Foreword

In a time where the Internet and online retailing play a proliferating role in the world-wide economy, it is of major concern to understand e-commerce's advantages and pitfalls. Only then retailers and manufacturers can act effectively in this extremely competitive market. In this context interactive decision aids, or so called smart agents, are becoming more and more important. While it is known that their key advantage lies in offering various levels of interactivity with which information can be tailored to each consumer's idiosyncratic needs, little is known about its particular advantages for consumers, retailers, or manufacturer when compared to the alternative of offline shopping.

Nina Mažar's work targets exactly this shortcoming. To be more precise, she deals with one of the currently most feasible interactive decision aids in order to show its usefulness for different product categories and effects on all actors in the market. Based on profound findings from research on constructive consumer preferences and economics of information, Nina Mažar analyses the consequences in an experimental simulation and demonstrates the decision aid's effectiveness and boundaries.

This work represents a significant contribution to both academics and business. From a research perspective it extends the literature on consumer behavior in the direction of decision making in interactive electronic marketplaces. From a management perspective it gives retailers and manufacturers invaluable practical recommendations since it goes down to the level of single product and attribute categories. It is no surprise that this work was well received at the European conference of the Association of Consumer Research in 2003.

Nina Mažar wrote a thesis that I recommend not only to researchers and managers but also to students interested in consumer decision making and the world of interactive decision aids. It gives an easy to understand overview of the decision making mechanisms operating in the context of interactive decision aids, offers an excellent introduction to the current state of agent applications, and presents ideas for future research. I hope that this work will disseminate extensively.

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