Developing a Cost-effective Brand Loyalty Program

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What makes a brand loyalty program successful or cost-effective? Interviews of 41 managers of brand loyalty programs were conducted to establish the best practices for such programs. Following this, a study of 132 brand managers and a study of 643 consumers jointly show that brand managers may overestimate the importance of targeting heavy users (or frequent users) and may underestimate the effectiveness of inexpensive reward programs. In reality, low and moderate reward programs that target light users may generate higher incremental sales and may tend to be more profitable than is generally expected.

While trading-stamp programs were perhaps the first brand loyalty programs, American Airlines' AAdvantage program in 1981 stimulated an interest in loyalty programs that quickly spread to nearly every major airline in the country. Complementary services such as hotels and rental car agencies soon followed. By the end of the decade, however, some companies began to question the effectiveness and necessity of their own programs. In 1990, for example, both Radisson and Omni Hotels retreated from their loyalty programs to concentrate more on service (Seacord, 1996).

For some companies, the decision to establish a loyalty program was made according to a commonly held apocryphal belief that it is six times more expensive to obtain a new customer than it is to keep a current one and to encourage him or her to increase their consumption frequency (Wansink and Ray, 1996). Indeed, if a company increases customer retention by 2 percent, costs can decrease by as much as 10 percent (Conlon, 1996). Yet, for whatever reason, loyalty programs are being adopted with increasing frequency by credit cards issuers, long distance carriers, restaurants, and even coffee shops. Recently, consumer packaged goods companies have begun to experiment with these programs. They typically give participants the opportunity to receive various promotional products by collecting and redeeming points on packages (Hein, 1998).

In some cases, establishing a loyalty program is a competitive reaction. Yet, after a program has been established, its intended purpose is sometimes forgotten. Instead of becoming an effective marketing tool, the program becomes an ineffective, expensive administrative task. This article explores the following questions to help improve the effectiveness of brand loyalty programs:

1. What are the "Best Practices" of brand loyalty programs?
2. How can the cost-effectiveness of a loyalty program be estimated?
3. How does a loyalty program influence light and heavy users of a product?
4. What reward levels are appropriate for loyalty programs?

To address these questions, a best practices study of 41 brand loyalty programs is first conducted to better understand the elements of successful programs. Following this, the cost-effectiveness for brand loyalty programs is discussed. Study 1 shows that brand managers generally believe that high reward programs targeted at heavy users will be most cost-effective. In contrast, Study 2 is conducted with consumers and shows that low and

Thanks to Scott Seed for help on a related project.

DOI: 10.1017/S0021849903030290

moderate reward programs targeted at light users may be most cost-effective. In general, low and moderate reward programs targeting light users may prove to generate higher incremental sales and may tend to be more profitable than is typically expected. Programs offering anything more may be less cost-effective.

BEST PRACTICES OF BRAND LOYALTY PROGRAMS

A sample of 50 directors of loyalty programs for service companies, consumer packaged goods (CPG) companies, and direct marketing and advertising agencies were contacted for the "Best Practices" portion of the study, and 41 eventually agreed to participate. This convenience sample of managers had been cited in the business press as overseeing what had been noted as successful loyalty programs. The insights from these interviews were analyzed and compared with previous research on loyalty programs (Wansink and Seed, 2001) to address the following questions.

What characteristics make products and services well suited for loyalty programs?

Loyalty programs work best for products and services with high margins or ones that a customer will invest heavily in over a long period of time. They also tend to work well for products and services that are typically not unique (Geller, 1997). Airlines and hotels, for instance, are well suited for loyalty programs since their services are difficult to differentiate and are relatively expensive. In addition, travelers spend a great deal on these services over their lifetimes, and loyalty programs hope to capture a majority of these purchases and increase the lifetime value of the customer.

