stimuli, according to Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:19), are categorised, grouped and then integrated with information already existing in the brain during this phase.

- **Perceptual interpretation**

During the perceptual interpretation phase, the consumer *interprets* information received from the WBCC messages. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) explain that since perception is selective and subject to organisation, it is also interpretative. Because all people differ according to their values, norms, interests, motives and backgrounds, they will all interpret stimuli differently (Sinclair & Barenblatt 1993: 19-20; Schiffman & Kanuk 1997:168; Chisnall 1995).

Once the online consumer has gone through all the perceptual phases, he/she has formed a perception regarding the WBCC message, the product or the service advertised, as well as the organisation disseminating the message. Once the perception has been established, he/she proceeds to the next level of the online consumer response process, the cognitive level.

#### **6.3.4 Cognitive level**

At the cognitive level, online consumers gather information and cognitively engage with the WBCC message. They proceed through various cognitive phases during which they gather information on the WBCC message, as well as on the product and service advertised. The following phases take place at the cognitive level of the online consumer response process.

- **Attention**

The first phase of the cognitive level of the online consumer response process is the attention phase. After the consumer has formed a positive perception of the WBCC message, as well as of the product or service, he/she will *pay attention* to the message, the elements encompassed in the message, as well as the product, service or organisation advertised. If the online consumer forms a negative perception of the WBCC message, he/she will most likely end the interaction with the message.

Ashcroft and Hoey (2001) regard attention as the first phase in the offline communication process, when market segments get to know that the product or service exists. Although attention is usually regarded as the first phase of the traditional consumer response process, it is believed to be preceded by other online consumer response levels and phases in the online environment. During the online consumer response process, the attention phase is thus perceived as being part of the cognitive level, which follows on the perceptual level.

- **Recognition of needs**

Once the consumer has started paying attention to the WBCC message, he/she starts to *recognise* his/her needs pertaining the WBCC message and the product or service advertised. Wells et al (2006:108) define needs as “*something you think about*”, which means that the recognition of needs should be part of the cognitive level of the online consumer response process. During this phase, the WBCC message provides the consumer with cognitive information regarding needs.

- **Gathering of information**

If the consumer decides that he/she needs the specific advertised product or service, he/she starts *gathering information* concerning the product. The online consumer thus tries to determine whether or not the specific product or service will satisfy his/her specific need. Since WBCC messages are information-intensive, the consumer should be able to gather enough information in order to make an informed decision. Wells et al (2006:108) state that, during this phase, the online consumer gathers information about product features such as size, price, construction and design.

- **Association**

While the online consumer is gathering information regarding the product, service and organisation, he/she becomes aware of the *associations* suggested between the product, service or organisation advertised and certain elements in the WBCC message. Preston (1982:5) mentions that associations are made with the product's own physical or performance attributes or anything apart from the product that the advertiser chooses to associate with it. He furthermore explains that the value of what the advertiser associates with the product determines the success in obtaining intended sales response.

- **Cognitive learning**

It is accepted that at the cognitive level of the online consumer response process, cognitive learning follows the association phase. The Oxford Dictionary of Sports and Medicine (1998) defines cognitive learning as "*a type of learning which mainly uses cognitive processes, such as perception and reasoning, and in which the contribution of the learner is emphasised*". Wells et al (2006) explain that during the *cognitive learning phase*, facts, information and explanations are presented and ultimately lead to understanding. Assael (1998) agrees that cognitive learning is all about problem-solving and that it focuses on changes in the consumer's psychological set as a result of learning.

- **Conditioned learning**

Wells et al (2006:110) explain conditioned learning as being “*the way in which association implants an idea in a consumer’s mind*”. Most of the WBCC messages are designed to elicit a cognitive response, but sometimes they are designed to teach consumers about a product or service in a noncognitive or irrational way. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Burnett and Moriarty (1998), Assael (1998), Foxall et al (1998), Statt (1997), Ferguson (1999), Mowen (1990) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) differentiate between classical conditioning and instrumental conditioning. When classical conditioning occurs, responses are automatic or involuntary. Instrumental conditioning refers to the type of conditioning resulting from either reward or punishment. The consumer might therefore also proceed through a *conditioned learning phase* when he/she proceeds through the cognitive level of online consumer response.

- **Differentiation**

During the *differentiation* phase, the consumer learns the differences between the different brands of the same product. The consumer should be able, based on the WBCC message, to tell the different brands apart. Wells et al (2006:108) explain that whenever the consumer understands the explanation of the competitive advantage of a product, differentiation is possible. The consumer needs to be able to understand the WBCC message and the features of the product, and has to be able to differentiate between the different brands by comparing them.

- **Comprehension**

*Comprehension*, one of the steps in the information processing model developed by McGuire (1978), is also an important phase at the cognitive level of online consumer response, since the consumer will not interact, adapt, or buy the product or service advertised if he/she does not understand the message.

- **Elaboration**

During the *elaboration phase*, relevant, learned, differentiated and comprehended information is processed (Petty & Cacioppo 1983). Petty and Cacioppo's (1983) elaboration phase is applied to the online consumer response process and it is therefore argued that the processing of web-based commercial information takes place during two different routes of elaboration, namely high and low elaboration:

- *High elaboration* takes place when the online consumer thoroughly thinks about and carefully deliberates on the arguments and persuasive elements in the WBCC message. The online consumer thus carefully thinks about and considers the true merits of the information presented (Kitchen 1999:176; Assael 1998:158; Mowen 1990; Cacioppo & Petty 1989).
- *Low elaboration* takes place when the online consumer does not think or argue about persuasive advertising messages, but makes inferences based on positive or negative cues in the WBCC message (Belch & Belch 2001:162; Hanekom 2006:250). During the low elaboration process, the online consumer's motivation or ability to elaborate on or process WBCC message content is relatively low (Kitchen 1999:176; Assael 1998:158).

