

## **UNDERSTANDING THE DO-IT-YOURSELF CONSUMER**

Dwane Hal Dean, Frostburg State University  
dhdean@frostburg.edu

### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this study was insight into why some consumers avoid a service encounter and choose “do-it-yourself” (DIY) service. Fifty adults were interviewed, grouped into self-described DIYers or confirmed non-DIYers. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses resulted in a conceptual model of the antecedents and outcomes of DIY service. Motivations affecting DIY activity included: saving money, control over the procedure, a feeling of accomplishment, meeting the expectations of others, lack of trust in service providers, and fear of doing a poor job. However, DIY activity required a set of enabling factors as well: necessary equipment, facilities, knowledge and skill, and perceived time to perform the task. For some consumers, the decision to DIY appears to be related to a service failure with a provider. Performance of one DIY activity did not necessarily predict a pattern of other DIY tasks. Guidelines to better market to the DIY segment are offered.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In one of the early articles investigating self-service, Bateson (1985) identified a consumer segment that preferred to “do it themselves” and render a large part of the service within a service encounter, even in the absence of monetary or time-saving incentives. The author labeled this participative group the do-it-yourself (DIY) consumer. However, some consumers take the participative role to the extreme and choose to provide all of their own service, avoiding a service encounter entirely. Examples include changing one’s own motor oil and filter, cutting one’s own hair, and preparing one’s own income taxes. Although understanding the motivations for DIY service would seem to be of interest to both academicians and service providers, it has been noted that there is a relative lack of literature on this topic (Davidson & Leather, 2000; Godar & Godar, 2001).

An example of the managerial significance of DIY service may be illustrative. The Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association periodically conducts exit interviews of a sample of about 2,000 shoppers at retail auto parts stores around the nation. Comparison of surveys conducted in 1994 and 2000 revealed that the percent of respondents changing their own motor oil dropped from 75 percent to 55 percent (DIYer maintenance down, 2001). The implication of this behavioral trend is likely to be more business for rapid oil change service providers, e.g. Jiffy

Lube, and reduced sales of motor oil and oil filters at auto parts stores. That is, the decrease in DIY shifts a tangible goods sale away from one retailer to another as well as adding a service component fee. In order to better design service plans and advertising strategy, it makes sense that managers would want to understand the motivations and situational factors that propel DIY service.

The goal of the present study is better insight and understanding of DIY service, focusing on three particular DIY activities: self-service oil changes, haircuts, and income tax preparation. From thematic analysis of study participant responses, a conceptual framework of DIY service is presented. Finally, based on the framework, certain guidance is given that may aid in the development of service marketing strategy.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Relation to Self-Service**

Conceptually, DIY service might be viewed as an extreme form of consumer co-production of a service. Indeed, the current service paradigm is that companies generally desire to engage customers in the co-production of their service (Bitner, Ostrom, & Meuter, 2002; Honebein & Cammarano, 2006; Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom, & Brown, 2005). This may range from simply filling out a form (such as a medical history) to busing one's own table in a fast-food restaurant, to e-ticket check-in and printing of one's own boarding pass for an airline flight. Co-production has been described as a sliding scale, ranging from the company doing all the work to the customer doing all of the work (Honebein & Cammarano, 2006). However, as illustrated in this paper, there is a distinction between DIY service and self-service. In the case of self-service, there is still a service encounter (if not with company personnel, then at least with some form of self-service technology and the brand of the company). With DIY service, the consumer does not have an encounter with the service provider or his brand (although the consumer may need to purchase or rent materials from a retailer to accomplish the DIY task).

### **DIY Literature**

There is a relatively small body of DIY literature. A significant portion of this research stream is devoted to DIY home-improvement product retailing. Topics covered by these studies include: refinements in retail strategy to better serve DIY consumers (Browning & Zabriskie, 1985; Hornik & Feldman, 1982), the size of the DIY market (Brogan & Cort, 1997; Davidson & Leather, 2000), and competition among retailers for DIY consumers (Jones, 1984). The focus of these early investigations was on the use of sales personnel, communications, and in-store displays to better appeal to and serve the DIY segment.

A smaller body of work has investigated what motivates DIY service. One study notes that DIY home improvement is not always about saving money; rather, it may be about achieving an outlet for creativity and fulfillment (Browning & Zabriskie, 1985). Another author concludes that both motives operate simultaneously (Williams, 2004), proposing a typology of DIYers based on these motives (Williams, 2008). Yet, the most insightful investigation of DIY motives comes from the work of Bateson (1985). From focus group discussion, this author identified core

motives for consumers who wish to be very active co-producers of service within a service encounter. These include: control (of the procedure, the outcome, and the timing of service production), independence (not wanting to depend on others), and risk (financial, psycho-social, and performance).