While customer loyalty programs can work well for higher involvement products (Dowling and Uncles, 1997) that tend to be more expensive, there are exceptions. Consider a premium ice cream manufacturer that currently operates a successful loyalty program for its ice cream. This product line is suitable for a customer loyalty program because it has high margins and has the ability to be purchased many times over a customer's lifetime. Although ice cream is not a typically a high-involvement product, the ice cream manufacturer has been able to enhance customer involvement by periodically mailing full-color brochures full of dessert recipes and new product information to its program members. The seeming exclusivity of belonging to such a program and the benefit of being the first to receive information about new products and services can make the customer feel special and closer to the organization.

Since the incentives used in CPG programs are not as valuable as for an airline or hotel (a 50 cent coupon does not compare to a free trip or room upgrade), Bissell (1996) argues the only way loyalty programs can be effective for CPGs is to build involvement in customers. Such involvement can be created by communicating to customers (through advertising and packaging) in a way that shows an understanding and appreciation for that customer's personal needs and lifestyle. The key is in raising exit barriers. For service-related companies, such as airlines or hotels, this is often accomplished through mileage and points. Because it is convenient for customers to switch CPG brands, developing these exit barriers needs to be accomplished through an emotional or hedonic link with the product that is created either through advertising (Wansink, 1994) or through nonmonetary promotions (Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent, 2000). Customers who are not willing to put forth the effort to begin a relationship with a new brand, therefore, will remain with—and perhaps loyal to—the existing brand.

How do loyalty programs use customer information?

The best loyalty programs are able to obtain a wealth of customer information (such as product usage data, purchasing habits, feelings, and attitudes) and use this to tailor products and services to the specific needs of customers. Information is primarily obtained through an initial enrollment process and subsequent recording of purchases. Airlines, hotels, and rental car agencies have an advantage in information collection because these customers must identify themselves at the time of purchase. This customer information can then be easily linked with previous enrollment data and can be used to segment and focus marketing efforts.

A program that simply requires a name, address, and proof-of-purchase from a customer redeeming an award is not building a long-term, knowledgeable relationship with that customer. Enrollment is a means of self-selection. Customers willing to take the time to complete an enrollment form for a program are usually more involved in the product than a casual purchaser. The best CPG loyalty programs require an enrollment form that obtains background such as demographic data, usage frequency data, and preference-related data that can provide insights into potential cross-promotions and targeting efforts (for additional ideas refer to Sudman and Wansink, 2002). The result is a database of customers who may be predisposed to a longer-term relationship with the company.

In general, CPG companies are at somewhat of a disadvantage since a customer's purchases cannot be easily linked with established customer information. Although some have partnered with retailers to obtain this information, CPG manufacturers currently do not have the capability to obtain data for every customer purchase. Even tracking coupon redemption can be ineffective if a company's best customers do not use coupons. For now, the best that CPG companies can do is to rely on consumer panel data to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.

A company that continually heaps promotions onto its customers will undermine its efforts to establish a sincere relationship.

How do loyalty programs attract and retain customers?

Companies with the best programs use focus group and survey research to frequently refine the benefits of their programs to make them relevant and attractive to customers. Some programs publish magazines that include information relevant to its customers' interests, and others use cross-promotional reward programs that reinforce the brand's personality. The danger with such programs is that they cannot appear to be too self-serving. A company that continually heaps promotions onto its customers will undermine its efforts to establish a sincere relationship. Members must be provided with real benefits that make them feel valued, not targeted.

Companies with the best loyalty programs go beyond merely retaining their program members as customers. By using background and purchase information for more focused targeting, companies with effective programs attempt to generate incremental business from their members and maximize share of customer category purchases

For some companies, retention rates are one measure of a program's success. Yet if members expire from the program, they should still be treated as current members (Lewis, 1997). A major airline, for example, sends a special offer to members who have not flown for several months after expiring from the program. While keeping nonmembers permanently in the database may not be cost-effective, such initial treatment demonstrates the company is concerned for its customers even when their purchases stop. Membership expiration is also an opportunity to communicate with the customer and discover if leaving the program resulted from a change in lifestyle or from past dissatisfaction with the product or service. If the reason is dissatisfaction, this offers an opportunity to resolve the problem and potentially win back a customer. If dissatisfaction was not the reason for expiration, this offers an opportunity to show appreciation for past purchases. Since former members have the ability to influence new and existing customers, a positive final interaction with the company can be important.

