

Penny P. Profit
BUAD 307
October 9, 2007

**PRELIMINARY ASSIGNMENT
OPTION #2**

**THE IDENTITY WIPER:
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR ISSUES**

PROPOSAL: The Identity Wiper would consist of software that would change personal information—such as the names of a child and family member, birthdays, city of residence, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses—to bogus values in order to prevent children from giving out information that might be abused by online predators or others who might abuse this information.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses consumer behavior issues relevant to the marketing of the Identity Wiper. Although many of the predictions made are subject to verification from market research, likely consumer behaviors, attitudes, background, and perceptions are proposed along with a discussion of managerial implications.

LEVEL OF CATEGORY INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Protection of children from predators and inappropriate Internet content is an important parental concern. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the selection of software or a service that would be useful in accomplishing this would be a matter of high involvement. For a high involvement product category, consumers are ordinarily likely to put considerable effort into making the best decision subject to the knowledge that they have available. However, as discussed in the section on consumer product category knowledge, it is likely that many parents will have difficulty

understanding this technology and may therefore base a decision primarily on the recommendations of a trusted source rather than by examining the technical aspects of the product.

Regardless of the method of search, it is reasonable to expect that parents will put a considerable amount of effort into finding the most suitable product until they are satisfied that a good solution has been found. This suggests that at least a large proportion of the consumers will go through a significant amount of decision making, opening opportunities for influence at several stages.

CONSUMER PRODUCT CATEGORY KNOWLEDGE

Computers and the Internet are inherently very technical matters. Although many consumers have experience using the Internet to find information, and although many have considerable experience using computers at work, much of this experience is likely to have been focused on routine use of computer applications which has required limited knowledge about the overall technical functions of the computers. To compound this problem, computers in general and Internet related technologies in particular advance at a very rapid pace. Thus, most parents are unlikely to really understand much of the technology relevant to Internet protection software. This suggests that these consumers may be able to read and appreciate software reviews that clearly list the types of dangers that can be experienced and then evaluate the effectiveness of different types of software in non-technical terms. Many will probably be particularly appreciative of authoritative recommendations that make a firm recommendation of one specific solution so that they do not have to trust their own judgment in an area where they lack confidence.

Some parents—especially those who hold jobs in computer technology or are

active computer hobbyists—may be, or at least believe themselves to be, more tech-savvy and may be interested in a more technical discussion of the merits of different types of products. This suggests that different types of information—both technical and more “user-friendly”—should be available at the firm’s web site. It is further important that both types of information be made available to journalists and the common types of recommenders discussed below.

CONSUMER INFORMATION SEARCH STRATEGY

Most parents are at least somewhat aware of dangers that face children on the Internet, and thus, problem recognition has already taken care to some extent. When news reports bring stories of children that have been harmed through the Internet, however, many parents who have not already implemented safeguards are likely to become more serious about this. Many parents who have already set up security measures may become more worried about the adequacy of their current method of protection.

The theoretical model of consumer information search suggests that consumers first become aware of a problem, and then sequentially search for alternatives, evaluate these alternatives, make a purchase or a decision not to buy, and engage in any post purchase activities such as returning the product, upgrading, and/or speaking to friends, family, and acquaintances about the purchase. In this case, many parents may already know about the general idea of Internet protection software. Some will know about specific brands. Thus, many might be able to get by simply by Internal search of known offerings, but because of the importance of the product and consumer recognition that new software products are made available in rapid succession, it is likely that most will engage in some external search before making a final decision.

Therefore, those who wish to start this type of protection or to upgrade existing protection will probably enter the search stage with various levels of existing information. For this type of product, consumers would probably use the following type of search or, giving the level of involvement, likely a combination of the following:

1. *Checking with schools, teachers, or organizations such as the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) for recommendations.* For many parents who do not understand the technology, the search may often stop here if a clear recommendation is made. If, however, these sources indicate that several products may each do the job, the consumer will either have to engage in more information search or pursue some kind of tie-breaker. Some of these tie breakers may result in:
 - a. Going with the lowest cost option;
 - b. Going with the highest priced option, given the importance of the product and the perception that higher priced products are likely to be more effective;
 - c. Going with a known and trusted brand (e.g., a product from Microsoft, Symantec (makers of the Norton line of computer tools), or AmericaOnline.
 - d. Selecting the option that looks easiest to use.
 - e. The use of some other criterion.
2. *Consulting some other highly trusted source such as a computer technician.* This may result in choices as described in case #1 above.
3. *Seeking recommendations from friends, family, co-workers, or other acquaintances.* This information may not be relied upon quite as closely as will the information from sources that are viewed as having higher expertise, and therefore, the consumer may seek out additional information to confirm the merits of the recommendation.
4. *Searching for information in periodicals such as Consumer Reports or online sources such as CNet or PC Magazine.* Both of the latter have one or more "Editor's Choice" recommendations for the category. If these are strong, the recommended product may be chosen without further examination. However, when more than one product is recommended, additional examination may have to be done. All of these sources typically provide elaborate reviews on each product, and the parent may thus feel responsible for reading, and trying his or her best to understand, all this material.
5. *Searching on search engines for terms such as "Child Internet protection."* This is likely to result in a large number of sites, many of which will actually be advertisements or web sites of the publishers of the various programs. These sites are likely to be trusted less than those listed above. However, a reference to "Editor's Choice" or some other award or endorsement is likely to significantly influence the consumer.

