

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONSUMER PERCEPTION**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In biology, perception refers to the senses that any organism uses to collect information about its environment. Wade & Tavriss (1987) note that the senses corresponding to the human sense organs have been categorised at least since Aristotle's time as: vision (our eyes), hearing (our ears), taste (our tongues), touch (our skin) and smell (our noses). Walters & Bergiel (1989) continue the biological viewpoint by explaining that according to the modern outlook, our sense of smell and taste are our olfactory senses due to the fact that our senses of smell and taste are so closely entwined. They continue by stating that humans also perceive in a kinaesthetic mode (using muscles and joints) and in a vestibular mode (through our internal organs).

In consumer behaviour, however, perception refers to much more than just the biological use of our sense organs. It includes the way stimuli are interacted and integrated by the consumer.

Although there are numerous definitions in literature explaining perception from a consumer behaviour perspective, the one used by Walters *et al* (1989, p. 333) provides particular clarity on the topic:

"The entire process by which an individual becomes aware of the environment and interprets it so that it will fit into his or her frame of reference."

Walters *et al* (1989) expand on the definition by stating that every perception involves a person who interprets through the senses some thing, event, or relation which may be designated as the percept. Van der Walt (1991) adds that perception occurs when sensory receptors receive stimuli via the brain, code and categorise them and assign

certain meanings to them, depending on the person's frame of reference. A person's frame of reference consists of all his previous held experiences, beliefs, likes, dislikes, prejudices, feelings and other psychological reactions of unknown origin.

From the discussion it is eminent that the perception process has long been recognised as the most significant barrier to effective communication. It is at this point that the sender does or does not get through to the receiver (Aaker et al, 1987), since correct decoding of marketing information hinges on the consumer's perception of the communication content (Van der Walt, 1991).

A problem though with perception and related studies (Schiffman et al, 1991) is that two individuals may be subject to the same stimuli under apparently the same conditions, but how they recognise, select, organise and interpret them is a highly individual process based on each person's own needs, values, expectations and the like. Individuals furthermore act and react on the basis of their perceptions, not on the basis of objective reality. With this in mind (Schiffman et al, 1991), it is important that marketers understand the whole notion of perception and its related concepts so that they can more readily determine what influences consumers to buy.

The perception process is also complicated due to the possibility that individuals may be stimulated below their level of conscious awareness (known as subliminal perception), ie they can perceive stimuli without being consciously aware of the stimuli in question.

Individuals also experience a certain amount of risk when making a purchasing decision and have a limited capacity to process all the different stimuli directed at them. This leads to a selective perception process where individuals will expose themselves selectively to marketing stimuli, pay selective attention to these stimuli and then interpret it to conform with previous held beliefs and attitudes. Only messages conforming to held beliefs will be retained.

## 3.2 FRAME OF REFERENCE

The relevance of briefly referring to the frame of reference while researching consumer perception, can be explained by the following statement by Van der Walt (1991, pp. 295-296):

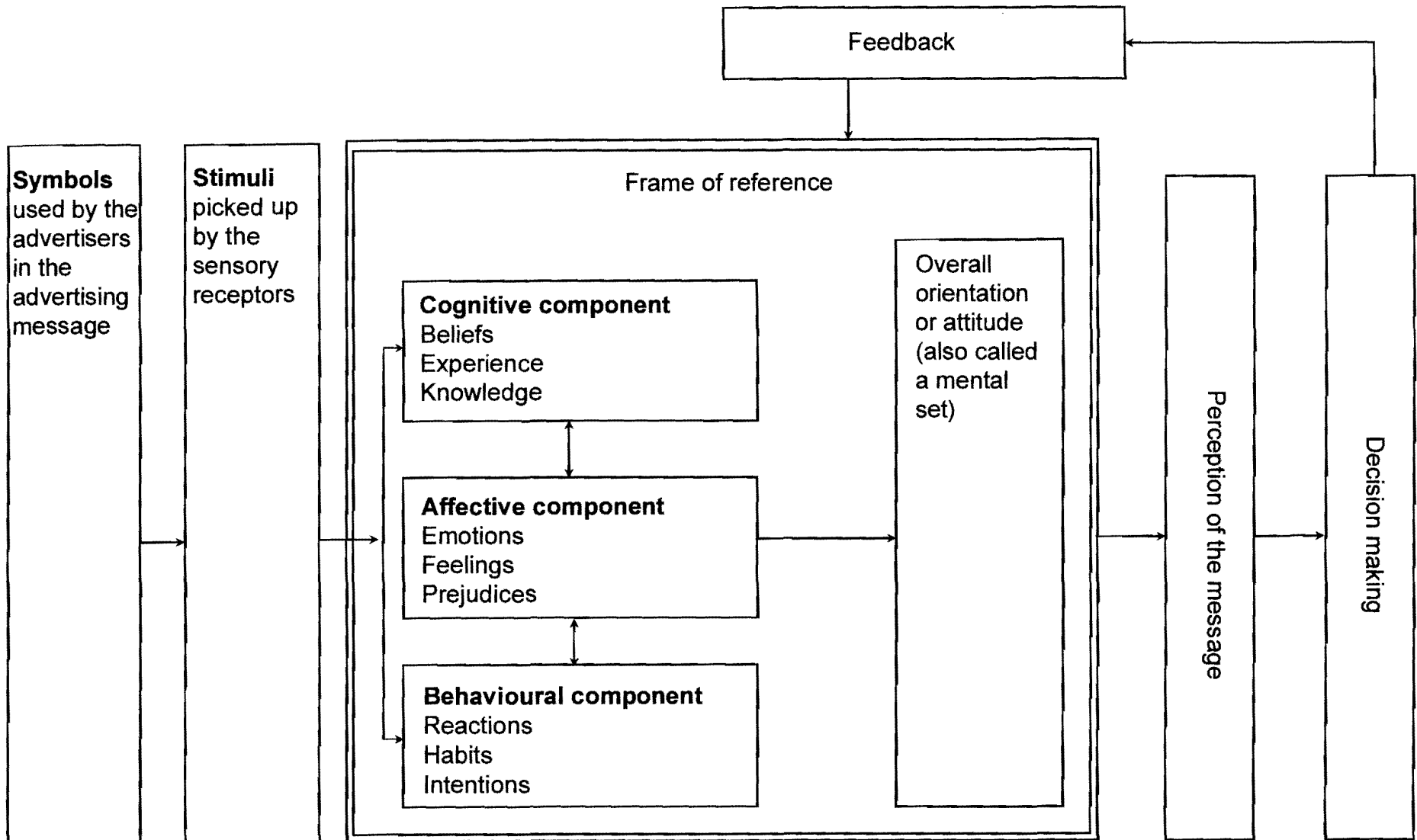
"Merely seeing or hearing, however, cannot be referred to as perception. Perception is seeing or hearing it in terms of a person's frame of reference."

Van der Walt (1991) continues by explaining that a person's frame of reference consists of all his previous experiences, beliefs, likes, dislikes, habits, prejudices, feelings and other psychological reactions of unknown origin. Furthermore, it is important to note that a person's frame of reference is unique to that person. The frame also acts as a filter for any stimuli that a person is exposed to, or as Mowen (1993) suggests, it acts as an anchor to which any rising issue is compared to on a judgemental scale. Stanton, Etzel & Walker (1991) expand on the latter statement by explaining that if an inconsistency is discovered, the new information will be distorted to conform to the established beliefs.