DETERMINING THE COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF LOYALTY PROGRAMS

Loyalty programs can be profitable in the short run, and yet the cost-effectiveness of a program that does not break-even in the short run can still be profitable in the long run if it generates a longer stream of purchases and a longer string of goodwill than would otherwise have been realized. Unfortunately, too many programs do not attempt to account for the long-term payback from these loyalty programs, and they only focus on quarterly or yearly returns. In determining the cost-effectiveness of loyalty programs, the time horizon is a critical issue.

The cost-effectiveness of a program cannot be determined by simply subtracting its administrative costs from gross profit. Yet this is the way some trial programs have been evaluated it the past. Such an approach ignores the longer-term implications on sales and loyalty and does not account for profit cannibalized by rewards (such as free products or coupons) that are redeemed by customers whose purchases remain unchanged from preprogram levels. These customers could be true loyalists who would have purchased without the motivation of a loyalty program. On the other hand, they could be customers who were persuaded by a loyalty program to refrain from switching to a competitor. In short, the success of a program depends on its objectives and upon the type of user it most influences.

Generally, if a program does not generate a net increase in purchases, it is seldom considered cost-effective and it is typically terminated.[1] For instance, a major cereal manufacturer test marketed a loyalty program and found that it resulted in a 7.1 percent unit increase in sales to the targeted segment of heavy users. Unfortunately, the redemption rate of coupons (given as rewards to the targeted segment) accounted for 22 percent of the unit sales with this test group. Coupons were cannibalizing existing sales, thereby making the program ineffective. That is, the redemption rate far exceeded the incremental increase in sales.

In retrospect, it was believed this miscalculation could have been avoided if a

[1] *It should be noted that this is primarily true in growing or stable categories. In product categories that are shrinking, a brand loyalty program may be successful even if it only enables a brand to maintain market share.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021849903030290

simple effort had been made to model how incremental sales and redeemed coupons might influence heavy users. In this case, heavy users were close to a cereal consumption ceiling. That is, it is estimated that of the 56 boxes of cereal they annually purchased, 45 (80.3 percent) were brands that were already being purchased from this company. As a result, coupons were redeemed on purchases that may have otherwise been made at full price. As Figure 1 illustrates, a better target for the loyalty program may have been light users. Although they purchased only 31 boxes each year, 24 (77.6 percent) were from competing cereal companies.

For the sake of demonstration, consider a simple two period scenario. Excluding the administrative costs of a program, the marginal cost-effectiveness of a program can be represented by the following equation:

$$\text{Gain/Loss} = (U_a * P) - D - (U_w * P) - A$$

where

U_a = unit sales after program implementation

P = price per unit

D = dollar amount of redeemed coupons or other incentives

U_w = unit sales before program.

This equation can be used separately to determine the cost-effectiveness of programs for different levels of users. For instance, the gain or loss of a program can be determined for nonusers of a brand, for light users of a brand, and for heavy users of a brand (Wansink and Park, 2000). Relative comparisons can enable management to determine which of these user segments might be most profitable to target.

Such a basic model can be enhanced in a number of ways. It could be modified to take into account the future stream of earnings at whatever appropriate discount rate a company uses for its projects, or it could incorporate brand or company objectives.

An illustration of this simple model using actual purchase data would be useful, and the two studies we conduct are intended to serve as precursors to such work. Study 1 examines the ordering of how 132 brand managers estimate the relative incremental sales and profitability of three brand loyalty programs (low, medium, and high reward level programs) across nonusers, light users, and heavy users. Study 2 brings consumers into a lab setting to explore how these same three programs might influence their purchase intentions. If the results of this lab study prove promising, this would increase our confidence that the costs associated with a full-scale purchase study would be merited.