Although existing studies have shed some light on the DIY consumer, it has been noted that motives for this behavior remain underexplored (Davidson & Leather, 2000; Godar & Godar, 2001). The current investigation seeks a better understanding of these motives and presents a conceptual framework of DIY service that may aid in the development of marketing strategy.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR DIY**

### **Conceptual Model**

Based on thematic analysis of responses from participants in this study, a model of the antecedents and outcomes of DIY service is presented in Figure 1. The model is presented now so that the reader may refer to the model as interview results are presented and determine how the results support the model as configured.

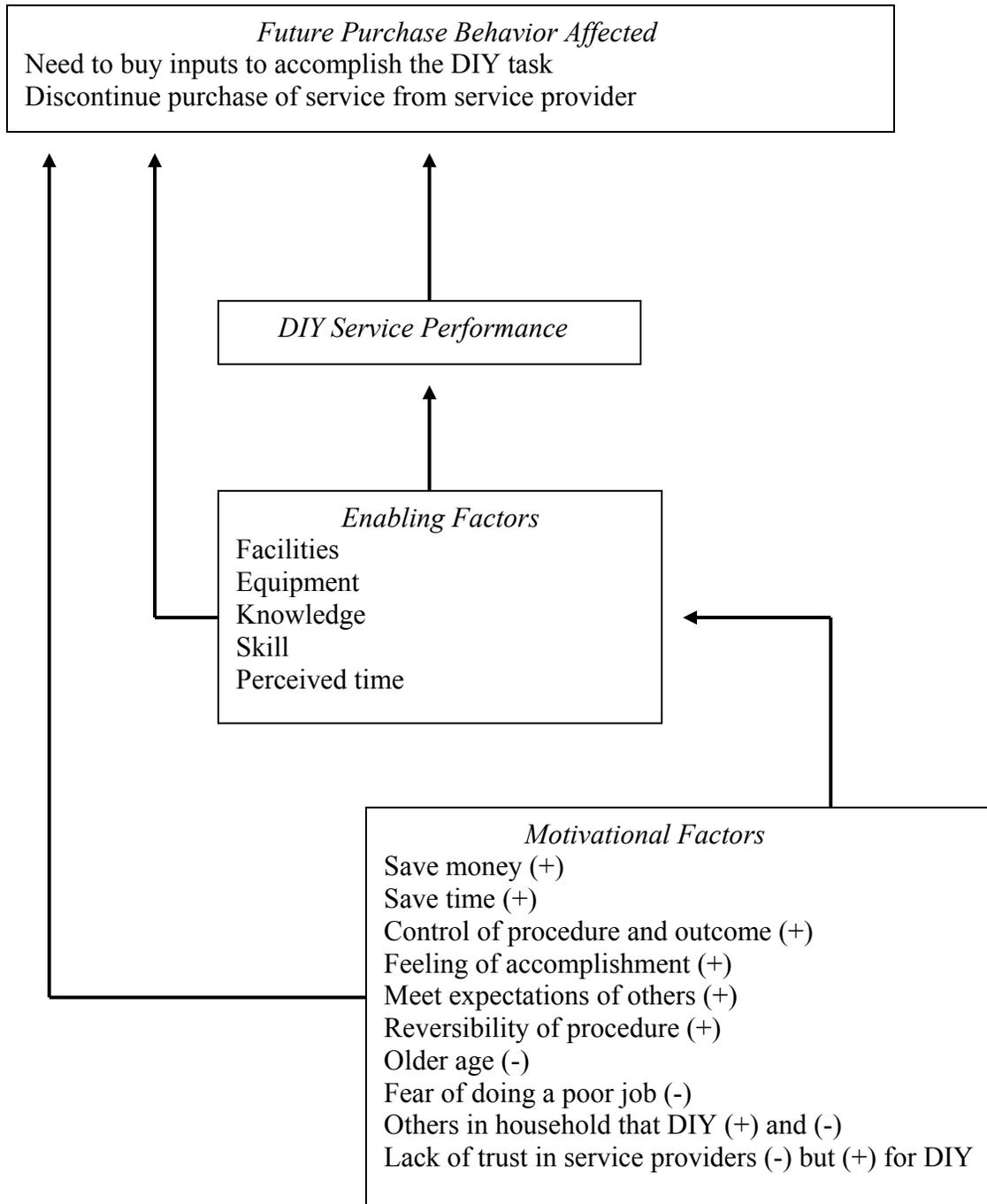
The model proposes two sets of factors as antecedents to DIY service performance: motivational factors and enabling factors. Elements within the motivational factor box are given a positive or negative valence sign relative to whether the element would favor or inhibit DIY service performance. Enabling factors are conceptualized as situational factors that may facilitate or inhibit DIY service performance, but unlike motivations, they are listed absent a valence sign, suggesting that they do not have an affective component. Although motivational factors and enabling factors are presented as separate boxes, motivations are conceptualized as influencing enabling factors. For example, lack of knowledge or skill (enabling factors) may inhibit DIY service performance, but a motivated consumer may choose to acquire the requisite knowledge and skill to perform the DIY activity. Thus, the two sets of factors are linked. Both sets of factors as well as experience in DIY service performance are proposed to influence future purchase decisions, the behavioral outcome of DIY service performance.

