Elevating Billiards

By Jaime S. Ong

In Consumer Behavior and Marketing Strategy (Irwin McGraw-Hill, 1999), authors J. Paul Peter and Jerry Olson propose a simple and versatile framework for understanding the dynamics of consumer behavior.

Its elements are: 1) consumer affect and cognition, or the feelings and beliefs people have about things around them; 2) the consumer environment, or whatever influences these thoughts and feelings, like stores, products, ads, social pressures; 3) consumer behavior, or observable actions like shopping, eating, and paying cash; and 4) marketing strategy, or the stimuli -- products, brands, packaging, price tags -- that marketers place in the environment to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors.

A change in one element can cause a change in the others, and change can loop back and forth. That is to say, a change in my environment (a new mall near my home) can effect a change in behavior (my neighbors and I may shop there and not elsewhere), but that same behavior may alter the environment too (traffic congestion closer to home). And while marketers like to think they always occupy the driver's seat, launching products and crafting ads that draw customers to the mall, the fact is that customer behavior often rebuffs, and then reshapes, marketing strategy.

All this is entirely theoretical and deadeningly abstract until one applies the framework to a market phenomenon like billiards, and sees how much sense it makes.

The changing customer of billiards has been described in a paper written by students Anda del Rosario, Tessa Macatangay and Patrick Salamat for a graduate class in marketing. The material in their report might be recast according to the Peter-Olson framework as follows:

Environment. Up till the 1980s, Manila's billiard halls were seedy, dimly lit, located in rundown alleys of the University Belt.

Behavior: Their habitues were deadbeats, truants, and hustlers (recall the hard-as-nails loners and losers in the 1961 Paul Newman-Jackie Gleason movie, "The Hustler.") The game was inextricably linked with gambling.
Affect and Cognition: Mothers regarded billiard halls as houses of sin. Well-behaved students felt uneasy fraternizing with "tambays." Skill was evidence of misspent youth. (Recall Professor Harold Hill's warning of "You Got Trouble!" in the 1962 musical "The Music Man.")

Marketing Strategy: Nothing much till the 80s, when AMF-Puyat bowling and billiard halls began appearing in more upscale areas. Air-conditioned, safer to be seen in, but still not enough to jumpstart the sport.

Then the environment, and everything else, changed in the late 90s when Efren Bata Reyes burst upon the scene. Well, "burst" is not quite accurate, because Reyes had been honing his skills since he was eight, and had hustled his way through Bulacan, Olongapo, Houston and Chicago before Jose Puyat became his sponsor in 1989.

The fortuitous pairing of long-term backing and exceptional skill culminated at Wales in 1999. The Philippines had a world champion.

Efren, Django and others gave the sport something it had always lacked: respectability, class, style. No longer grungy, it is now played in shopping malls, posh country clubs, pricey resorts. It is now legit among preppies, professionals, coeds who aren't playing hooky. Its tournaments are telecast, its virtuosos become celebrity endorsers in beer commercials.

And as marketing strategy requires, billiard halls have had to elaborate on their offerings, to match the tastes and lifestyles of its new consumers. Apart from the usual snacks and bar drinks, some establishments offer dance music and live performers. Others are family venues. Still others are attached to video game arcades and Internet cafes. There even are websites, like www.manilabilliards.com and www.easypooltutor.com, that offer tournament news and information, tips, lessons, and statistics.

Where is the game headed? The Peter-Olson analytical framework is dynamic; it allows for, and predicts, continuing change. Some predictable scenarios already seem to be playing themselves out. There are signs of market saturation -- the old hot pan de sal folly -- and halls unable to offer a differential appeal have closed shop. But the growing interest shown by varied customer segments suggests a continuing evolution in billiard hall concepts and service features. The game will never backslide into its disrepute of yore.

Dr J S Ong is chair of the marketing management department, college of business & economics, De La Salle University. These article are contributed by the CBE Faculty in the column of Business Focus of Manila Bulletin published May 23, 2003.