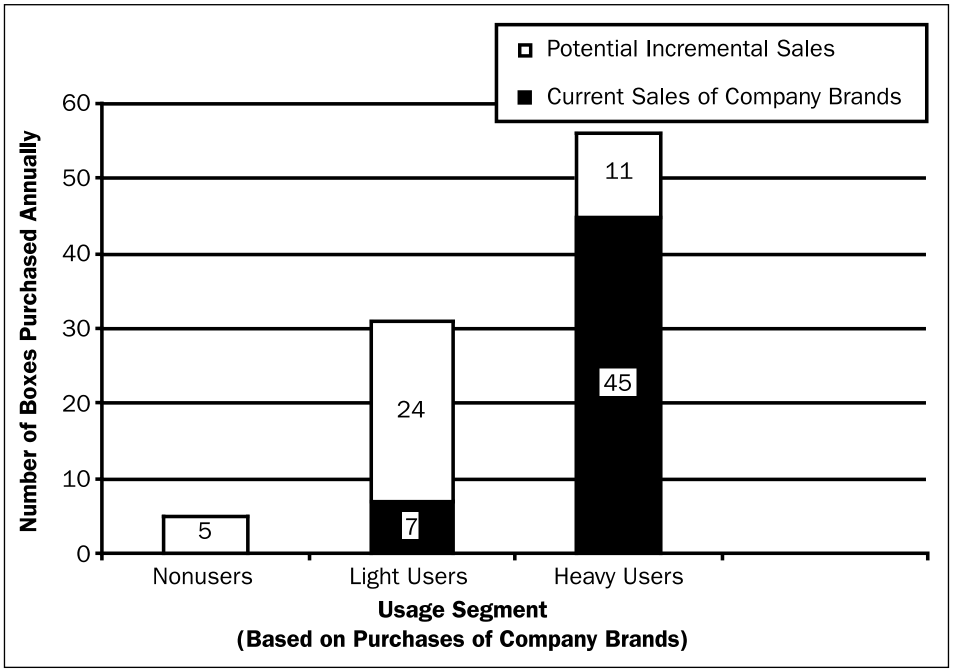

Figure 1 Annual Cereal Purchases for Three Usage Segments of a Cereal Company

STUDY 1: BRAND MANAGER PERCEPTIONS OF LOYALTY PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

The purpose of this study is to assess managerial judgments about the effectiveness of three different reward levels of brand loyalty programs. The perceptions of these managers will eventually be compared with how well these programs perform in a lab study with adult consumers.

Method

To collect these judgments, a survey of 300 brand managers was conducted. The names of these 300 managers were taken from the American Marketing Association membership list. Each had been working in the packaged goods industry for at least 5 years (average 7.7 years), and 76 percent had received an MBA or other graduate school training. When con-

TABLE 1
The Three Brand Loyalty Reward Programs Used in the Study

Reward Program	Membership Newsletter	Discount Coupons	Product Line Merchandise
Low	A quarterly one-page newsletter with information concerning new and existing products in the product line	Coupons included in the newsletter for a $0.25 discount off any product in the product line	Receive product line merchandise (e.g., coffee mugs or T-shirts) with 20 proofs of purchase and a $5.00 postage and handling fee
Moderate	A quarterly full-color booklet with recipes and information concerning new and existing products in the product line	Coupons included in the booklet for a $0.50 discount off any product in the product line	Receive product line merchandise (e.g., coffee mugs or T-shirts) with 20 proofs of purchase.
High	A monthly full-color booklet with recipes, games and puzzles, and information concerning new and existing products in the product line	Coupons included in the booklet for a $1.00 discount off any product in the product line	Receive product line merchandise (e.g., coffee mugs or T-shirts) with 10 proofs of purchase.

tacted through the mail, they were told that in exchange for completing a brief questionnaire, they would be provided a copy of the results. Of the 300 that were mailed, 132 usable surveys were returned (43 percent response).

Managers were presented with three loyalty programs with different reward levels: (1) a low reward program with minimal benefits, (2) a moderate reward program with average benefits, and (3) a high reward program with more valuable benefits (see Table 1). They were then asked to predict which reward program (low, moderate, or high) would generate the most incremental sales and to predict whether these sales would be from nonusers, light users, or heavy users. They were also asked which of the three reward programs they believed would be most cost-effective. This was repeated for three different product lines (Kellogg's, Betty Crocker, and Land O' Lakes),[2] and the results were averaged.