### 3.2.1 Operation of the frame of reference

As noted earlier, the frame of reference acts as a filter. According to Van der Walt (1991), however, exactly how this filter works remains a mystery which could possibly never be solved. The frame entails the evaluation of every stimulus to which a person is exposed in the light of previously held emotions, behavioural intentions and beliefs. These evaluations are concluded in an overall orientation or attitude towards a certain object, also referred to as a mental set. Figure 3.1 provides a detailed assessment of the frame of reference.

**FIGURE 3.1: INFORMATION FLOW THROUGH THE FRAME OF REFERENCE**



Source: Van der Walt (1991, p. 297)

The three main components through which all information must flow in the frame of reference are the cognitive, affective and behavioural components.

\* **Cognitive component**

The cognitive component consists of the total configuration of beliefs and knowledge about a certain object, as well as previously gained experience.

\* **Affective component**

The affective component involves emotions, feelings and prejudices. Prejudices refer to faulty interpretations made previously, and such prejudices cannot be changed easily.

\* **Behavioural component**

The behavioural component has to do with habits, reactions and intentions. Any information contradicting one's habits and intentions will not be accepted easily.

Therefore, it can be said that if it is stated that a message was perceived, it means that the stimuli have passed through all three components of the individual's frame of reference in such a way that the person is ultimately able to come to a decision. The fact that stimuli are passing through a person's frame of reference does not mean that the message was perceived correctly or that the decision that flows from it will be positive.

According to Walters et al (1989) it is important to note that the meaning of the market stimulus depends on the context in which it is perceived. All our senses have some limit to responsiveness to stimulation. These limits are referred to as thresholds.

### 3.3 THRESHOLDS

Wade et al (1987) note as introduction to the discussion on thresholds that the relationship between the physical properties of stimuli and the human psychological experience of them is studied in the field of psychophysics. Drawing on principles of both physics and psychology, they examine how varying the intensity or strength of a stimulus affects the strength of sensation in an observer.

Schiffman et al (1991) explain that sensation is the immediate and direct response of the sensory organs to simple stimuli (eg an advertisement, a brand name etc.). Human sensitivity refers to the experience of sensation, where the sensitivity to stimuli varies with the quality of an individual's sensory receptors (eg smell or eyesight) and the amount or intensity of the stimuli to which he is exposed. Sensation itself depends on energy change or differentiation of input. It can therefore be said that an unchanging environment, regardless of the strength of the sensory input, provides little or no sensation at all.

The following example by Schiffman et al (1991) may provide more clarity on the above discussion: A person living in a busy street of mid-town Manhattan would probably receive little or no sensation from the inputs of noisy stimuli such as tyres screeching, sirens of fire-engines, or horns honking, since such sounds are so common in New York City. One honk more or less would not make any difference. The reason is that in situations where there is a great deal of sensory input, the senses do not detect small intensities or differences in input. As the sensory input decreases however, our ability to detect changes in input or intensity increases, to the point where we attain maximum sensitivity under conditions of minimal stimulation.

This leads to the statement of Assael (1992, p. 131) which reads as follows: "The ability of consumers to detect variations in light, sound, smell, or other stimuli is determined by their threshold levels." Wilkie (1990) states that a threshold simply is a point at which an effect begins to occur.

There are two different threshold levels, namely an absolute threshold, below which no stimulus can be detected and a differential threshold, the minimum difference between two stimuli that can be detected. A third threshold is often referred to in literature (eg Van der Walt, 1991 and Walters et al, 1989) as an upper threshold, beyond which increased stimulation produces no increased response.

### **3.3.1 The absolute threshold**

Schiffman et al (1991) explains that the lowest level at which an individual can experience a sensation is called his absolute threshold, often referred to as the lower threshold. This means that the point where a difference can be detected between "something" and "nothing" is a person's absolute threshold for that stimulus.

### **3.3.2 The differential threshold**

The differential threshold, also called the just noticeable difference, is the minimal difference in stimuli that can be reliably detected by an observer when two stimuli are compared (Wade et al, 1987, supported by Assael, 1992, and Schiffman et al, 1991). Schiffman et al (1991) explain that the just noticeable difference (j.n.d.) between two stimuli is not an absolute amount, but an amount relative to the intensity of the first stimulus. The latter phenomenon is referred to as Weber's Law.

#### **\* Weber's Law**

Wade et al (1987, p. 164) defines Weber's Law as:

"A law of psychophysics stating that the change necessary to produce a just-noticeable-difference is a constant proportion of the original stimuli."

Aaker et al (1987) added to the definition by first stating that the degree to which a stimulus will be regarded as different will not depend on the absolute stimulus change

but on the percentage of change from some reference point, and secondly by supplying the equation used by Weber's Law to determine the constant that varies across senses:

$$\frac{\Delta I}{I} = K$$

where  $\Delta I$  = the smallest increase in stimulus intensity that will be perceived as different from the existing intensity;  
 $I$  = existing stimulus intensity; and  
 $K$  = constant that varies across senses.

A practical example of Weber's Law might explain the phenomenon more clearly (adapted from Wade et al 1987): Assume a pebble weighs 5 kg. When a second is weighed, the detectable difference between the two pebbles is 100 gram (0,02 kg). Now, suppose a boulder weighs 100 kg. How much must the second boulder weigh to detect a difference? The answer is 102 kg, an addition of 0,02 kg of 100 kg, or 2 kg. The importance of the example is that the proportion of the change necessary to produce the j.n.d. is the same. It is interesting to note, as was seen in the example, that the larger the object (or the higher the price for a product), the larger the difference has to be to be noticed (Assael, 1992).

The principles of Weber's Law (and the related concept of j.n.d) is widely used in marketing decisions such as price increases and reduction in size or quality of products.

Related to the discussion on thresholds is subliminal perception, where it is believed that individuals can be influenced by stimuli without being consciously aware of such stimuli. It is generally accepted that subliminal stimuli are not capable of influencing consumer behaviour or decision-making even though such stimuli may exist. From a marketing perspective, however, it is important to examine subliminal perception. As stated by Moore (1982), if only one per cent of a total audience of ten million is influenced by a subliminal message, such a message can be meaningful in altering the



behaviour of individuals.

Before turning to subliminal perception it should be emphasised that each individual has his own, unique threshold limit, applicable only to him (Walters et al, 1989).

### 3.3.3 Subliminal perception

The controversial topic regarding subliminal perception dates back as far as September 1957 where approximately 45 000 people attended the movie called "Picnic" in a theatre in Fort Lee, New Jersey. This movie allegedly contained subliminal advertising messages displayed at 1/3000 of a second at intervals of five seconds. The subliminal messages invited audience members to "eat popcorn" and "drink Coca-Cola".

After the experiment the researcher, Mr Vicary, reported dramatic increases in Coca-Cola (18%) and popcorn sales (57,8%). Mr Vicary, however, could not provide any documentation regarding the increase in sales.

The reaction regarding the alleged results was immediate and widespread and raised serious ethical questions, since consumers could be influenced by messages without their approval or without them even knowing about it. Laws were drafted prohibiting the use of subliminal advertising on television, while public response included statements such as:

"... take this invention and everything connected with it and attach it to the centre of the next nuclear explosive scheduled for testing." (Cousins 1957, p. 20 in Moore, 1982, p. 38)

After a second study was conducted, this time controlled and supervised, no change occurred in either the sale of Coca-Cola or popcorn. After being questioned, Mr Vicary admitted that he had fabricated the results hoping he could revive his failing business (Wells, Burnett & Moriarty, 1989 and Weir, 1984).

From the discussion above, one of the major controversies regarding consumer perception arises namely whether consumers can actually perceive marketing stimuli below their thresholds of awareness.

