The challenges of learning to use new products

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Consumers learn how to use new products best if they get a chance to try them out repeatedly, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"With the proliferation of consumer devices such as the iPhone, Wii, digital cameras, and various kinds of software applications, consumers face the challenge of learning to use new products," write authors Arun Lakshmanan, Charles D. Lindsey (both University at Buffalo - SUNY), and H. Shanker Krishnan (Indiana University). The researchers found that "massed learning" (intense hands-on trial periods) lead to consumers developing a good mental model of the product, a positive attitude, and greater willingness to pay for new products.

"For example, a new Wii user may play a game repeatedly during one gaming session and thus attain some skill at using the nunchuck or she may become proficient via multiple play episodes over and extended period of time," the authors write. For some items, companies can facilitate trials. For example, a Best Buy salesperson may ask a teen trying Rock Band for the first time to play around with its features, or cellphone representative might help a potential customer program numbers into a phone. Companies may want to consider ways to allow customers even more chances to work with their products.

The authors also found that consumers differ in how they learn: they may learn by following instructions or through actual experience. "Over four experiments conducted using different software products we find

that when consumers learn how to use a new product by reading instructions, they do better if the learning episodes are spaced," the authors write. "However, if their learning is via actual trial, they do better if the learning episodes are massed."

Their study also found that massed trials lead to a better and more flexible mental model of the product. In turn, consumers are better able to undertake new tasks with the product. "This ability is particularly relevant for new product success since it determines how much a product is used after purchase," the authors write.

"For example, individuals may try out different modes of image capture in a digital camera during their first interaction with the product (say, in a store) but over time, may use features that are different than the one initially learned (various resolution settings,
timer set-up, etc.). How well consumers perform on these new tasks may have a strong bearing on how much they use the products, and in turn, their ultimate satisfaction."

More information: Arun Lakshmanan, Charles D. Lindsey and H. Shanker Krishnan, "Practice Makes Perfect? When Does Massed Learning Improve Product Usage Proficiency?" Journal of Consumer Research: December 2010.

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