Results

There are two generalizations about how brand managers view loyalty programs. First, as Figure 2a indicates, brand mangers tend to believe that high reward programs are more effective at generating incremental sales than moderate loyalty programs, and they believe that moderate loyalty programs are more effective than low reward loyalty programs. To increase incremental sales, 57 percent of the brand managers (7 percent + 23 percent + 27 percent) believed that higher reward programs would be most effective.

The second generalization from these managers is illustrated in Figure 2b. No brand managers believed that low reward programs would be cost-effective. Instead, 80 percent believed that heavy users would be the most profitable segment to target across either the moderate and high reward programs. None believed the nonuser segment could be profitable. Only 18 percent thought the light user would be the most profitable, and most of these (14 of 18 = 78 percent) believed this would happen only if a high reward program were used.

In general, these managers tended to believe that heavy users should be targeted with high reward loyalty programs. This was consistent with the open-ended comments they provided, and it is consistent with the general notion that the best

[2] *The three product lines involved in the study were Kellogg's cereals (Special K, Frosted Flakes, Rice Krispies), Betty Crocker meal and side preparation products (Hamburger Helper, Suddenly Salad, Bisquik), and Land O' Lakes dairy products (Land O' Lakes Butter, Land O' Lakes Dairy Case Cheese, Land O' Lakes Sour Cream). They were selected because prestudies have shown that purchase intention estimates in these categories are reasonably highly correlated with actual purchase (Wansink, 1990).*