Assael (1992, p. 724) defines subliminal perception as follows:

"Perception of a stimulus below the conscious level. If the stimulus is beneath the threshold of conscious awareness, but above the absolute threshold of perception, it is known as subliminal perception."

Assael (1992) expanded his definition by adding that the conscious level is referred to as the limen. Therefore, perception beneath the conscious level is subliminal. Schiffman *et al* (1991) explain that although perception occurs at a level below the conscious level, it is not below the absolute threshold. Perception of stimuli that is above the conscious level of awareness is referred to as supraliminal perception.

Potentially, subliminal perception could be achieved in at least three major ways. The possibilities are the presenting of visual stimuli for a very brief duration; presenting auditory messages through accelerated speech at low volume levels; and embedding or hiding images or words in pictorial material.

The purported benefit of using subliminal perception techniques in advertising, according to Loudon & Della Bitta (1988), is that subliminal messages will not be strong enough to arouse consumers' selective attention and defence mechanisms, but will be strong enough to influence them at an unconscious level. Regarding this statement Peter & Olson (1990), as well as Moore (1982) explain that one of the pioneers of embedded images and words in advertising, a certain Dr Key, believes that humans have at least two sensory input levels, one that encodes data at the conscious level and a second operating at a level below conscious awareness.

According to Dr Key, a concealed word or symbol that is usually invisible to the consciousness appears instantly perceivable at the unconscious level (Moore, 1982). The foundation of the theory of Dr Key, namely that subliminal embeds exist in advertising rests upon numerous different advertisements with embedded microscopic erotica (Moore, 1982). In a liquor advertisement for example, Key found among others the letters "s", "e" and "x" in different ice-cubes. In another advertisement he found them on the back of a child's hand. Other sexual embedded symbols and messages, of which many were male and female genitals, also featured as evidence for Key's claims (Wilkie, 1986; Haberstroh, 1984; and Moore, 1982).

The problem with Key's theory, however, is that not only are none of the embedded images visible to the naked eye (in fact it apparently requires weeks of analysis for many of them to be discovered) but are sometimes also embedded upside down (Moore, 1982). Herberstroh (1984) furthermore claimed that when Key conducted his research, none of the respondents ever discovered any of the subliminal details in the advertisements. Of course, with the expert "guidance" of Dr Key, all were soon able to "see" the objects he pointed out. A further counter argument is that there are no psychological theories or data of the two alleged processing systems that Key refers to (Peter et al, 1993 and Moore, 1982). In conclusion, Moore (1982) stresses that Key appears to invent whatever features of perception and memory would be necessary to achieve the results imputed to embedded stimuli. Haberstroh (1984) supports the view concerning Key, and adds that the broad advertising community and academic profession perceive Dr Key as "crazy", "paranoid" and above all, "obsessed with sex".

But how does one see erotic and other symbols in ice cubes? Mowen (1993) provides one answer by explaining that one can see the shapes for the same reason that you can find dogs, cats, elephant, and faces in complex cloud formations. Schiffman et al (1991) support this statement by adding that a vivid imagination can see whatever it wants to see in just about any situation.

As a final conclusion on the topic of subliminal perception, it can be stated that subliminal advertising is not capable of influencing the individual (Peter et al, 1993; Assael, 1992; Loudon et al, 1988; Schiffman et al, 1991; Haberstroh, 1984; Weir, 1984; Zano, Pinicus & Lamp, 1983; and Moore, 1982) due to the following reasons:

- \* The effects of subliminal stimuli are extremely weak and most certainly are overridden by a host of more powerful messages (Mowen, 1987).
- \* Perceptual thresholds differ from person to person, and even from time to time (Wells et al, 1989).
- \* Symbols that are subliminal to one person might be perceived consciously by another. A message that is guaranteed to be subliminal to an entire audience would probably be so weak that any effect would be limited (Wells et al, 1989).
- \* Another problem is the lack of control that the advertiser would have over the distance and position of the message, for this can also affect the recognisability of the subliminal stimulus (Wells et al, 1989).
- \* The recognisable (supraliminal) material, such as the commercial or the movie used in conjunction with the subliminal message has different effects on people. The supraliminal stimulus might overpower the subliminal material entirely (Wells et al, 1989).

## 3.4 THE CONSUMER PERCEPTION PROCESS

### 3.4.1 Introduction

The perception process as displayed in Figure 3.2 consists of five distinct activities. The first activity is that of exposure to stimuli. The second states that attention to stimuli has to occur. During the third activity, organisation, people organise stimuli so that it can be comprehended and retained. The fourth activity is that of interpretation of the message. Information is retained during the last activity. As seen in Figure 3.2, a successful perception process leads to a purchasing and consumption decision. Consumer decision-making models were discussed in Chapter 2.

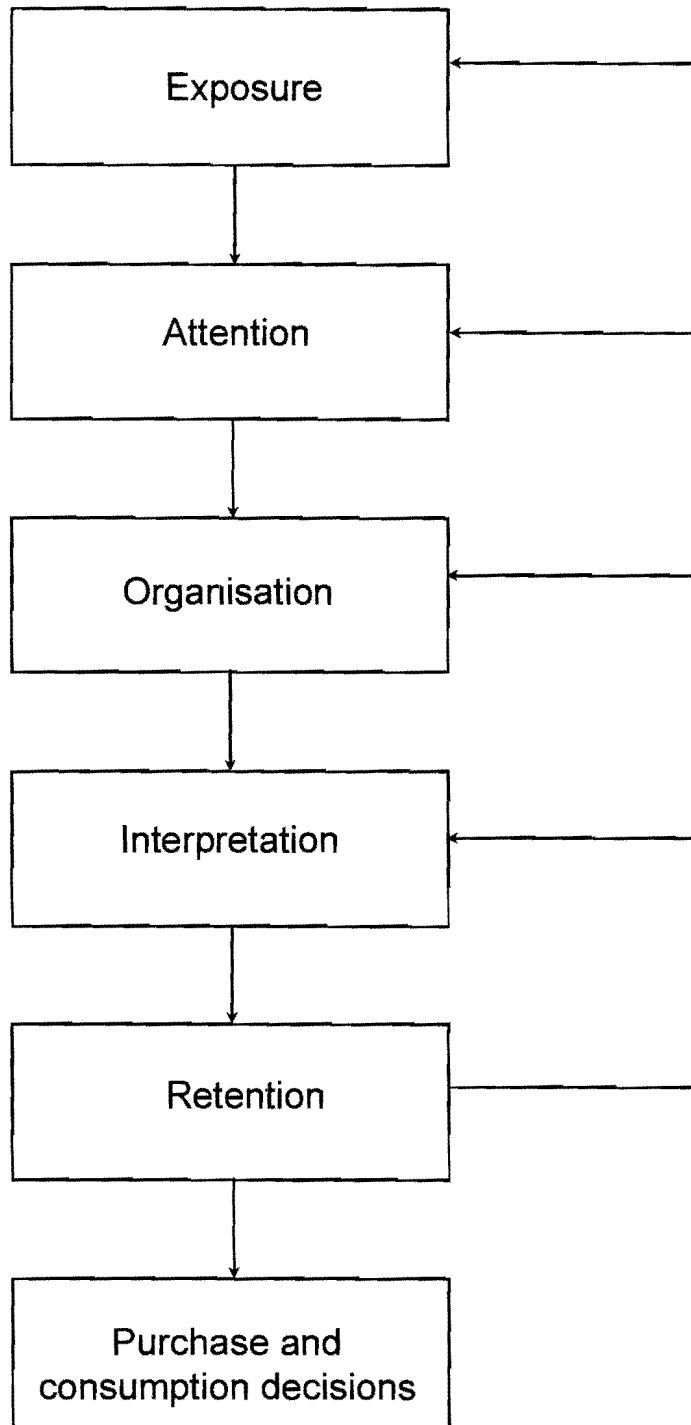
### 3.4.2 Exposure

Exposure, the first step of the perception process, occurs when a stimulus comes within the range of our sensory receptor nerves, ie when stimuli come within the range of one of our senses. Exposure is therefore simply the minimum requirement of perception. No matter how great a message is, it will not be perceived unless a person is exposed to the stimulus (Wells *et al*, 1989).