There is a conceptual similarity between the enabling factors shown in Figure 1 and transaction costs, as discussed in the economics literature. From the point of view of a service provider (or DIYer), transaction costs are acquired resources specific to the performance of a service that cannot be easily redeployed without a significant loss in value (Husted & Folger, 2004). For example, needed resources for a DIY oil change include knowledge, an oil filter wrench, and a portable ramp (for vehicles that have a low ground clearance). These assets are rather specific to an oil change procedure and appear to meet the definition of transaction costs. More will be said about this point in the discussion.

### **Usefulness of the Model**

Conceptualizing DIY service as shown in Figure 1 is believed to have practical usefulness. For example, the motivational factors are believed to be relatively fixed (linked to enduring individual values, attitudes based on experience, and personality). In contrast, the enabling

factors are more transient - perceived time available for a task can change depending on one's level of motivation. Knowledge, skill, and necessary equipment can be acquired. This has strategic implications; service providers can probably do little to change enduring attitudes and



**FIGURE 1. MODEL OF ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOMES OF DIY SERVICES**

values, but they may be able to change the enabling factors. As an example, Lowe's Home Improvement Centers typically offer classes on how to lay the flooring tile sold in the store (changing the consumer's knowledge enabling factor). Other companies rent equipment to facilitate DIY service (tools for laying carpet, spray-painting equipment, etc.). Overcoming the knowledge barrier is made even easier when it can be incorporated into a software product. An example is software to facilitate the preparation and e-filing of federal taxes. This mitigates both a lack of knowledge and perceived time on the part of the consumer. In general, companies would appear to be more successful in appealing to the DIY segment by focusing on the enabling factors rather than the motivational factors.

## **METHODS**

### **Data Collection**

A sample of adults residing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2008 was surveyed. The goal of sampling was to collect representatives from two sub-groups (people who typically engage in DIY service or the polar opposite – people who typically avoid doing any DIY service). To tap these segments, a modified snowball sampling technique was employed. Names of potential interviewees were solicited by asking people if they knew acquaintances that would either fit the DIYer profile or the polar opposite. An overall sample of 50 individuals was obtained, approximately evenly split between DIYers and confirmed non-DIYers.

Interviews were loosely structured. Respondents were first asked to explain why they considered themselves a DIYer or non-DIYer. They were then asked to explain why they behave the way they do toward DIY service, whether they knew anyone else who acted towards DIY as they do, and finally, respondents were asked to speculate on this other person's motivations to do or not do DIY service. Although a number of different types of DIY service were addressed, interviews tended to focus on self-service motor oil changes, haircuts, and income tax preparation. The interview was completed with demographic information.

### **Analysis**

Responses to open-ended questions were studied in an effort to extract underlying motivations or situational factors that might explain the reported behavior. The conceptual model in Figure 1 is based on this thematic analysis.