It is clear from the discussion above that, in the consumer decision process for this

type of product, information search and evaluation of the alternatives are unlikely to be distinctively separate activities. Much evaluation will undoubtedly go on as information is gathered, and the search may be terminated at a such point that the consumer believes that additional search is unlikely to result in making a significantly better decision. Many of the likely decision criteria have already been discussed.

DECISION MAKING

For those consumers who have persisted in their search beyond a clear and simple recommendation from trusted sources, a decision will now have to be made. Those who have already decided to go with the recommendation of a trusted source will have already made a non-compensatory decision based on this recommendation. For those who are now considering several alternatives, however, the final decision could ultimately be a compensatory or non-compensatory one depending on the importance of various attributes that have been discovered in the information search. For example, some parents may conclude that the best method of prevention is to keep children away from the most dangerous sites. For those parents, then, any system must have a “filter” that denies access to web sites that have not been specified as acceptable, or at least to sites on a list of unacceptable destinations. Even with this kind of non-compensatory criterion, however, there may still be several alternatives remaining that each satisfy this criterion. This may lead the consumer to select another “non-negotiable” criterion as required, a process that may be continued until only one offering remains. Alternatively, compensatory decision making may “kick-in” at some point. For example, a parent may weigh the effectiveness of a program against the extent to which it may decrease the performance of the computer

and/or run the risk of denying the child access to sites that could be educational and/or otherwise beneficial.

Assignment #2 on primary research addressed methods of finding attributes that are likely to be important to consumers. Any final discussion of decision search would have to await the results of this research. However, it is expected that some parents would weight, to various degrees, the following criteria:

- Effectiveness in keeping children from as many dangerous sites as possible, with special emphasis on the ones that are most dangerous.
- Maximizing access to legitimate sites subject to adequate protection above.
- Cost.
- Difficulty of installation and use.
- Frequent updating as needed.
- Preventing children from revealing private or dangerous information.
- Effect on the performance of the computer, both when used by the child and by others.
- Ability of the program to prevent attempts to circumvent the protection.
- Ready availability, whether from stores, mail-order, and/or downloading.
- Endorsement by trusted sources.

The proposed software does not, in and of itself, provide filtering capability. However, it is intended to work with other software offering that provide this filtering separately. For those consumers who either hold filtering as an attribute for which compensation cannot be made, or for those who weight this attribute highly, it is important to get across that this software can be used with filtering software, adding additional protection. Thus, this point should be emphasized as appropriate in advertisements, news releases, and on packaging and point-of-purchase displays.

ATTITUDES

Attitudes consist of beliefs, affect, and behavioral intentions. The latter category involves plans to either forego buying in this product category, buying our brand with or without a complimentary one, buying only a competing product, or

pursuing further search. Affect is important here since use of this product is motivated by well justified fear. However, because this is a high involvement product, it will probably be most important to attempt to influence consumer beliefs which, in turn, will influence behavioral intention.

Although firms that offer Internet protection programs or other services compete against each other to some extent, all share the goal of informing parents about the dangers that their children can face on the Internet and the existence of products and services that can ameliorate these dangers. Since people already know about these dangers to a significant extent, much of the effort here may need to focus on strengthening these beliefs—i.e., not only do these bad things happen, but that these happen to an increasing extent as online predators become more and more sophisticated.

Since this new product—a program that distorts personal information revealed by the child online—offers a new type of protection, the most important goal for attitude change is probably the *addition* of a belief that although existing programs can be effective in keeping the child away from certain dangerous sites and providing certain other protections, this new program, unlike all others, *also helps in preventing the child from giving out sensitive information*. It can be pointed out that *predators may find ways to show up on sites where parents have chosen to give their children access* due to the educational or other quality found there.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed issues in consumer behavior that affect the marketing of this product. Because of the complexity and rapid advancement of computer products, information search is likely to be an important part of the decision and

adoption process.

The observations made in this paper suggest that it is important to gain favorable word of mouth from trusted sources such as schools and product review sources such as *Consumer Reports*, *PC Magazine*, and CNet. It is therefore important to make information readily available to these sources and encourage their review. News releases to the media are important here, as are free samples to PTA groups and other relevant organizations. It is also important to generate positive word of mouth from existing users through strong product performance and high quality customer service.

Consumer information search can be influenced at several stages. The actual information search has been discussed above. At the alternatives evaluation stage, it is important to have positive endorsements from trusted sources. It may also be useful to present information comparing other offerings to this brand in a format that is easy to process (e.g., a table). It may be useful to have links to review sites from the firm web site.

Some consumers may not feel they understand much about computer technology and may proceed immediately to the store to buy a product. Thus, if affordable, point of purchase displays may be useful. These may also be useful in influencing consumers who have already made a decision but may, with additional information, change this decision at the store.