Bisschoff (1992) explains that exposure to stimuli is of either an intentional or an accidental nature. Intentional exposure occurs when an individual is exposed to market-related information because of his own intentional, goal-directed behaviour, ie it reflects a person's interests, reading habits, information needs and life style.

Accidental exposure to stimuli occurs when the individual is exposed to intensive marketing campaigns, such as the messages portrayed by the broadcasting media, billboards, point-of-sale displays in the retail store and the vast number of magazine and newspaper advertisements. Furthermore, the individual is also accidentally exposed to information such as testimonies from friends or relatives concerning a specific product. Such testimonies first leads to interest, and then to intentional exposure.

**FIGURE 3.2: THE CONSUMER PERCEPTION PROCESS**



Source: Adapted from Hawkins et al (1992, p. 222)

Aaker et al (1987) conclude by emphasising the importance of exposure by stating that there can be no communication (or a perception process for that matter) without exposure.

### 3.4.3 Attention

An individual is exposed, whether intentionally or accidentally, to thousands of different marketing stimuli during a normal living day ranging from thousands of different products in a retail store, all differing in packaging, colour and design to as many as 1 500 advertisements (Belch et al, 1995; Assael, 1992; and Aaker et al, 1987).

From a marketing perspective attention is of crucial importance, since no matter how often a consumer is exposed to marketing stimuli, if no attention took place, the message is of no use.

Assael (1992, p. 709) defines the attention process as:

"The momentary focusing of a consumer's cognitive capacity on a specific stimulus."

Attention to a given stimulus has taken place only if a consumer notices or attends to the stimulus. If a consumer does not focus on a stimulus, eg an advertisement, although he has been exposed to it, attention did not take place.

The attention process can therefore be viewed as an information filter - a screening mechanism that controls the quantity and nature of information any individual receives (Aaker et al, 1987).

Before attending to the factors determining attention, it is important to note that the so-called attention filter operates at three different levels of effort and consciousness that vary from active search to passive attention.

### **3.4.3.1 Levels of effort and consciousness in the attention process**

Hawkins et al (1992) pointed out the importance of there being three different levels in the attention process. The same person may devote different levels of attention to the same stimulus in different situations. The three levels involved are active search, passive search and passive attention.

According to Aaker et al (1987) a receiver actually seeks information at the first level of the attention filter, active search. Information might be gathered from magazines not normally read, or by soliciting the opinions of friends.

At the second level, passive search, a receiver searches for information only from sources to which he is exposed during the normal course of events. No effort is made to obtain information from sources not usually exposed to.

At the final level, passive attention, a receiver has little immediate need for information. Although no conscious effort is made to obtain information, some may nevertheless enter the system.

### **3.4.3.2 Factors determining attention**

For the marketer to attempt to gain attention to his marketing efforts, it is useful to note the different factors determining attention. The three factors are the stimulus, the individual, and the situation (Hawkins et al, 1992).

#### **3.4.3.2.1 Stimulus factors**

According to Hawkins et al (1992) stimulus factors are physical characteristics of the situation itself. Mowen (1993), supported by Assael (1992), Hawkins et al (1992), Schiffman et al (1991), Wilkie (1990), Aaker et al (1987), and Berkman & Gilson (1986), explains that a number of stimulus characteristics tend to attract our attention independently of our individual characteristics. These stimulus characteristics are size



and intensity, colour, movement and contrast, position, isolation, format and information quantity.

\* **Size and intensity**

The size and intensity of the stimulus influence the probability of paying attention to it. Large stimuli are more likely to attract attention than smaller ones, simply because a consumer is more likely to notice them (Wilkie, 1990). Intensity of the stimulus can be used to draw attention. Loud noises, strong scents and brighter lights are all commonly used for this purpose.

\* **Colour, movement and contrast**

Both colour and movement serve to attract attention. Bright colours and moving objects are normally more noticeable. An example of the element of contrast suggests that a black and white advertisement is likely to be noticed in a full-colour context. Wilkie (1990) explains that contrast, because it represents a change to our sensory systems, will activate our sensory receptors and stimulate our attention processes.

\* **Position**

Position is one of the most interesting determinants of perception. Position refers to the placement of an object in a person's visual field. Items placed more to the centre of the visual field are more likely to be noticed than those placed near the edge of the field. This explains why consumer goods manufacturers compete fiercely for eye-level space in grocery stores. Likewise, advertisements placed on the upper half of a page get more attention than the lower part and left-hand side more than the right. It is interesting to note that Orientals, Arabs and people used to reading Hebrew will give perceptual emphasis to other portions of the page.

\* **Isolation**

Isolation is the process of separating the stimulus object from other objects. For example, if a small object is placed in a virtually blank page, it draws immediate attention due to the isolation principle.

\* **Format**

The concept of format refers to the manner in which the message is presented. A general rule is that simple, straight forward presentations receive more attention than complex presentations. The concept of compressed information is related to format since the speeding of a message can increase attention, whereas elements in the message that increase the effort required to process the message tend to decrease attention. Aaker et al (1987) agree that in printed advertising a short, simple copy can be informative, but add that if a reader has real use for information and if the information is well packaged, he can be induced to read a long copy. Format, like the other stimulus elements, must be developed with a specific target market in mind (Hawkins et al, 1992).

\* **Information quantity**

Information quantity relates more to the total stimulus field than to any particular item in that field. Although there are substantial variations among individuals, all consumers have limited capacities to process information. Information overload occurs when consumers are confronted with so much information that they cannot or will not attend to all of it. Instead, they become frustrated and either postpone or give up the decision, make a random choice, or use a suboptimal portion of the total information available.

### 3.4.3.2.2 Individual factors

Individual factors are characteristics of the individual. The most important individual factors are personal interests or needs. Berkman et al (1986) focus our attention on the importance to remember that interests and needs vary from individual to individual and that individual response factors cannot be gauged with the scientific precision of stimulus factors as explained above.

Wilkie (1990) is of the opinion that our physical needs cause us to be more sensitive to potential stimuli that might satisfy those needs. Hawkins et al (1992) refer to interest and explain that interest can also influence personal perceptions since it is a reflection of our overall lifestyle as well as a result of long-term goals and short-term needs. Short-term goals and needs are heavily influenced by the situation. Our goals furthermore cause us to be more attentive to specific stimuli that might help to satisfy them (Wilkie, 1990). A practical example would be to notice how many petrol stations one observes once the petrol gauge begins to drift towards the "Empty" mark.

Aaker et al (1987) continue the discussion by explaining why a person obtains information. It is important to note that there are, of course, as many reasons as there are situations and individuals. It, however, is instructive to examine four general motives for attending to stimuli.

Information is first of all of practical value. It can also be supportive, stimulating and interesting.