## **RESULTS**

### **Oil Changes**

Individuals who typically changed their own motor oil and filter offered a variety of explanations for their behavior:

- To save money, to maintain my own vehicle, and to see for myself what the wear and tear on the underside of my vehicle looks like [male, age 23]

- Because it's cheaper and faster; all my brothers [and I] were taught at a young age [male, in his 20's]
- Because mechanics can make mistakes, I usually don't [male, in his 20's]
- More economical, relaxing to work on stuff, and like knowing I did it myself and don't have to rely on somebody else's work [male, in his 20's]
- I know it gets done right, and I feel more independent [male, in his 20's]
- Lack of trust [male, age 24]
- I like to control the outcome and because I am a bit of a perfectionist [male, in his 20's]
- It's the thrill of understanding the activity and how you can do it yourself and to justify my cheapskate ways; why would I pay when I can do it better myself [male, age 65+]

People who typically do not change their own motor oil and filter had the following explanations:

- I don't know how to and would not want to break my car [male, in his 20's]
- I don't have a place to do it efficiently [male, in his 30's]
- [Not] convenient; oil disposal problem [male, in his 20's]
- I don't know how to change it and am too busy [female, age 44]
- New vehicle, warranties, maintenance plans [male, age 42]
- Because I am not well versed in the process of the oil change, and Jiffy Lube is convenient [male, age 23]
- I prefer to have a professional do something correctly than to have to use trial and error doing something myself [male, in his 20's]
- If I don't need to, I won't. I don't know how or enjoy doing stuff like oil changes. I never had to do things myself. I have 4 brothers, a dad, and a step-dad to help me [female, in her 20's]
- I did more when I was younger [male, in his late 50's]

Several themes among the responses of oil-change DIYers were identified. These include: saving money, control over the procedure, and independence (not having to rely on someone else). Perhaps related to independence, the response from the one older gentleman suggests that performing the activity may contribute to enhanced self-efficacy. In addition, there are responses focused on the issue of trust and the possibility of the mechanic making a mistake. At first, the interpretation of these later comments was not entirely clear. However, upon discussion, it appears that they refer to two specific mistakes that may be made by rapid oil-change service providers. The first is an over-tightening of the oil pan drain plug after draining the oil and re-inserting the plug. The oil pan metal is relatively thin, and the threads can easily be stripped by over-tightening. Unfortunately, this condition is not easily repaired, and the result is a periodic drip from the oil pan. The second issue is over-filling the vehicle with oil. Excess oil results in oil pressure that is too high, and this can cause leakage at the seals, especially the crank-case seals. Most vehicles are not equipped with oil-pressure gauges, and so the condition can go undetected for some time, exacerbating the damage to the seals. As with the first issue,

this condition is not easily repaired, and the result is a “leaker” vehicle in your garage or driveway.

Among confirmed non-DIYers of oil-changes, the most prominent themes were: not knowing how, fear of doing the task incorrectly, and being too busy. Additional comments related to the convenience of oil-change service providers, the related problem of having to correctly dispose of used oil, not wishing to do the task when one is older, and not having a garage or the equipment to do the procedure.

Even though responses for only the first DIY activity have been covered at this time, the identified themes support most of the elements within the motivational and enabling factor boxes in Figure 1. However, two motivational elements, “meet expectations of others” and “others in household that DIY,” deserve some further explanation. Two comments from this section suggest that others in their household typically engage in DIY oil changes. For the female that mentioned this, it had the effect of dis-motivating her to learn to do a DIY oil change because there were others in the household to do the procedure for her. In the case of the male with four brothers who apparently DIY, there may be some implied social pressure to engage in DIY oil changes because this is something “men” are supposed to do.

## **Haircuts**

People who chose to cut their own hair gave the following justifications for their behavior:

- I cut my hair because I know what I want and what I will get. I benefit because I get the haircut that I want, when I want [male, age 25]
- Because it’s cheaper and I do not have much hair to cut – I feel more relaxed at home [male, age 61]
- Because [a barber] costs too much plus it’s way out of my way. I benefit more; I save time, money, gas, and it’s not a burden [male, age 21]
- I cut it when I want, at the hour I want, when I want. It’s easy, cheap, and you spend less time than going to a hairdresser [male, age 32]

Other people had no desire to cut their own hair and explained their behavior thusly:

- Because a barber can cut my hair cleaner and better than I can [male, age 27]
- It’s a lot easier to have someone who knows what they are doing versus me doing it myself [male, age 29]
- It’s only 15 dollars and I know it’s going to look good compared to saving money with the risk that I might have to end up shaving my head from messing up [male, age 21]
- I usually wait a long time between cuts, so it’s much too difficult to do myself. Most people I know go to a hairdresser because they want it styled a certain way and it’s easier than doing it yourself [male, age 28]

The primary themes given by respondents who cut their own hair were that the activity saves them money and is more convenient than going to a barber or stylist (saving travel and waiting

time as well as gasoline). The interpretation is that self-barbering appears to result in a higher level of overall value than going to a stylist. Notably, the trust issue mentioned by oil-change DIYers was not stated here. This may be due to the reversibility of a bad haircut (it will grow back), whereas vehicle damage that results in oil leaks is more permanent. Among people who did not want to cut their own hair, the reasons given were lack of skill and fear of doing a poor job.