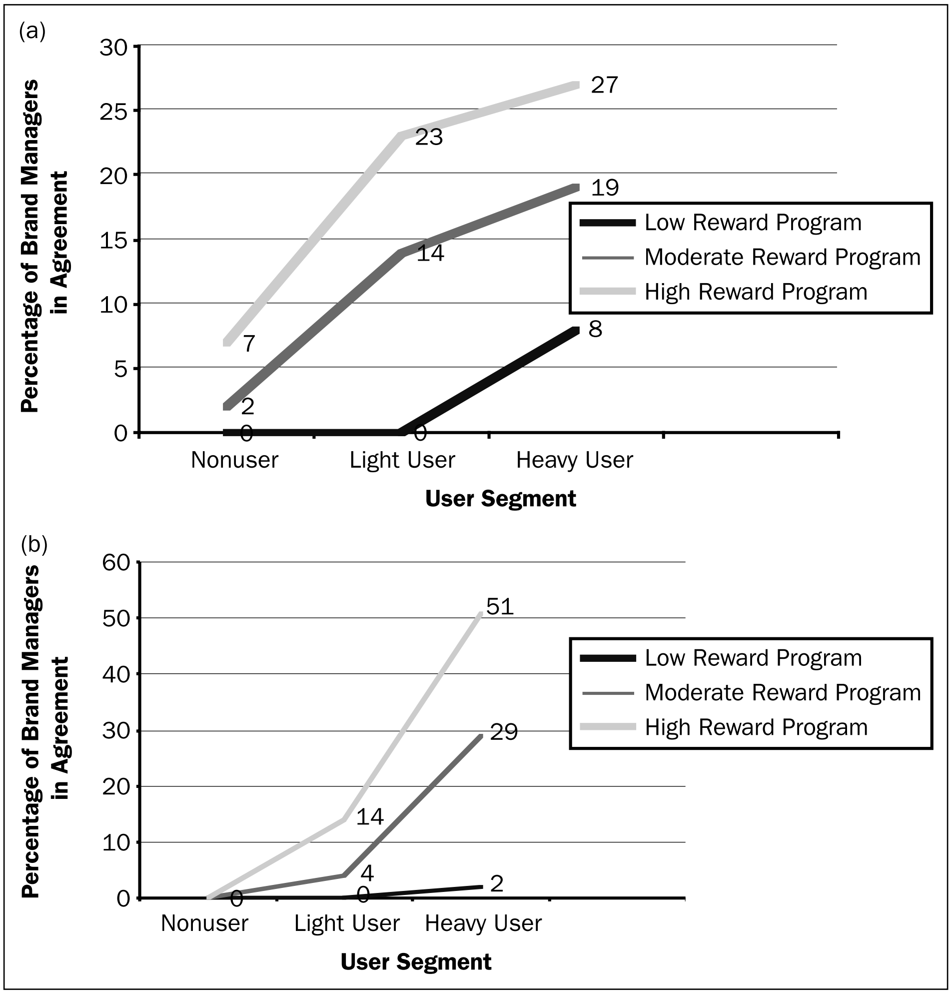

Figure 2 (a) "Which Reward Program Will Be Most Effective at Increasing Incremental Sales?" and (b) "Which Reward Program Will Be Most Cost-effective?"

way to increase volume is to target heavy or frequent users. Not only did 54 percent believe the biggest potential for incremental sales lay with these heavy users, but 82 percent also believed heavy users would be most profitable to target with loyalty programs.

STUDY 2: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION OF LOYALTY PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Study 2 investigates how the different loyalty reward levels examined in Study 1 influence the purchase incidence of different segments of users. This will enable us to compare the judgments of managers in Study 1 with some exploratory empirical findings.

Method

To determine how a certain type of program influences consumers with different usage levels, three separate questionnaires were randomly sent to a nationwide survey of 2,500 adult consumers who had been randomly recruited based on addresses obtained from census records. In exchange for completing the questions, each consumer received $6.00. Of the 2,500 questionnaires, 643 were returned in time to be included in the study. The average age of the respondents was 42, the average education was 0.8 years of college, and 65.2 percent were female.

The questionnaire asked about the expected purchase behavior for a particular product line for one of the three reward levels. The three reward levels were identical to those given to the managers in Study 1 (recall Table 1). Each respondent received the same reward level of loyalty program for all three product lines, and they were not made aware of the other reward levels of loyalty programs being examined by other respondents.

For each of the three product lines (Kellogg's, Betty Crocker, and Land O'Lakes), consumers were asked to estimate their household purchases in the next month and for the entire next 12 months for a particular reward level of program. Past purchase behavior was also recorded to determine the usage level of the products (nonuser, light user, and heavy user) and to calculate the monthly change in sales for a particular level of program.

Observations were analyzed using the intended increase in purchase behavior. Actual total purchases from the prior 12-month period were used to establish the level of product use. Light users and heavy users of a particular product line were estimated using average purchases per year.

Results

There are two key findings from this empirical study and both are somewhat at odds with the intuition of the brand managers. First, Study 2 indicated that moderate reward programs and high reward programs were equally effective at generating incremental purchase intentions (see Figure 3a). There was no statistical difference in their effectiveness ($p > .10$). Fur-

. . . by identifying and targeting different user segments simultaneously, a company could offer tailored reward values that further increase the cost-effectiveness of its loyalty program.

thermore, even the low reward programs were effective at generating incremental purchase intentions from both light users (+0.8 units) and from heavy users (+1.1 units). This is in contrast with brand manager's beliefs that the high reward program would be most effective at generating incremental sales and that the low reward program would have little impact on most consumers.

The second major finding of Study 2 was that, in contrast to the beliefs of the managers, the high reward program appears to be the least cost-effective program across all three segments. Given the simple two-period model noted earlier, Table 2 shows the low reward program is the most cost-effective across all three segments ($1.67), and the moderate reward program is the most cost-effective with the heavy user ($3.10). Contrary to what brand managers believed, high reward programs only resulted in an average gain of $0.60 across users.