Thus, during the elaboration phase of the cognitive level of the online consumer response process, the online consumer either carefully deliberates on the information presented in the WBCC message, or makes inferences based on positive or negative cues in the WBCC message.

- **Knowledge**

Once the online consumer has processed the information provided in the WBCC message, he/she gains *knowledge* regarding the WBCC message, the product or service advertised, and the organisation disseminating the WBCC message. Chisnall (1995:295) explains the knowledge phase as “*relating to information or ideas, or to the intellectual, mental or rational states of the online consumer*”.

- **Web-based commercial communication message acceptance**

The last phase of the cognitive level of the online consumer response process is where the online consumer *accepts* the WBCC message. Belch and Belch (2001:156) point out that message acceptance is a prerequisite for affect development in the traditional consumer response process. Although this can be relevant to the online consumer response process, the affective level or affect development phase follows only after the interactive level of the online consumer response process. WBCC message acceptance is also a prerequisite for the online consumer, since he/she will only be willing and eager to interact with WBCC messages once he/she has accepted the WBCC message.

The next level of online consumer response is the interactive level.

### **6.3.5 Interactive level**

The interactive level of the online consumer response process is unique to the online consumer process, since it is not identified in the traditional consumer response process. It is important to emphasise that interaction with WBCC message content is possible during all the levels and phases of the total online consumer response process. It is thus not necessarily the fifth level of

the online consumer response process, but may be encompassed in all of the other eight online consumer response levels. It is argued that interaction is an exceptionally important level of the online consumer response process, since it is the most obvious response level which sets the online consumer response process apart from the traditional response process.

After the online consumer has cognitively engaged with a WBCC message and accepted the message, as well as the elements in the message, he/she is ready to interact with the content in order to receive more information regarding the product, service or organisation. The online consumer has thus proceeded to the interactive level of the online consumer response process.

It is proposed that the interactive level of the online consumer response process consists of the following 14 phases:

- **Control of exposure to and amount of interaction with Web-based commercial communication**

The first phase of the interactive level is the phase during which the online consumer *controls* the *exposure* to and *amount of interaction* with WBCC. During the online consumer response process the consumer is in control of the interaction with the WBCC message. It is therefore argued that the online consumer cognitively decides whether he/she wants to enter the WBCC encounter, as well as what amount of exposure and interaction he/she desires. The online consumer is thus in complete control of the communication encounter.

With the development of the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process in Figure 6.1, it was established that the online consumer response process includes a pre-exposure level during which the online consumer proceeds through an intentional phase where he/she deliberately decides to access the Internet and WBCC messages. The online consumer thus controls his/her exposure to WBCC and is usually not accidentally exposed to the medium or the WBCC messages. Kiani (1998) and Raman

and Leckenby (1998) state that, in the online environment, the consumer has to actively and voluntarily find or visit the marketer or advertiser's WBCC message, therefore exposure to WBCC messages is deliberate and desired by the consumer. It can be argued that the online consumer *controls* his/her exposure to WBCC. Once the online consumer has decided to enter the online environment and WBCC messages, he/she also controls the amount of interaction he/she has with the website as well as with the content of the WBCC message. Raman and Leckenby (1998) support this argument by stating that in addition to the choice of exposure, the consumer also chooses the amount of exposure to WBCC messages and decides what to watch, when and how much.

- **Active attraction to web-based commercial communication messages**

The next phase is when the online consumer is *actively attracted* to the WBCC message. During this phase, the online consumer has to *actively* and voluntarily find or visit the marketer or advertiser's WBCC message (Kiani 1998; Raman & Leckenby 1998). Heinen (1996) elaborates that no guarantees exist in the online world that a consumer will automatically visit a website, interact with WBCC messages or engage in two-way communication with an organisation.

- **Choice**

It is argued that the choice phase is one of the central phases of the online consumer response process which distinguishes the online consumer response process from the traditional consumer response process. Online consumers proceed through this phase when they *choose* (1) whether they want to approach the organisation through their website (Gordon & De Lima-Turner 1997; Ranchhod et al 2002; Vescovi 2000), and (2) whether they want to interact with the content. During this phase, the online consumer thus actively chooses whether he/she wants to pay attention to the WBCC

message, whether he/she wants to interact with the content of the message by entering various links and also whether he/she wants to interact with the organisation by providing feedback, or interact with other stakeholders by entering discussions.

- **Active engagement and participation in web-based commercial communication**

If the online consumer chooses to access WBCC messages he/she now proceeds through a phase during which he/she *actively engages* and *participates* in WBCC. According to Kiani (1998), the importance of online consumers engaging and participating in WBCC cannot be overemphasised. If online consumers choose to actively engage in a website and are interested in the WBCC message, they will interact with and participate in the WBCC message.

- **Interaction with customised, information-intensive web-based commercial communication**

During this phase, the online consumer chooses to engage and participate in WBCC and *interact with customised, information-intensive* WBCC messages. Ribbink, van Riel, Liljander and Streukens (2004) and Kiani (1998) elucidate that a website can be personalised to suit the consumer's needs and can thus be customised to fit specific consumers' needs and wants. It is thus possible to customise interactions between a specific consumer and the organisation by targeting individuals and disseminating personalised messages. In addition to the fact that information and interactions can be customised, WBCC is also information-intensive. Kanso and Nelson (2004) explain this concept by pointing out that the Internet offers more content-rich information about specific features of a product. The emphasis of WBCC is more on information and content-delivery and less on visual persuasion. The online consumer thus proceeds through this phase by interacting with customised and information-intensive WBCC messages.