### **Income Tax Preparation**

Respondents who chose to prepare their own tax returns explained their behavior as follows:

- I want to make sure it gets done correctly. I have trouble delegating tasks to others [female, early 20's]
- Because of the availability of high-end software that helps me be in charge [female, late teens]
- Saving money and being accurate. My dad will probably teach me [more] in the future and I am sure more people would if they had someone to teach them [female, early 20's]
- If you have the time, it's a good learning experience and less expensive [female, early 20's]
- Don't feel like paying people to do my tax [male, mid 20's]
- If my tax return required various schedules, I would probably use an accountant [female, mid 20's]

Those that preferred to use a tax professional gave the following reasons:

- Because companies like H & R Block provide professional services at an affordable rate [male, early 20's]
- Don't have the time and it is too complex [male, over 30]
- Because of the convenience and efficiency, and I don't have the knowledge [female, over 30]

The income tax preparation DIYers raised several points. One is that they want the return to be correct and accurate (meaning that they want all legitimate deductions to be taken to minimize their tax). There appears to be a concern that a seasonal employee at a tax preparation service may not be well-trained enough to serve them properly. One person mentioned being taught by her father, and this is an important point for all DIY activities (listed as "others in the household that DIY" in the motivational factors box in Figure 1). Having a tutor to teach one how to DIY increases personal knowledge, serves as a role model, and perhaps also reflects a household value placed on the ability to DIY. Lack of knowledge, time, and complexity were all mentioned by non-DIYers as reasons to not prepare their taxes, but there are user-friendly software products that mitigate these reasons, and the availability of this software was mentioned by a DIYer as a specific reason to prepare her own tax return.

## **Pattern of DIY Activities**

Although the focus of this study was on self-service oil changes, haircuts, and income tax return preparation, respondents were encouraged to mention other DIY activities they perform. The one noteworthy finding from this evidence is that the pattern of activities chosen for DIY appears to be relatively specific to the individual. That is, just because a person is a DIYer for one activity does not necessarily predict that the person will DIY other types of activities in any particular pattern.

An example of the above is an 82 year old gentleman who engages in DIY plumbing, hair-cutting, yard work, and house painting. Yet, this person does not change his own motor oil or prepare his own taxes. Another example is a 47 year old male who performs DIY plumbing, yard work, house painting, and income tax preparation. But this same individual does not change his own motor oil or cut his own hair. A further example is a 44 year old woman who cuts her own hair, performs her own yard work, grooms her own pet, but does not prepare her own taxes.

## **Service Failure and DIY**

During interviews, respondents occasionally addressed the relationship between service failure and their decision to DIY. A 20 year old female mentioned that a salon-performed hair dye had turned out really awful, prompting her to dye her own hair and vow never to go back to a salon for this service. This was an insightful comment because it suggests that the customer is lost not just for the offending service provider, but for all service providers who perform the same type of service. However, there was also evidence that service failure can occur within a DIY context. Another female, age 25, reported that she attempted to DIY her own hair highlights after a salon had allowed bleach to burn her scalp and spill onto and bleach her shirt. Unfortunately, her attempt at DIY highlights resulted in orange-colored hair so she decided to return to a salon service provider (noting that she is now very careful about who she trusts with her hair).

## **DISCUSSION**

From the qualitative data obtained from respondents in this study, a conceptual model of DIY service has been proposed (Figure 1). This is believed to be a contribution because there is no current model of DIY service in the scant literature on the topic. The paucity of literature on DIY service has been noted by others (Davidson & Leather, 2000; Godar & Godar, 2001). An additional contribution of the proposed model is that it may guide service providers in developing marketing strategy (dealt with in more detail in the managerial implications section).

The present study finds that the core motivational factors identified by Bateson (1985) for participation in self-service (control, independence, and perceived risk) also apply to consumers who choose to avoid a service encounter and DIY. Additional motivational factors were found as well as a set of enabling factors that appear necessary for a motivational intent to progress to actual DIY service performance (Figure 1). The behavioral outcome of DIY service is an influence on future purchase decisions. For example, a consumer who performs DIY motor oil changes would need to purchase motor oil and filter elements rather than having these supplied by a service provider e.g. Jiffy Lube.