#### \* **Information of practical value**

The objective of gaining information of practical value is that it will be of use to a person. In an advertising context, an individual will obtain information that will help him make better purchasing decisions. More information might be needed about certain products such as expensive and new products with which the consumer is not familiar.

Information of practical value would also be used once consumers are actively searching for information. This may result in gathering information from sources normally not exposed to, such as advertisements in specialist magazines, by soliciting information from others, or by reading technical reports, especially when adequate information is not available through prior experience.

Such an active search for information generates exposure that is extremely important because such exposure will be more likely to affect product knowledge and attitude structure than that not associated with effort. Furthermore, the receiver is apt to be close to a purchase and the chances of forgetting the message is therefore lower.

The purchase, however, need not be imminent for a person to collect product information. Individuals often acquire information for future reference, using processes such as passive search or passive attention.

\* **Information that supports**

People have a psychological preference for supportive information, ie they may be motivated to be exposed to information that supports their opinion - selective exposure. They therefore tend to avoid non-supportive or discrepant information. Selective exposure will be discussed under Section 3.6.1.

\* **Information that stimulates**

It is a common fact that people get bored very easily and are therefore motivated to reduce that boredom by seeking stimuli that are novel, unusual and different. In particular, people may be motivated to seek out information that does not support their positions due to influenced exposure patterns.

\* **Information that interests**

People tend to notice information that interests them. In turn, they are interested in subjects with which they are involved. They are essentially interested in themselves and in various extensions of themselves.

**3.4.3.2.3 Situational factors**

The final factor determining attention, the situation, are stimuli in the environment other than the focal stimulus, focusing only on one stimulus source (eg an advertisement or package), or temporary characteristics of the individual that are induced by the environment, such as time pressure or a very crowded store. As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that one person may devote different meanings to the same stimulus in different situations.

Aaker et al (1987) conclude by stating that advertisers should try to attract attention, but at the same time be cautious not to divert interest from the important points of the message. In particular, it is of no use to attract an individual's attention if the brand and its message get lost in the process.

**3.4.4 Perceptual organisation**

Assael (1992, p.720) defines perceptual organisation as:

"The organization of disparate information so that it can be comprehended and retained."

Schiffman et al (1991) explain that people do not experience the numerous stimuli they select from the environment as separate and discrete sensations. They rather tend to organise them into groups and perceive them as unified wholes. The perceived characteristics of even the simplest stimulus are therefore viewed as a function of the whole to which the stimulus appears to belong. Assael (1992) and Wilkie (1990)

support this viewpoint by adding that during the perceptual organisation process, consumers group information from various sources into a meaningful whole to better comprehend such information and act on it.

Aaker et al (1987) explain perceptual organisation by stating that because stimuli are perceived not as a set of elements but as a whole, it can be concluded that this total has a meaning of its own that is not necessarily deductible from its individual components. This phenomenon is termed the Gestalt psychology.

Assael (1992, p.715) defines the Gestalt psychology as:

"A German school of psychology that focuses on total configurations or whole patterns. Stimuli, such as advertising messages are seen as an integrated whole. In short, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

Assael (1992) claims that the basic hypothesis of the Gestalt psychologists is that people organise perceptions to form a complete picture of an object. Mowen (1993) supports this view by stating that the Gestalt psychologists attempted to identify the rules that govern how people take disjoint stimuli and make sense out of the shapes and forms to which they are exposed.

Aaker et al (1987) suggest that even when stimuli are incomplete, people strive to form a complete impression of a person or object. The reason for this statement is that an individual has a cognitive drive towards an orderly cognitive configuration or psychological field. An individual desires to make the field as good as possible.

Wilkie (1990) and Aaker et al (1987) conclude by stressing the fact that an important tenet of the Gestalt psychology is that there is a cognitive drive to obtain what they term a "good Gestalt", ie people desire to have perceptions that are simple, familiar, regular, complete, meaningful and consistent.

#### 3.4.4.1 Gestalt principles of organisation

The three basic Gestalt principles of organisation (Mowen, 1993; Assael, 1992; Schiffman *et al*, 1991; Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1990; and Wilkie, 1990) centre on closure, grouping (consisting of proximity, similarity and continuity) and context (the principle of figure and ground). Other principles, according to Wilkie (1990), are symmetry and common fate (supported by Mowen, 1993). Mowen (1993) as well as Krebs and Blackman (1988) add illusion as the final element of perceptual organisation. Figure 3.3 displays the various Gestalt principles of organisation.

##### \* Closure

Perception favours a complete or closed figure. Closure, therefore, refers to a perceiver's tendency to fill in the missing elements when a stimulus is incomplete. Consumers have a desire to form a complete picture and derive a certain amount of satisfaction in completing a message on their own (Figure 3.3-1).


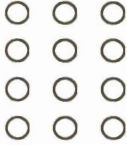

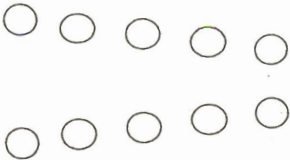

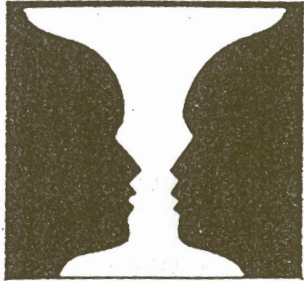
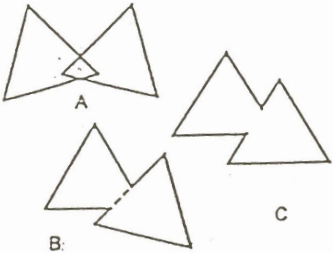
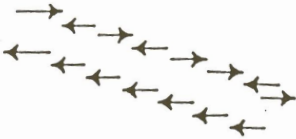
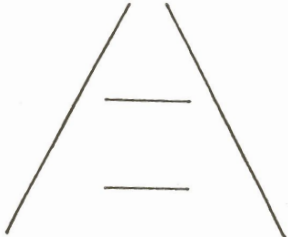
##### \* Grouping

Individuals are more likely to perceive a variety of information as groups rather than as separate units. As was noted earlier, principles of grouping that have emerged from Gestalt psychology are proximity, similarity and continuity.

The tendency of **proximity** means that one object will be associated with another because of its closeness to that object. The twelve circles in Figure 3.3-2 are seen as three columns of circles rather than four rows of circles because of their vertical proximity.

According to the principle of **similarity**, elements that are similar in appearance seem to form a unit. In Figure 3.3-3, the circles and squares are grouped in three sets because of their similarity.

**FIGURE 3.3: GESTALT PRINCIPLES OF ORGANISATION**

<p><b>1. Closure</b></p> 	<p><b>2. Proximity</b></p> 	<p><b>3. Similarity</b></p> 
<p><b>4. Continuity</b></p> 	<p><b>5. Context</b></p> 	<p><b>6. Figure and ground</b></p> 
<p><b>7. Symmetry</b></p> 	<p><b>8. Common fate</b></p> 	<p><b>9. Illusion</b></p> 

Source: Compiled from Mowen (1993), Assael (1992), Krebs et al (1988), and Wilkie (1986).

**Continuity** suggests that stimuli are also grouped into continuous and uninterrupted forms rather than into discontinuous contours. The circles displayed in Figure 3.3-4 are, because of continuity, more likely to be seen as an arrow projecting to the right than as columns of circles.



## \* **Context**

Individuals will tend to perceive an object by the context in which it is shown. Assael (1992) stresses that even the setting of an advertisement will influence the perception of a product (Figure 3.3-5 is an example of the context principle. Both the horizontal lines in the figure are of equal length, but because of the different positions of the arrows - that is the context - the horizontal line on the left is perceived to be longer).