- **Dialogue**

Once the online consumer starts interacting, engaging and participating in WBCC, he/she proceeds through a phase during which a *dialogue* between the organisation and the consumer is established. It is argued that this is another unique phase of the online consumer response process which differentiates the online consumer response process from the traditional consumer response process. In the online environment, direct feedback is possible. Kiani (1998) and Ranchhod, Gurau and Lace (2002) therefore agree that, in essence, the process of WBCC is a process of exchange and should therefore be regarded as a dialogue.

- **Multi-directional communication**

During this phase, the consumer engages in conversation with or gives feedback to the organisation, as well as engaging in conversation with other organisational stakeholders. The online consumer thereby proceeds through the *multi-directional communication phase* of the interactive level of the online consumer response process. Ranchhod et al (2002), Kiani (1998), Vescovi (2000), Ihator (2001), Rowley (2004) and Koekemoer (1998) affirm that multi-directional communication is characteristic of the nature of online communication. During this phase, everybody, including the organisation as well as the audience members and all stakeholders, are communicators and are interconnected. Stakeholders are able to discuss and debate organisational activity without the organisation's knowledge (Ranchhod et al 2002).

- **Exchange and sharing**

It is argued that during the exchange and sharing phase, the online consumer can *exchange* and *share* information with all stakeholders, including the organisation and other consumers. Todd (1999) and Ainscough (1996)

support this argument by emphasising the ability of the Internet to allow the exchange and sharing of information at high speed.

- **Information empowerment**

The *information empowerment* phase follows the exchange and sharing phase, but also collaborates with it. According to Ihator (2001), online consumers can now interact online with stakeholders and even with the organisation. Information-sharing is thus possible, because they can now go directly to the source of the information and share their viewpoints with each other. The online consumer thus proceeds through an *information empowerment phase* during which he/she is empowered with information regarding the product, service or organisation and can use this information in making informed decisions.

- **Uncertainty reduction**

The *uncertainty reduction phase* explains the process whereby the online consumer acquires directly disseminated information from the organisation. It is proposed that at this phase uncertainty is reduced, because the online consumer knows that no gatekeeper or third party has interpreted the WBCC message. Because the organisation has the ability to acquire, process, interpret and directly disseminate information, misinformation, disinformation and misinterpretation do not take place (Ihator 2001). It is argued that the online consumer's uncertainty regarding the credibility of the WBCC message is diminished, because he/she knows that the organisation is the primary source and that no third party has altered the meaning of the message.

- **Involvement**

During this phase, the online consumer becomes *involved* in the WBCC message, the product and service advertised, and the organisation disseminating the WBCC message by interacting with it and determining its personal relevance. While the online consumer proceeds through the

involvement phase of the interactive level of the online consumer response process, he/she determines whether the WBCC message or product or service advertised is relevant to him/her, by evaluating the personal relevance of the product, service, organisation and WBCC message (Celsi and Olson 1998:211). Putrevu and Lord (1994) explain involvement in terms of two types:

- *Affective involvement.* While the online consumer proceeds through the affective involvement phase, he/she processes symbolic quality and image dimensions with the right brain.
- *Cognitive involvement.* While the online consumer proceeds through the cognitive involvement phase, he/she intensely processes product-feature information with the left brain.

- **Connectivity**

The Internet as WBCC medium allows the online consumer to proceed through phases of sharing and exchanging information and participating in a dialogue as well as multi-directional communication. These phases overlap with the connectivity phase, during which the consumer is *connected* to the organisation as well as to other online audience members. Ranchhod et al (2002) describe detachment as one of the features of the old communication model (mass communication model), where the communicator was isolated from the audience, thus creating a uni-directional communication channel. On the Internet, all stakeholders are connected via the network. The online consumer is connected not only with the organisation, but also with other online audience members (Ranchhod et al 2002; Rowley 2001). The fact that the online consumer is connected with the organisation as well as other online audience members during this phase implies that he/she is interactively exchanging information.

- **Building online relationships**

During this phase, *online relationships* are built with all organisational stakeholders (Lagrosen 2005). Online relations are created when organisations and online consumers interact on an ongoing basis via the Internet (Hanson 2000:188). The importance of feedback and two-way communication is stressed during this phase.

- **Enjoyment and gratification**

If online consumers enjoy their interactions with the WBCC messages, they proceed through an *enjoyment* and *gratification* phase. It is argued that online consumers need to enjoy their interactions in order for them to return to a website or WBCC message. According to Newman, Stem and Prott (2004), the more the online consumers enjoy the interaction on a website, the more they will habitually return to the website. Joines, Scherer and Scheufele (2003) add that various audience members may seek different uses and gratifications within the same medium or media content. Users may initially interact with a website because of curiosity, but what is important is the continuous use of the website.

The next level is the affective/emotional level.

### **6.3.6 Affective/emotional level**

This level consists of different phases during which online consumers shape their emotions regarding the product or service advertised, the organisation disseminating the WBCC message, and the WBCC message itself. It is important to note that if the online consumer does not form positive affections or emotions towards the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will not proceed to the last two phases of the online consumer response process, namely the decision-making and conative/behavioural phases.

- **Recognition of wants**

If the online consumer has interactively engaged with the content of the WBCC message, he/she will have *recognised* his/her *wants* in terms of the product or service advertised or in terms of the elements portrayed in the WBCC message. Wants are portrayed, according to Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:109), as influenced by emotion or desire. Therefore, the recognition of wants phase is depicted as being part of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process. Whenever an online consumer wants something, he/she desires it. This desire is based on emotions like wishes, longings and cravings.

- **Shaping of emotions around the message/product**

During this phase of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process, the online consumer develops positive or negative *emotions* regarding the product, service or organisation. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:109) determine that emotions regarding a product have more impact than rational approaches or thoughts. If the online consumer has developed positive emotions regarding the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will become interested in the product, service, organisation or WBCC message. If the online consumer has developed negative emotions regarding the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will end his/her interaction with the message.

