

Crippleware: How do consumers react when companies disable product features?

February 14 2012

Consumers dislike it when manufacturers remove or degrade features in existing models—even though it's a common practice, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Product versioning—the manufacturing strategy of deliberate subtraction of functionality from a product—is typically achieved when a firm starts with an existing product and produces a lower-quality or reduced-feature configuration," write authors Andrew Gershoff (University of Texas at Austin), Ran Kivetz (Columbia University), and Anat Keinan (Harvard University).

Many global brands—Sony, BMW, Intel, Microsoft, Verizon, Motorola, Canon Sharp, and Apple—have employed versioning. But when information on manufacturing practices can be easily disseminated via social media, consumers can revolt—and even sue companies—if they view their practices as being unfair.

"Consumer advocates, bloggers, and journalists have been using less-than-flattering terms to describe the versioning production method, calling it 'crippleware,' 'product sabotage,' and 'damaged goods,'" the authors write. Consumers chastised Apple for removing iPhone features to create the iPod Touch. And Verizon eventually paid more than \$10 million to settle a class action lawsuit after the company disabled Bluetooth features in the Motorola v710 phone.

In six studies, the authors found that consumers perceive versioning as

unfair and may avoid purchasing those [products](#), especially when versioned (inferior) products are similar to their superior counterparts. "Products with identical characteristics and [features](#) were perceived as more unfair and unethical, and preferred less, when their manufacture involved degrading a superior configuration compared to when it involved enhancing an inferior configuration, or when no information about the production method was provided," the authors write.

The authors found that companies can mitigate negative consumer reactions by reducing the similarity between the products and by communicating with [consumers](#) about how common the practice is.

More information: Andrew D. Gershoff, Ran Kivetz, and Anat Keinan. "Consumer Response to Versioning: How Brands' Production Methods Affect Perceptions of Unfairness." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2012 (published online December 21, 2011). ejcr.org/

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Crippleware: How do consumers react when companies disable product features? (2012, February 14) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-crippleware-consumers-react-companies-disable.html>

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