The most important principle of context is that of **figure and ground**. Perception tends to feature one object at a time and view the remaining stimuli as background. Assael (1992) suggests that, according to Gestalt psychology, individuals will in organising stimuli into wholes, distinguish prominent stimuli (the figure that is generally in the foreground) from less prominent stimuli (the ground or background). Figure 3.3-6 is an example of the figure and ground principle. Mowen (1993) explains that the image switches back and forth because our brain cannot decipher whether the figure is the black or the white portion of the drawing.

## \* **Symmetry**

Wilkie (1990) explains that perception favours a symmetrical form over an asymmetrical one when both interpretations are possible. Figure 3.3-7 depicts the principle of symmetry. In Figure 3.3-7A, individuals may see separate triangles rather than the overall form. In Figure 3.3-7B, one might focus more on the triangles than the irregular four-sided shape, while the more regular overall outline displayed in Figure 3.3-7C may be "shaped" to a more symmetrical form.

## \* **Common fate**

Common fate suggests that moving elements that are travelling in the same direction seem to form a unit. Figure 3.3-8 depicts an example of common fate.

## \* Illusion

Illusion, also termed the Ponzo illusion, suggests that lines of equal lengths are perceived as being of different lengths; in the presence of adjacent angled lines, most people judge the upper horizontal line to be longer than the lower horizontal line (Figure 3.3-9). According to Krebs *et al* (1988) an important characteristic of illusion is that by simply becoming aware that a misperception is occurring, an individual will not be able to correct the error. In such instances, knowledge available to an individual's cognitive system is not sufficient to correct an error in the operation of his perceptual system.

### 3.4.5 Perceptual interpretation

Mowen (1993, p. 778) defines interpretation as:

"A process whereby people draw upon their experience, memory, and expectations to interpret and attach meaning to a stimulus."

Schiffman *et al* (1991) and Van der Walt (1991) explain that the interpretation phase is uniquely individual, since it is based upon what individuals expect to see in the light of their previous experience, on the number of plausible explanations they can envision, and on their interests and motives at the time perception occurs. Mowen (1993) adds to this by stating that during this phase, people will retrieve from long-term memory information pertinent to the stimulus. Expectancies regarding what the stimulus "should be like" are also retrieved from memory and used to interpret the stimulus.

Mowen (1993) notes a problem with interpretation, namely that individuals may interpret the same stimulus differently. He adds that personal inclinations, bias, and most important of all, expectations of the individual, will influence his interpretation of a stimulus.

Assael (1992), supported by Wilkie (1990), continues by explaining that perceptual interpretation consists of two basic principles, namely categorisation and inference. Categorisation assists the individual to process known information quickly and efficiently and classify new information. Inference involves the development of an association between two stimuli.

#### **3.4.5.1 Perceptual categorisation**

Perceptual categorisation is defined by Assael (1992, p. 710) as:

"Tendency of consumers to place marketing information into logical categories in order to process information quickly and efficiently, and to classify new information."

Wilkie (1990) explains that the categorisation process is extremely important since it underpins all our interactions with our external world. He expands his explanation by stating that the way an individual initially categorises a stimulus, will affect how interested that individual will be in the stimulus, what to expect from it, and whether it will be evaluated positively or negatively. Furthermore, it is important to note that the categorisation process works at an extremely rapid speed, and usually at the unconscious level.

When an individual has previously encountered a specific external stimulus and has a strong category for it in long-term memory (Wilkie, 1986), the process is similar to "recognising" the stimulus pattern and calling forth the right node from long-term memory. If an individual has not encountered a particular stimulus before, the categorisation process must rely on matching "cues" from the stimulus to possible categories in long-term memory, therefore arriving at what possible identity seems right for it.

### 3.4.5.2 Perceptual inferences

According to Assael (1992, p. 716) inference:

"Involves the development of an association between two stimuli; ..."

Wilkie (1986, p. 397) expands on the definition by stating that "an inference is a belief that we developed based on other information". If a person's name is Sue for example, that person is likely to be a woman; if a product has a high price, it is likely to be of higher quality. Wilkie (1986) explains that not all inferences will be correct, although we would like them to be so. Again, most of these inferences will be made at an unconscious level due to the high speed involved in the processing of stimuli. Perceptual inferences that are made at a conscious level will be termed conscious inferences.

Assael (1992) concludes that there are three types of inferences: evaluation-based, similarity-based, and correlation-based inferences. **Evaluation-based inferences** are judgements leading to a consistently positive or negative evaluation of a brand. **Similarity-based inferences** are beliefs about an object based on its similarity to other objects. Because of similarity, individuals develop inferences about unfamiliar products by linking them to products they are familiar with. **Correlation-based inferences** are those based on associations from the general to the specific.

### 3.4.6 Retention

Van der Walt (1991) explains that even if the total perception process was successful it serves no purpose if the individual is unable to recall the information when he is required to act on it. The message has failed if a person cannot remember its content.

Retention is therefore the actual storage of processed information in the memory of the individual. Hawkins et al (1992) expand the explanation by stating that memory plays a critical role in guiding the perception process. Memory has a long-term storage component and a short-term active component. Bisschoff (1992) adds to the discussion by explaining that, since short-term memory is the active component, it deals with problem-solving by using newly acquired information. This, however, can only be true if no knowledge about a certain subject exists, and that is rarely the case. Long-term memory is activated to help solve the problem by supplying relevant past stored information. Long-term memory is once again activated to retain the information once the processing has been completed, and this will remain dormant for future reference purposes.

Walters et al (1989) conclude by expressing the opinion that retention is of a temporal nature, ie of short duration. A stimulus with constant intensity therefore needs repetition if it is to be brought to the consciousness.

### **3.5 PERCEPTUAL DEFENCE**

Assael (1992, p. 720) defines perceptual defence as:

"Distortion of information by consumers so that it conforms to their beliefs and attitudes. This function operates to protect the individual from threatening or contradictory stimuli."

Schiffman et al (1991) view perceptual defence as a subconscious distortion of stimuli that are important for the consumer not to see, even though exposure may already have taken place. Therefore, threatening or otherwise damaging stimuli are less likely to achieve awareness than neutral stimuli at the same level of exposure.

Van der Walt (1991) explains that there are two reasons why people apparently feel a need to defend themselves against information. The two reasons are perceived risk and perceptual overload. Perceived risk deals with the different kinds of risk associated with

a purchasing decision, while perceptual overload holds that the consumer has a limited capacity to process the variety of stimuli directed at him.

Because of the above, consumers erect perceptual defence barriers, also known as the selective perception process. Before attending to the selective perception process, the focus will be directed towards perceived risk and perceptual overload.

### **3.5.1 Perceived risk**

Mowen (1993 p. 782) defines perceived risk as:

"A consumer's perception of the overall favorability of a course of action based upon an assesment of the possible outcomes and on the likelihood that those outcomes will occur."

Van der Walt (1991) explains that because the consumer constantly needs to make decisions regarding products and services that best satisfy his needs, and the consequences of such decisions are often uncertain, he faces some degree of risk when making a purchasing decision.

Schiffman et al (1991), supported by Van der Walt (1991), stress the importance to note that the consumer is influenced only by the risk he perceives, regardless of whether or not such risk actually exists. If no risk is perceived, there will be no reaction, even in dangerous situations. Schiffman et al (1991) furthermore stress that the amount of money involved in a purchasing decision is not directly related to the amount of risk perceived. Therefore, selecting the right mouthwash may present as great a risk to a consumer as selecting a new television set.