- **Interest**

During the *interest phase*, the online consumer becomes interested in the product, service, organisation or WBCC message. The AIDA model developed by Strong (1925) (for a detailed discussion and evaluation of the AIDA model, refer to section 4.2.1), as well as the innovation adoption model developed by Rogers (1962) (for a detailed discussion on the innovation

adoption model, refer to section 4.2.3) both contain an interest phase, which forms part of the affective stage of the traditional consumer response process. Even though these models are indicative of the traditional consumer response process, the interest phase encompassed in these models is descriptive of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process. If the online consumer is interested in the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will interact with it and proceed through the remaining online consumer response levels and phases. If, on the other hand, the online consumer is not interested in the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will end his/her interaction with the specific message.

- **Liking**

If the online consumer is interested in the product, service or WBCC message, he/she will start *liking* it. Liking is a phase which is encompassed in the affective stage of the hierarchy of effects model developed by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) (for a detailed discussion on the hierarchy of effects model, refer to section 4.2.2). Although this model describes the traditional consumer response process, liking is also a phase which is indicative of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process. It is argued that, just like in the offline environment, the online consumer should also like the product, service or WBCC in order for him/her to act positively towards it by ultimately purchasing the product or using the service. If the consumer continues to like the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will continue to the next phase of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process, namely the desire phase.

- **Desire**

During this phase, the online consumer is interested in the product or service, likes it and, if positively evaluated, will *desire* the product or service. Desire is one of the phases encompassed in the affective stage of the AIDA model and is once again indicative of the traditional consumer response process, but

may also describe the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process.

- **Preference**

During this phase, the online consumer *prefers* the specific product, service, organisation or WBCC message above any other. Preference, according to Chisnall (1995:295), is concerned with the forming of favourable attitudes or feelings towards the product or service advertised. The preference phase is also encompassed in the affective stage of the hierarchy of effects model, but describes the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process as well.

- **Conviction**

During this phase, the online consumer assures and convinces him/herself that he/she is making the right choice by attending to the specific WBCC message. *Conviction* is a phase in the affective stage of the hierarchy of effects model developed by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) (for a detailed discussion on the hierarchy of effects model, refer to section 4.2.2), but also describes the online consumer response process. If the online consumer is sure that he/she is making the right choice, he/she will proceed to the attitude formation phase of the affective/emotional level.

- **Attitude formation**

During the attitude formation phase, the online consumer forms a favourable or unfavourable attitude or disposition towards the product, service, organisation or WBCC message. If the online consumer's attitude is positively changed towards the product, brand, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she will be compelled to act based on that specific attitude. If his/her attitude is negatively changed, he/she will end the

interaction and will not proceed to the last level, namely the conative/behavioural level.

*Attitude formation* is an important phase of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process, since this phase determines whether the online consumer is going to act positively or negatively towards the WBCC message. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993), Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006), Wilmshurst (1985), Burnett and Moriarty (1998), Assael (1998), Foxall et al (1998) and Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) all regard attitude formation as an important phase in the consumer response process. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993:22), Burnett and Moriarty (1998:169), Assael (1998) and Statt (1997:157) view attitudes as consisting of three components:

- When the online consumer proceeds through the *cognitive component* of the attitude formation phase, he/she forms beliefs and gains knowledge regarding the object of the attitude.
- When the online consumer proceeds through the *affective component* of the attitude formation phase, he/she develops feelings about the object and product.
- When the online consumer proceeds through the *behavioural component* of the attitude formation phase, he/she takes action. This action can be in the form of interacting with the WBCC message or buying the product advertised.

- **Motivation formation**

The motivation formation phase is the last phase of the affective/emotional level of the online consumer response process and it is argued that this is the phase during which something like a desire, aspiration or stimulus compels the online consumer to act in a certain way. The online consumer has formed a positive attitude regarding the product, service, organisation or WBCC message and now proceeds through the *motivation* phase, during which he/she is compelled to act in a certain way. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:166), Schiffman and Kanuk (1997:83), and Mowen (1990:145) regard motivation

formation as a process during which an inner drive pressures the individual to act in a certain way in order to relieve tension, and which leads to goal-directed behaviour. Burnett and Moriarty (1998:166) differentiate between three different motives:

- When the online consumer proceeds through the *rational motive* formation phase, he/she reasons about the product, service, organisation or WBCC message.
- When the online consumer proceeds through the *emotional motive* formation phase, he/she is not consciously aware of the emotional motives.
- When the online consumer proceeds through the *manifest motive* formation phase, he/she is aware of the motives, but is not willing to acknowledge them.

### **6.3.7 Decision-making level**

The decision-making level of the online consumer response process consists of ten different phases, of which association evaluation is the first. These phases are based on Preston's (1982) description of the traditional consumer response process and were adapted for the online consumer response process for the purposes of this study.

- **Association evaluation**

During the cognitive level of the online consumer response process, the online consumer associates different elements in the WBCC message with the product advertised (refer to section 6.2.4). During the association evaluation phase of the decision-making level, the online consumer *evaluates* these *associations*. The association evaluation phase is the phase during which the consumer decides whether he/she is going to make a positive or negative association between the products and the elements depicted in the message. The decision-making process thus begins with the decision of

whether or not the associations between the elements depicted in the WBCC message and the product advertised are going to be positive or negative.

- **Product evaluation**

Once the online consumer has decided whether the associations between the elements in the WBCC message and the product advertised are positive or negative, he/she proceeds through a phase during which he/she decides how he/she is going to evaluate the product itself. The *product evaluation* phase is part of the decision-making level, because the online consumer decides how he/she feels about it and whether or not he/she will buy it. Product evaluation is based on the direct advertising (WBCC message) input and represents what in the consumer's view, the advertisement (WBCC message) is communicating to him/her.