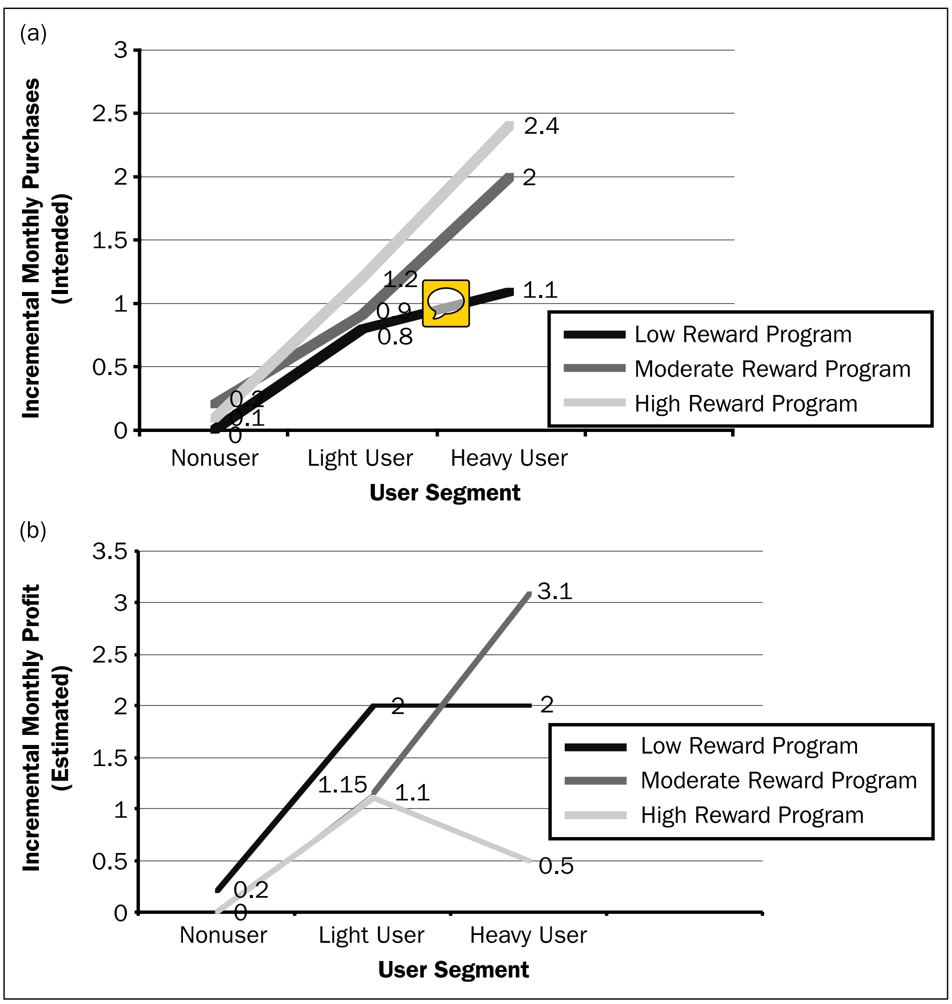

Figure 3 (a) All Reward Programs Influence Incremental Purchases and (b) Low and Moderate Reward Programs Are the Most Cost-effective

Table 2 illustrates the importance of choosing an appropriate program level. A marketer targeting a specific user segment could actually spend less on a program and gain more in return. In this survey, for example, using a high reward program to target the heavy user would be the least cost-effective. Although a company would gain an additional $0.50 per customer by implementing a high reward program, it could gain $3.10 by implementing the moderate reward program instead.[3] Even the low reward program provided a $2.00 gain under these scenarios. Further, by identifying and targeting different user segments simultaneously, a company could offer tailored reward values that further increase the cost-effectiveness of its loyalty program.