There are several kinds of risk associated with a purchasing decision. Some people are more vulnerable to some kinds of risk than others, and some are more vulnerable to all kinds and experience great difficulty making up their minds.

The different types of risk, as well as the uncertainty associated with the specific risk is shown in Table 3.1.

**TABLE 3.1: TYPE OF PERCEIVED RISK AND RELATED UNCERTAINTY**

Type of Risk	Uncertainty
Functional/ Performance	Risk that the product will not perform as expected (eg Will it work? or, Will it last?)
Physical	Risk that the product will physically harm the buyer (eg Is it safe to use?)
Financial	Risk that the outcome will harm the consumer financially (eg Am I wasting money?)
Social	Risk that friends or acquaintances will deride the purchase (eg Will my family and friends approve my choice? or, Will they admire me?)
Psychological	Risk that the product will lower consumer's self-image (eg Will it make me feel (look) good? or, Will it impress others?)
Time	Risk that the time spent in a product search may be wasted if the product does not perform as expected (eg Will I have to go through the shopping effort all over again?)
Opportunity loss	Risk that by taking one action the consumer will miss out on doing something else he would really prefer doing (eg Will the purchase of one expensive item deprive me from buying many other, less expensive items?)

**SOURCE:** Compiled from Mowen (1993, p. 197), Schiffman *et al* (1991, p.181) and Van der Walt (1991, p. 301).

Van der Walt (1991) explains that all types of risk are involved to a greater or lesser extent with the consumer's ego or self-esteem. High risk perceivers are sensitive to risk, lack self-confidence and have egos which can be easily bruised by making what they see as a "wrong decision" such as wasting a lot of money on a product which in any case may not work properly and may also make them look ridiculous. Schiffman *et al* (1991) add that high-risk perceivers are narrow categorisers, since they limit their product choice to a few safe alternatives. They would rather exclude some perfectly good alternatives than chance a poor selection. In contrast, low-risk perceivers are

broad categorisers since they tend to make their choices from a much wider range of alternatives. They would rather risk a poor selection than limit the number of alternatives from which they can choose.

### **3.5.2 Perceptual overload**

Van der Walt (1991), supported by Walters *et al* (1989), explains that the second reason why consumers have a need for perceptual barriers (selective perception), is that they have limited capacities to process all the information directed at them. She states that perceptual overload occurs because the mind of the individual fails to comprehend all the sensations, often of conflicting nature, which bombard one's senses at any given moment.

Marketing stimuli bombarding the senses include an enormous number of variables, all of which compete for the consumer's attention. Different shapes, sizes, colours and conflicting messages are but a few examples of the variables.

Van der Walt (1991) concludes that perceptual defence occurs throughout the perception process. Man's ability to be selective when dealing with information helps him to adjust and make consumer decisions without undue difficulty. As stated earlier, it is understandable that these decisions will not always be completely logical or rational.

## **3.6 SELECTIVE PERCEPTION**

Selective perception can be defined (Assael, 1992, p. 722) as the process where:

"Consumers perceive marketing stimuli selectively to reinforce their needs, attitudes, past experiences, and personal characteristics. Selective perception means that the identical ad, package, or product can be perceived very differently by two consumers"



Schiffman et al (1991) and Wells et al (1989) add to the definition by describing selective perception (referred to as defence barriers by Van der Walt, 1991) as a heightened awareness of stimuli that interest the consumer, a process of screening out information that does not interest him, and retaining information that does.

Belch et al (1995), supported by Van der Walt (1991) and Walters et al (1989), justify the existence of a selective perception process by explaining that such a process is required because of the sheer number of stimuli that a person is exposed to every day (advertisements alone account for between 300 and 1 500 per normal working day). The individual mind simply fails to comprehend and interpret all the sensations that bombard the senses at any given time due to the limited capacity of a person's sensory system.

The selective perception process to be discussed consists of selective exposure, selective attention, selective interpretation and selective retention. The stage of organising stimuli is the same as discussed in the perception process, since individuals will during both the perception and selective perception process attempt to organise stimuli so that they can better comprehend (interpret) and retain it. Figure 3.4 displays the selective perception process.

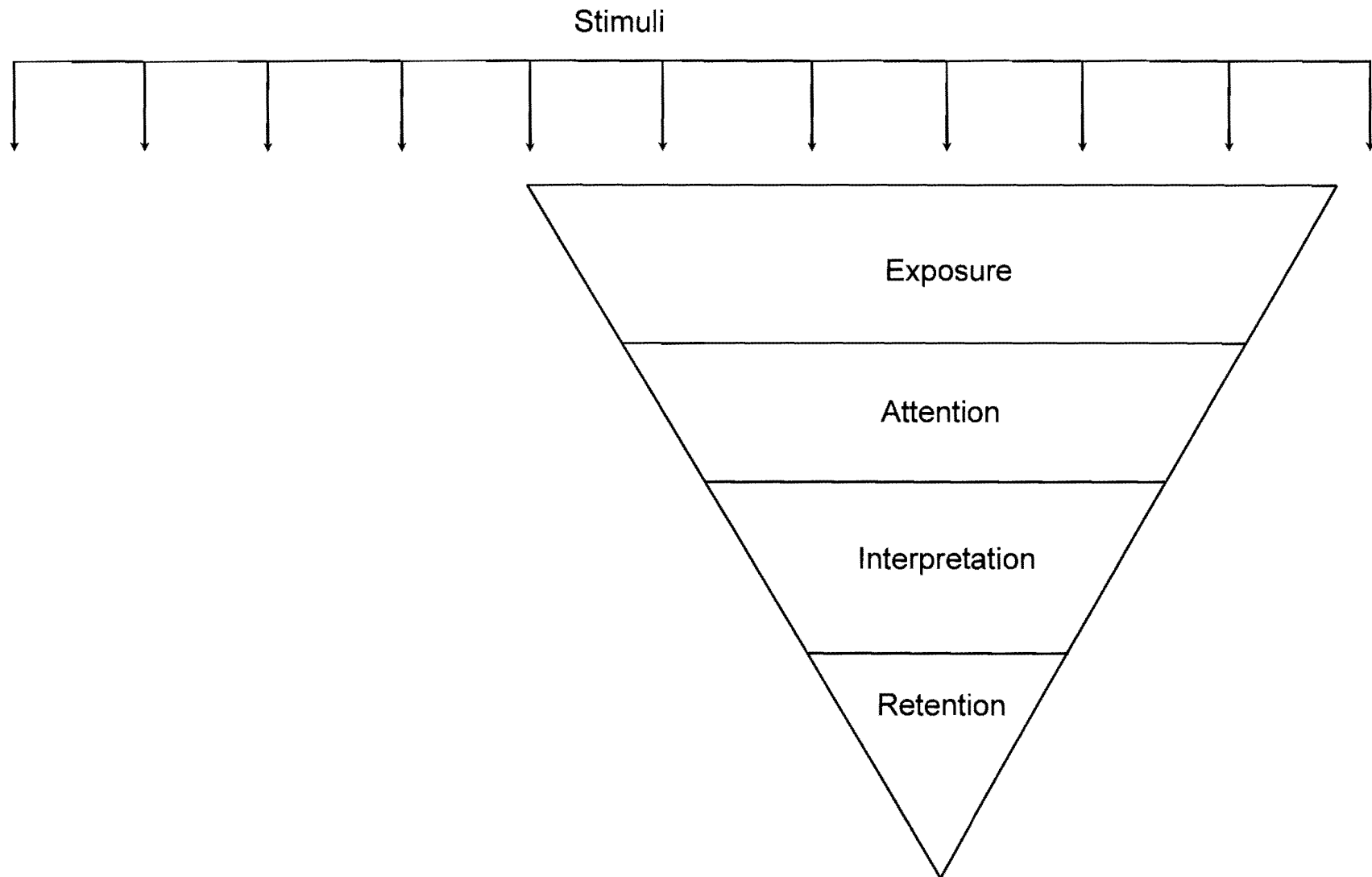
### **3.6.1 Selective exposure**

According to Schiffman et al (1987, p. 710) selective exposure can be defined as the

"Conscious or subconscious exposure of the consumer to certain media or messages, and the subconscious or active avoidance of others."