- **Prior evaluation**

During this phase the online consumer retrieves prior evaluations of the product, service, organisation or WBCC message. These prior evaluations influence his/her product evaluation during the decision-making level of the online consumer response process, as well as his/her decisions regarding the purchase of the product or acceptance of the WBCC message. The online consumer usually holds a prior evaluation of the product, based on past inputs and personal experiences.

- **Integrated evaluation**

During this phase, the online consumer integrates his/her product evaluation with his/her prior evaluation and forms an *integrated evaluation* of the product, service, organisation or WBCC message. The integrated evaluation phase represents how the consumer decides to feel about the product, service, organisation or WBCC message.

- **Affect referral**

The affect referral phase allows the online consumer to go through a simple process during which he/she retrieves his/her attitudes towards alternative brands from memory (Kitchen 1999:165). The online consumer will choose the product which is associated with the most positive attitudes. This *affect referral* phase thus assists the online consumer at the decision-making level.

- **Compensatory heuristic**

During the compensatory heuristic phase, the online consumer decides which attributes and benefits are of most value to him/her and which he/she would like to base his/her buying decisions on (Kitchen 1999:165). Different products, services, organisations and WBCC messages have different strengths and weaknesses, and therefore the *compensatory heuristic* assists the online consumer during the decision-making level of the online consumer response process.

- **Conjunctive heuristic**

During the *conjunctive heuristic* phase, the online consumer practises a non-compensatory strategy (Kitchen 1999). The consumer will, according to Kitchen (1999:166), set standards on all key choice criteria during this phase, and a product, service, organisation or WBCC message will only continue to be considered if it meets or exceeds these standards.

The following three phases describe the process of acquiring an internal stimulus or motivation toward the final level of the online consumer response process, namely the conative/behavioural level:

- **Product stimulation**

*Product stimulation* is derived from direct WBCC message input. During this phase, the online consumer is stimulated towards the product in order to create a motivation for him/her to act/behave on.

- **Prior stimulation**

The *prior stimulation* phase follows the product stimulation phase and describes the process during which the online consumer retrieves previous stimulation encounters.

- **Integrated stimulation**

During this phase, the product stimulation and prior stimulation phases are integrated to form the *integrated stimulation* phase. It is argued that the integrated stimulation phase refers to the process during which the online consumer acquires an internal motivation toward the last level of the online consumer response process, namely the conative/behavioural level. The integrated stimulation is based on the product stimulation and prior stimulation.

The online consumer has now decided whether or not to proceed into action, that is, whether or not to buy the product or use the service. The decision-making level is thus followed by the conative/behavioural level of the online consumer response process.

### **6.3.8 Conative/behavioural level**

The last level in the online consumer response process is the conative/behavioural level. The online consumer proceeds through the various levels of the online consumer response process in order to reach the final level, during which he/she acts or behaves in a certain manner. It is

important to emphasise that not every online consumer will proceed to the final level, since it is possible that the interaction with the WBCC message may be ended at any given moment. However, it is every marketer and advertiser's goal to persuade the online consumer in such a way that he/she will ultimately act by buying the product, using the service, approaching the organisation or interacting with the WBCC message. The following eight phases constitute the conative/behavioural level:

- **Memory: recognition**

If online consumers begin to act towards the product, service, organisation or WBCC message in a positive or negative way, they need to retrieve WBCC message information from *memory* and base their decision on the information provided in the WBCC message. When online consumers *recognise* elements from the WBCC message which they previously interacted with when they want to buy the relevant product, they proceed through the memory: recognition phase. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006:106) assert that when consumers remember seeing an advertisement in the offline environment, they are able to recognise the advertisement or product being advertised. This can also be true for the online environment. Sinclair and Barenblatt (1993) explain memory in terms of stages of information processing:

- *Encoding and storing stage.* During this stage, the online consumer receives information via the senses. Stimuli are heard, seen, smelt, felt or tasted. The inflowing stimulus is stored automatically without conscious effort.
- *Retaining and storing stage.* During this stage, the online consumer proceeds through a process where information is retained and stored for future use.
- *Transferring, tagging and retrieving stage.* During this phase, the online consumer proceeds through a process of linking information with already known information. Only then will the online consumer be able to retain and retrieve information.

- **Memory: recall**

It is argued that, during this phase, the online consumer *recalls* the message disseminated by the WBCC message. He/she thus *remembers* what it said. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) explain that when the consumer recalls the advertising message or product, it is a measure of learning or understanding. According to Foxall et al (1998:82), comprehension takes place during the memory: recall phase when the consumer can assign meaning to the elements of the message content and form new representations which themselves can be stored in memory. The online consumer should thus be able to retrieve information from memory during the conative/behavioural level of the online consumer response process, but before he/she purchases the product or uses the service.

- **Conviction and preference**

During the *conviction* phase, the online consumer believes the claims made in the WBCC message to be true. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) explain that effective persuasion results in conviction, which means that the consumer believes something to be true. The online consumer then proceeds to the *preference* phase, during which he/she prefers a specific product, service or organisation based on the WBCC message. If the online consumer prefers the product, service, organisation or WBCC message, he/she might proceed to the later phases of the conative/behavioural level, namely the action and purchase phases.

- **Action**

The online consumer has now remembered the WBCC message, become convinced, and prefers the specific product or service advertised. It is argued that he/she now proceeds into *action*. This is the phase during which the online consumer starts behaving in a specific manner towards the product or

service advertised. Strong (1925) identifies the action step as the last step in the traditional consumer response process and also as the last step of the behavioural stage of the AIDA model. Although Strong (1925) describes the traditional consumer response process, his explanations of the action step of the AIDA model are, for the purposes of this study, applied to the online consumer response process as well.