DISCUSSION

We cannot take the results of these studies and categorically state that it is always a mistake to target heavy users using high reward programs. We can suggest, however, that light users may be an over-

[3] *Although actual changes in purchase behavior might be less than the results predict in Table 2, the relative difference between the changes could be considered the significant result of the survey.*

TABLE 2
The Estimated Two-Period Cost-effectiveness of Three Brand Loyalty Programs

Program Reward Level	Average Monthly Purchases Before/After Program Start (in units)	Change in Purchases (in units)	Average Monthly Revenue after Program Start[a]	Dollar Amount of Coupons Used[b]	Average Monthly Revenue before Start[c]	Gain/Loss[d]
Nonuser						
High	0.0 to 0.1	+0.1	$0.30	$0.10	$0.00	+$0.20
Moderate	0.1 to 1.3	+0.2	$0.60	$0.30	$0.30	+$0.00
Low	0.0 to 0.0	0.0	$0.00	$0.00	$0.00	+$0.00
Light user						
High	1.3 to 2.5	+1.2	$7.50	$2.50	$3.90	+$1.10
Moderate	1.7 to 2.5	+0.8	$7.50	$1.25	$5.10	+$1.15
Low	0.8 to 1.6	+0.8	$4.80	$0.40	$2.40	+$2.00
Heavy user						
High	4.3 to 6.7	+2.4	$20.10	$6.70	$12.90	+$0.50
Moderate	3.8 to 5.8	+2.0	$17.40	$2.90	$11.40	+$3.10
Low	4.1 to 5.2	+1.1	$15.60	$1.30	$12.30	+$2.00

[a] *(Monthly purchases before program + change in purchases) ∗ 3.00/unit. $3.00 per unit was arbitrarily chosen for this discussion.*
[b] *Assumes all purchases were made with coupons of either $1.00 (High Reward Program), $0.50 (Moderate Reward Program), or $0.25 (Low Reward Program). Dollar amount of coupons used = Face value of coupon ∗ Average monthly purchases after program start.*
[c] *Average monthly purchases before program ∗ $3.00/unit.*
[d] *Gain/Loss = Average monthly revenue after program − Dollar amount of coupons used − Average monthly revenue before program start.*

looked segment and that lower reward programs may be more cost-effective than previously expected. There are a number of loyalty programs that have been eliminated because they were unprofitable when targeting heavy users with high reward programs. Part of their ineffectiveness was due to their reward levels being more costly than needed. Another part of their ineffectiveness was that they were targeting consumers who had already hit a consumption ceiling with respect to how much of that brand they could buy and consume (recall Figure 1).

The two studies reported here were intended to investigate how much of what was discussed as Best Practices in brand loyalty programs was evident to experienced brand managers. What is notable is that well-trained, experienced brand managers appear to exhibit a bias toward expensive programs and heavy users. In Study 2 *neither* of these were the correct targets. Moderate reward programs, when aimed at light users, were most profitable.

Limitations and future research

Loyalty programs are common across many types of frequently purchased products or services. These studies focused on CPGs, and we might find that these results vary across different packaged goods in the same way they might vary across different durable goods and service categories. For instance, while low-switching costs may contribute to differences across categories, so may the frequency with which a category is purchased, or the degree of impulsivity that precedes the purchase.

The survey conducted for this research measured changes in the purchase intentions of a panel of 643 consumers. Yet the actual purchase behavior of these consumers could change when uncontrollable variables (such as competitive actions) are added to their environment. Further research in this area could determine how different loyalty programs affect the actual purchase behavior of consumers. A consumer products company, for exam-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021849903030290

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ple, may establish different levels of loyalty programs in different geographic areas and track established panels of consumers.

It might also be useful to know what specific elements of the programs appear to impact behavior the most. Further research could determine, for example, which benefits (free prizes or coupons) best motivated heavy users to increase (or perhaps decrease) their purchases.

Summary

It appears managers are biased to believe that high loyalty programs will be most effective and that heavy users will be most profitable to target. In contrast, it may be that low reward programs targeted at light users might hold a great deal of promise.

Many different elements must be considered when establishing an effective, profitable loyalty program. Once established, these elements should be regularly reassessed to help the program remain effective. Changes in customer needs or use, reactions from competitors, or shifts in product or service costs can negatively affect a brand loyalty program.

Most of the more successful loyalty programs are long-term propositions, not short-term promotions. Management has to be committed to a program that will last for years, not months. Such commitment will help develop and maintain a strong lifetime relationship with customers. The result of such a close connection will bring many rewards to both sides. JAR

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