Schiffman et al (1991), supported by Van der Walt (1991) and Wilkie (1986), expand on their definition by explaining that consumers actively seek messages that are pleasant or with which they are sympathetic, and actively avoid painful or threatening ones.

**FIGURE 3.4: THE SELECTIVE PERCEPTION PROCESS**



Source: Adapted from Hawkins et al (1992, p. 223)

Assael (1992) adds to the discussion by stating that selective exposure can be explained by the consistency theories, such as dissonance theory, which suggest that people have a cognitive drive to develop consistent cognitions and behaviours about objects. The dissonance theory predicts that cognitive dissonance, the existence of conflicting cognitive elements, is discomforting and that people will try to reduce it. One mechanism of reducing dissonance is selective exposure, by obtaining supportive information and avoiding discrepant information. Schiffman et al (1991) confirm this viewpoint by adding that consumers selectively expose themselves to advertisements that reassure them of the wisdom of their purchasing intention.

Van der Walt (1991) concludes by stating that exposure to a message only means that it has been seen. There is no guarantee that the individual will choose to pay attention to it.

### **3.6.2 Selective attention**

Wilkie (1990) stresses that while selective exposure vastly reduces the range of stimuli available to a person, it does not decide which remaining stimuli will be perceived. This is determined by selective attention.

Selective attention can be defined (Mowen, 1993, p. 784) as:

"The concept that consumers selectively decide to which stimuli they should attend."

As stated in the definition, it is clear that the process of selective attention is the focusing of attention on selective aspects of the environment and blocking out of others (Belch et al, 1995; Assael, 1992 ; and Wade et al, 1987).

People vary according to the kind of information they are interested in and the form of message and type of medium they prefer (Schiffman et al., 1991). Van der Walt (1991) adds by stating that a person will only pay attention to a message that fits within his frame of reference. She continues by explaining that consumers have a heightened awareness of stimuli which meet their needs and depressed awareness of stimuli irrelevant to their needs. Therefore, consumers are likely to pay attention to advertisements for products that may satisfy their needs.

In studying the concept of selective attention, it is important to note the following:

- \* Selective attention shows that the brain is not focused on responding to everything the sense receptors send its way (Wade et al., 1987).
  
- \* Because we pay attention by exception, and because of the incredible speed at which our perceptual system works, only those marketing stimuli with the power to capture and hold our attention have the potential of being perceived (Stanton et al., 1991 and Wilkie, 1990).
  
- \* Even if the consumer does pay attention to all the details in a message it does not mean that he will interpret it as intended by the marketer (Van der Walt, 1991).

### **3.6.3 Selective interpretation**

Assael (1992, p. 722) defines selective comprehension (selective interpretation) as:

"Interpreting discrepant information so that it is consistent with beliefs and attitudes."

Wilkie (1990) states that once an external stimulus receives attention from an individual, it begins to be consciously processed by his conceptual system. Belch et al. (1995) explain that consumers interpret information based on their own attitudes, beliefs, and

previous experiences. Furthermore, in selective interpretation, consumers will often interpret information in a manner that will support their own position.

Van der Walt (1991) supports this viewpoint by adding that the information which has succeeded in passing through the exposure and attention barriers, "flows" through the selective interpretation barrier which enables the consumer to discard some bits of information, to change the meaning of others, or to place undue emphasis on certain sections. This may result in the meaning of the message being quite different from the message of the communicator originally intended.

According to Van der Walt (1991), two possible reasons for the faulty decoding of messages due to selective interpretation could be that of misindexing the message or distorting the meaning.

**Misindexing** refers to the way people tend to classify or categorise the meaning of the message and can often be ascribed to poor message construction. For example, an advertisement is so amusing or novel that the situation itself becomes the message while the originally intended message (product name or benefits) is overlooked. Another possibility is that the attention-getting device becomes the message, resulting in thoughts being steered away from the real meaning.

**Distortion** refers to the way the meaning of a message is changed by the consumer, whether done purposely or subconsciously. Conflicting stimuli, ie stimuli in contrast with previously held beliefs, habits, likes and dislikes create an imbalance in a person's cognitive structure, making him feel uncomfortable. To rectify the imbalance, the consumer must either change the meaning of the message or bring about changes in his cognitive structure. The meaning of the message can be distorted by either levelling or sharpening.

\* **Levelling** suggests that an important portion of information in the message is overlooked. It is important to note that if the brand name is overlooked, consumers might end up buying the competitor's product.

\* **Sharpening** claims that the consumer reads additional information into a message, ie information that does not actually appear in the message.

In conclusion, Van der Walt (1991) adds that if the nature of the message does not fit into the person's frame of reference it may be discarded entirely.

#### 3.6.4 Selective retention

Selective retention can be defined (Assael, 1992, p. 722) as follows:

"Consumers remember those messages or portions of messages most relevant to the decision and most likely to conform to their beliefs and attitudes."

According to Belch et al (1995) the meaning of selective retention is that consumers do not remember all the information they see, read or hear, even after attending to and correctly interpreting the message. The advertiser should therefore attempt to ensure that information will be retained in the consumer's memory so as to be available when it is time to make a purchase. As noted earlier, repetition of advertising messages aims to increase retention, especially at the time of the purchasing decision.

Van der Walt (1991) mentions two phenomena that may occur during the selective retention process, namely a positive sleeper effect and a boomerang effect.

\* The **positive sleeper effect** causes the consumer who has not been convinced by the advertisement to react in the desired way anyway, that is by purchasing the product. The only possible reason for this behaviour is that retention was not complete, and therefore the consumer forgot the nature or theme of the message and remembered only the recommendation that the product should be bought.

\* The **boomerang effect** causes the consumer to reverse his previous held

conviction and intention to purchase the product and to take directly the opposite course of action by purchasing a competitive product. A possible reason for this behaviour is that the consumer could not recall the differential product benefits mentioned in the original advertisement. This means that the message did not succeed to cross the just-noticeable-difference threshold.

### **3.7 SUMMARY**

From the discussion it can be seen that the perception process may be the most significant barrier to effective communication due to the number of different influences on the perception process. Important to note is the fact that the total perception process is highly individual and that the same person may devote a different meaning to the same stimuli in different situations. From a marketing perspective it is extremely important to note that consumers act and react on the basis of their perceptions, not on object reality.

The stimuli to which an individual is exposed, need to be above the absolute threshold level if they are to be perceived. All stimuli that a person is exposed to first pass through his frame of reference which consist of all his previous held beliefs, experiences, etc.

Information to be retained passes through the perception process. Because of the great number of stimuli that an individual is exposed to and the fact that risk is perceived during decision-making, consumers expose, pay attention, interpret and retain information selectively. All stimuli are also conformed to coincide with existing held beliefs. Information of conflicting nature to a person's frame of reference will not be changed easily.

Chapter 4 examines the importance of product attributes to the marketer and the consumer.