- **Trial**

During the trial phase, the online consumer *tries out* the product or service advertised. He/she can do this by, for example, ordering books for a trial period or tasting a product if he/she visits a shop. Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) assert that consumers are persuaded to at least try a product in the hope that the trial will motivate them to buy the product.

- **Purchase**

Wells, Moriarty and Burnett (2006) explain that marketers and advertisers want to ultimately sell the product to the consumer and therefore try to persuade them to buy the product or use a specific service. If the consumer liked the products or service that he/she tried out, he/she might *purchase* it or use the service.

- **Adoption**

During the adoption phase the online consumer *adopts* the product or service. He/she is thus pleased with the purchase and will most likely purchase the same product or use the same service again. Belch and Belch (2001) state that consumers make their purchase decisions based on the trial and purchase phases of the conative/behavioural level and then either adopt or reject the product or service.

- **Commitment and loyalty**

The *commitment* and *loyalty* phase allows the online consumer to become committed to the specific product or service. He/she has adopted the product or service, is satisfied with it and therefore becomes committed to buying or using it repeatedly. The online consumer has thus become loyal to the product, service or organisation. Commitment is also a stage in the response sequence depicted by the integrated information response model developed by Smith and Swinyard (1982). Belch and Belch (2001) furthermore explain that direct experience that results from trial purchase leads to high information acceptance and higher-order beliefs and affect, which can result in commitment or brand loyalty.

#### **6.4 CONCLUSION**

This chapter addressed the primary research objective of this study. It commenced with a graphical depiction and summary of the proposed theoretical framework for the online consumer response process. It then continued with a clarification and explanation of the eight online consumer response levels and the online consumer response phases encompassed therein. The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process which was developed in this chapter is based on the theoretical criteria for WBCC and the general consumer response process discussed in Chapter 5.

It was indicated in this chapter that the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process consists of eight online consumer response levels, namely the *pre-exposure level*, *exposure level*, *perception level*, *cognitive level*, *interactive level*, *affective/emotional level*, *decision-making level* and *conative/behavioural level*. Each of these eight online consumer response levels consists of various online consumer response phases.

It is important to emphasise that the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process developed in this chapter indicates that the online consumer proceeds through the online consumer response levels in a

hierarchical as well as a linear manner. Although the theoretical framework was developed to show the general online consumer response process, consumers may admittedly proceed through the levels and phases in a totally different sequence than the one depicted in the theoretical framework. It is also emphasised that many online consumers may not proceed through all the online consumer response levels and that any online consumer may end the online consumer response process at any given moment in time. Online consumer response levels and phases may also overlap and the sequential order may be altered because of different variables which may influence the online consumer response process. These variables include high and low involvement, thinking versus feeling types of products, consumers' personality traits and characteristics, and perceived product differentiation and risk (refer to Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on these variables).

Even though the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process is not applicable to all online consumer response situations, it is a comprehensive theoretical framework that is able to explain the online consumer response process.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.*

(Sir Winston Churchill 1942)

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter commences by presenting a conclusion of the study in terms of the primary and secondary research objectives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research and an indication of the contributions of the study to the field of communication science.

### **7.2 CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS RELATING TO THE SECONDARY RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Secondary research objectives 1 - 4 were addressed in Chapter 2, secondary research objective 5 was addressed in Chapter 3, secondary research objective 6 was addressed in Chapter 4 and secondary research objectives 7 and 8 were addressed in Chapter 5. The findings derived from these secondary research objectives aided in the development of the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process. These research objectives and how they were addressed are discussed in this section.

The secondary research objectives furthermore guided the critical discussions, explanations and analyses of WBCC, the online consumer audience, traditional consumer response models and the theory of consumer response in order to develop theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process as indicators of the levels and phases encompassed in the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process. The relation between the secondary research objectives and the theoretical discussions and analysis is therefore indicated.

The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process developed in this study contributes to the body of knowledge on online communication, WBCC, general consumer responses and online consumer responses. It does so by integrating literature on WBCC, consumer response and the online consumer response process. No proof of the existence of literature on WBCC and the online consumer response process could be found during the course of this study. Therefore, the concept of WBCC and the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process had to be conceptualised and developed.

Against this background and the need for the development of a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process, the secondary research objectives were addressed as follows:

### **7.2.1 The concept of web-based commercial communication**

*Secondary research objective 1: To develop the concept of web-based commercial communication*

According to existing literature it is clear that hardly any distinction is made between advertising, public relations, marketing communication, promotional and organisational communication messages on the WWW. This study refers to all these online communication messages as messages with a commercial intent which aim to move the online consumer from a state of being unaware of a message to the point of purchasing or moving to a certain action. A theoretical framework was developed for the response process which online consumers proceed through when exposed to above-mentioned messages. Since no collective term for referring to the integrated nature of these messages exists in the literature, the study developed the concept of *WBCC*, which addresses **secondary research objective 1**. *WBCC* was subsequently defined as:

*The integration of information-intensive, persuasive and influential online advertising, marketing communication, public relations, promotional, and organisational communication messages which are accessed voluntarily by, and which have the intent of progressing globally diverse consumers through certain response phases to the point of purchasing or proceeding to a certain action.*

## **7.2.2 The theory of web-based commercial communication and the online consumer audience**

*Secondary research objective 2: To identify the theory of web-based commercial communication and the online consumer audience*

**Secondary research objective 2** was addressed by exploring literature on the Internet as communication medium, integrated WBCC, the nature of WBCC, the rationale behind formulating WBCC messages, the integrated nature of WBCC, unique features of WBCC and unique characteristics of the online audience.

It was argued that the Internet and WWW are unique communication media and have an immense impact on the way in which organisations and stakeholders access, organise, exchange, share and display communication at high speed and on a global level. It was suggested that organisations should practise multi-directional communication instead of the previously utilised uni-directional methods of communication. The dynamic, unique and interactive nature of the WWW suggests certain dissimilar features to traditional marketing communication media. Additional features of online communication (like effective target marketing, communication control, information-intensive nature, flexibility, addressability, swiftness, customised interaction, information delivery, information empowerment, uncertainty reduction, purchase facilitation, ease of use and online relationship-building) furthermore suggest the uniqueness of the features and nature of WBCC.

It can therefore be argued that the online consumer audience differs from the traditional mass media audience since it possesses unique characteristics,

different from those of traditional mass media audiences. These characteristics include the existence of communities of interest, connectedness to the organisation, connectedness to other audience members, access to other information, possibility to pull information, literacy, information and communication regulation, search for enjoyment, and search for uses and gratifications.

### **7.2.3 The marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online**

*Secondary research objective 3: To identify the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online*

In addressing **secondary research objective 3**, the unique features of WBCC were summarised as a comparison between WBCC messages and marketing communication in traditional mass media. By indicating the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online, it became clear that WBCC differs from marketing communication in the offline world in various ways. The most prominent difference is to be found in the concept of interactivity, because WBCC creates the possibility for the online consumer to enter into a dialogue with the organisation or any other organisational stakeholders. Communication is therefore two-way. In the offline world, with traditional marketing communication messages and depending on the medium used, communication is usually in the form of a monologue and usually takes place in a one-way manner from organisation to consumer and then back. In the online environment, the possibility exists to interact with WBCC messages. The online consumer can choose when he/she wants to interact with the message and how much he/she wants to interact. The online consumer can also end the interaction at any time he/she chooses.

#### **7.2.4 Differences between online audience characteristics and traditional mass media audience characteristics**

*Secondary research objective 4: To identify the differences between online audience characteristics and traditional mass media audience characteristics*

**Secondary research objective 4** was addressed by comparing the differences between online and traditional mass media audience characteristics. Although many differences were indicated between these two types of audiences, the ability of the online consumer to control interactions and regulate communication can be seen as the most prominent.

#### **7.2.5 Evaluating advertising response models**

*Secondary research objective 5: To evaluate existing advertising response models*

The discussions on traditional consumer response models addressed **secondary research objective 5** by identifying, discussing, explaining, examining and analysing them.

The AIDA model, hierarchy of effects model, innovation adoption model and information processing model were jointly referred to as the traditional response hierarchy models. These models explain the response process from the online consumer's state of being unaware of a product or service to actual purchase behaviour. These models also explain the consumer response process as proceeding from the cognitive, to the affective phase and lastly to the behavioural or conative phase. The major criticism on these models is that they assume that all consumers proceed through the response phase in a linear or chronological order and that they remain passive during the response process.

As reaction to criticism on the traditional response hierarchy models, the three-orders hierarchy model of information processing was discussed. This

model consists of the learning hierarchy, the dissonance-attribution hierarchy and the low-involvement hierarchy. Although the three-orders model of information processing identifies three alternative orderings of the three traditional hierarchy stages based on perceived product differentiation and product involvement, it was criticised in this study for the hierarchical and linear way in which it depicts the consumer response process.

As a reaction on the traditional and alternative response hierarchy models, the integrated information response model was discussed. This model is a revised interpretation of the advertising sequence and integrates concepts from both the traditional and the low-involvement response hierarchy perspectives. It accounts for the effects of direct experience and recognises that different levels of belief strength result from advertising versus personal experience with a product. In evaluating the integrated information response model, it became clear that consumers are likely to integrate information from advertising, other sources and direct experiences in forming judgements about a brand. This model also elucidates that many purchase occasions occur because consumers need more information and not necessarily because they are committed or loyal to that specific brand.

In reaction, the FCB planning model was discussed. This model mainly consists of thinking and feeling dimensions and high and low involvement. There are purchase decisions where thinking is most involved and others where feeling dominates. The FCB model is an adaptation of the basic think – feel – do (like the traditional response hierarchy models) model, except that it accommodates both high and low involvement and is thus based on the involvement theory as well. Although this model demonstrates the progression made in understanding the consumer response process, it still presents the consumer response process in a sequential manner.

The elaboration likelihood model was then discussed. This model takes differences in consumer response to persuasive messages, like advertising messages, into account. The major constituent of the model is the identification of two routes of persuasion, namely the central and peripheral

routes, each characterised by a different likelihood of elaboration. It was indicated that the elaboration likelihood model improved on the previous models by acknowledging that different consumers react differently to advertising messages. In the evaluation of this model, criticism was offered against the lack of different consumer response phase/stages. The model concentrates on the routes to persuasion and on how attitudes are altered because of motivation and ability.

The last model which was discussed and evaluated was the association model of the advertising communication process. It was argued that the purpose of this model is to extend and improve on traditional response hierarchy models such as the AIDA model. The model was also developed to incorporate all of the measures of research commonly used in advertising. Eleven individual steps of consumer response were discussed in the association model of the advertising communication process.

This study focused on the consumer response process and it can be concluded, based on their evaluation, that the different traditional consumer response models all include different phases/stages in the consumer response process. It was established that WBCC is a distinctive way of communicating with organisational stakeholders and it was argued that only certain phases from the traditional consumer response models are relevant to the *online consumer response process*.

### **7.2.6 The theory of consumer response**

*Secondary research objective 6: To identify the theory of consumer response*

To address **secondary research objective 6**, the theory of consumer response was identified and explained and commenced with explanations of the three basic consumer response levels, namely the cognitive level, the affective level and the conative/behavioural level. It was indicated that these basic consumer response levels provide an overview of the broad levels which consumers proceed through when they are exposed to advertising

messages, but do not include the detailed consumer response phases. The detailed consumer response phases are encompassed in the facets model of effective advertising, which is utilised to explain the complicated general consumer response process. This model, discussed and explained in Chapter 4, includes the following phases in the general consumer response process:

- Perception
- Cognition
- Effective/Emotion
- Association
- Persuasion
- Behaviour

### **7.2.7 Theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication**

*Secondary research objective 7: To specify theoretical criteria for web-based commercial communication*

To address **secondary research objective 7**, theoretical criteria for WBCC were developed. These theoretical criteria were based on the theoretical discussions on the Internet and WWW, WBCC and the online audience. The theoretical criteria for WBCC serve as indicators of the unique phases of the online consumer response process and set WBCC apart from traditional marketing communication messages.

### **7.2.8 Theoretical criteria for the consumer response process**

*Secondary research objective 8: To specify theoretical criteria for the consumer response process*

In developing theoretical criteria for the general consumer response process, **secondary research objective 8** was addressed. These theoretical criteria,

which serve as indicators of phases of the online consumer response process, were developed based on the evaluation of the consumer response models and the general theory of consumer response. It was argued that although traditional consumer response phases are applicable to the online consumer response process, additional phases should be added in order to compensate for the unique response process which online consumers proceed through while interacting with WBCC messages.

### **7.3 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ONLINE CONSUMER RESPONSE PROCESS DEVELOPED IN THIS STUDY**

*Primary research objective: To develop a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process*

To address the **primary research objective**, a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process was developed. This theoretical framework is based on the theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process addressed in secondary research objectives 7 and 8.

The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process consists of eight online response levels, namely the pre-exposure level, the exposure level, the perception level, the cognitive level, the interactive level, the affective/emotional level, the decision-making level and the conative/behavioural level. Each of these levels additionally consists of various online consumer response phases. These phases are thus encompassed in the online consumer response levels. The theoretical framework for the online consumer response process includes, for example, levels and phases of consumer response which are not evident in any existing consumer response model. These phases are the pre-exposure level, the exposure level, the perception level, the interactive level and the decision-making level. These levels were added to the online consumer response process and are based on theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process identified in this study.

The significance of the proposed theoretical framework for the online consumer response process is fourfold. Firstly, it is uniquely developed and no proof of similar theoretical frameworks or models could be found in existing literature. Secondly, it incorporates already existing response phases from traditional response models, but includes levels and phases which were derived from theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process. Thirdly, it demonstrates the similarities and differences between the traditional consumer response process and the online consumer response process. Fourthly, it addresses the problem of the lack of literature regarding online consumer response.

To recapitulate, it is argued that the online consumer response process is unique and encompasses various phases from the traditional consumer response models, the general consumer response process and unique, distinctive online levels and phases derived from theoretical criteria developed for WBCC and the consumer response process.

#### **7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The main limitation of this study is the fact that the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process developed in this study is illustrated as a linear and sequential process. It was indicated in the figurative representation of the theoretical framework that the online consumer proceeds through eight levels and subsequent relevant phases while exposed to WBCC. This limitation coincides with the major criticism offered in this study against the existing consumer response models in Chapter 3. These models also depict the consumer response process in a linear manner. It is argued that consumers will not necessarily proceed through the response phases in a linear manner, since different variables will influence the sequential pattern. In the interactive online environment especially, it is possible for online consumers to control interactions and therefore omit or change the linear sequence of consumer response.

The next limitation is based on the fact that the proposed theoretical framework for the online consumer response process, developed in Chapter 6, assumes that the online consumer proceeds through all eight levels and subsequent phases while exposed to WBCC. It is argued that it should be taken into account that not every online consumer will proceed through all eight levels and all the various phases while interacting with WBCC. The online consumer can discontinue the interaction with WBCC at any moment and may not proceed through the subsequent levels and phases at all. Different levels and phases may thus be passed over or even omitted. Online consumers may also proceed through certain levels or phases of the online consumer response process at once. The process may thus take place randomly.

The next limitation addresses the fact that not all online consumers will proceed through the same sequence of the eight levels and phases of the online consumer response process. Every online consumer is an individual with individual needs and characteristics and will therefore experience his/her encounter with WBCC messages differently and will not necessarily react to these messages as indicated in the theoretical framework. It should therefore be emphasised that the proposed theoretical framework for the online consumer response process is an indication of the general response process which online consumers may proceed through. This process may differ in different circumstances and for different individuals.

Another limitation of the study is that no variables determining a different sequence of the online consumer response process were taken into account with the development of the theoretical framework. Variables like involvement (topical and product), perceived product differentiation, perceived product risk, types (emotional and rational or thinking and feeling) of products and motivation might influence the sequence of the levels and phases of the online consumer response process. It might also alter the inclusion of relevant levels and phases. It is recommended that these variables as determinants of the sequential flow of the online consumer response process should be explored through further research.

## **7.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study can be elaborated on by developing a model for the online consumer response process. This model can be based on and derived from the theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process, as well as the theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.

Once a model of the online consumer response process has been developed, it can be tested in practice. By testing this model, variables which influence the online consumer response process will emerge.

A model for the online consumer response process which takes different variables into account as indicators of different sequential patterns of the online consumer response process should then be developed.

## **7.6 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY TO THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCE**

This study contributes to the field of communication science by addressing a gap in literature regarding WBCC in general, integrated WBCC, the online consumer audience, the general consumer response process and, in particular, the online consumer response process. It furthermore contributes through the development of the concept of *WBCC*, which did not exist previously, and by determining and identifying the unique features of WBCC. This study also indicates and emphasises the marketing communication paradigm shift from offline to online and the unique characteristics of the online consumer audience. It furthermore specifies the differences between online and traditional mass media audience characteristics. The main contribution of the study to the field of communication science is the development of theoretical criteria for WBCC and the consumer response process, which ultimately lead to the development of a theoretical framework for the online consumer response process.



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