Three general findings within the current study are noteworthy. The first is the observation that the pattern of DIY activities for any one individual is somewhat unique, meaning that performing a specific type of DIY activity does not necessarily predict performance of any other specific type of DIY activity. For example, people who cut their own hair did not necessarily choose to change their own motor oil or prepare their own tax returns, and vice-versa.

The second general finding is an anecdotal association between service failure and the decision to DIY. The respondents who mentioned this appeared to have had strong affective reactions to the service encounter which prompted a withdrawal from not only the particular offending service provider but from all service providers in the industry. There is a body of literature linking service failure with customer anger (Bonifeld & Cole, 2007; Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003; Kalamas, Laroche, & Makdessian, 2008) and linking anger resulting from service failure with customer exit behavior from the business (Maute & Dube, 1999). However, service failure does not appear to have been previously linked to the decision to DIY.

A possible theoretical explanation for the link between service failure and the decision to DIY may be offered. The scenario begins with service failure eliciting within the consumer a perception of unfairness as well as the affective state of anger, conditions that have already been linked to service failure in the literature (McCull-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). Part of the consumer reaction to perceived unfairness is a mental state described as “counterfactual thinking,” contrasting what is perceived to be with what might have been (Morris & Moore, 2000). In a service failure context, one counterfactual thought might be ‘This would have turned out better if I had done it myself’ providing some impetus to a DIY decision the next time around.

However, forgoing an exchange with a service provider and choosing to render one’s own service entails certain transaction costs for the DIYer. Basically, a transaction cost is a cost associated with an economic exchange that is independent of the market price of the good or service (Husted & Folger, 2004). For example, a weekly shopping trip to the grocery store requires one to spend time travelling to the store, standing in line, loading and unloading one’s groceries, as well as the cost of gasoline for one’s vehicle – all costs that are independent of the price of the purchased items. From the perspective of a service provider (or DIYer who chooses to be his/her own service provider), transaction costs are acquired resources that are specific to a particular service performance and cannot be easily redeployed. For example, in the case of DIY oil changes, there is a need for an oil filter wrench and possibly a portable ramp (for vehicles that have a low clearance to the ground). Basically, the DIY consumer is engaging in a “make-or-buy” decision, similar to the way a business might decide to internally manufacture or purchase needed items or service.

One difference between transaction cost analyses by a firm versus a DIYer is that the latter analysis is likely to be heavily influenced by emotion. Indeed, for some, the decision to DIY is linked to a service failure, and the strong affective reaction resulting from this may cause the consumer to overweight certain benefits of DIY. However, the decision to DIY does result in the elimination of certain transaction costs. For example, a number of respondents in this study, especially those commenting about self-service haircuts, appeared to note a decrease in their overall transaction costs (not having to travel to the barber or stylist and not having to wait for service).

The third general finding from this study is a gender difference for respondents who engage in DIY motor oil changes. Men were much more likely to be DIYers for this activity than women. This might be explained by gender role theory (Grandley, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). The theory suggests that there is a social pressure to engage in activities that are congruent with one's gender role. For women, a DIY motor oil change may not be considered "ladylike" and this may serve as a negatively valenced motivation to perform the activity. Conversely, men may be expected to engage in "mechanical" activities, including DIY oil change maintenance.

### **Managerial Implications**

It may be noted that there are businesses that specifically target DIYers and derive much of their revenue from this segment e.g. auto parts stores. Presumably, these companies would like to promote the growth of the DIY segment. Conversely, there are businesses that sell the service that a DIYer is performing e.g. auto repair and maintenance, and these companies would probably prefer to see a diminishment in DIY activity. So, the issue may be looked at from both angles.

One strategy that may be employed to inhibit DIY performance is restricted sale of an input needed for the service. For example, purchase of certain brands of hair care products have historically been restricted to licensed professionals. In the current study, women mentioned that they were loyal to a particular brand (such as Matrix or Redken) that was not available outside of a salon – inhibiting their desire to DIY their own hair care. This is an example of distribution strategy affecting the ability to DIY. In this case, the marketer apparently sees more overall value in serving only the professional segment.

The other side of the coin is strategy to promote DIY activity. Here, management attention is probably best focused on situational factors that hinder DIY activity rather than attempting to manipulate individual motivations, as the latter are probably more enduring and permanent. Companies that target the DIY segment already appear to be following this strategy. For example, Home Depot has a tool rental business that mitigates lack of equipment as a factor. Also, Lowe's Home Improvement typically offers in-store demonstrations on how to perform certain installation tasks, facilitating the knowledge factor. Indeed, a number of cable channels run shows demonstrating how homes can be updated and rehabilitated by DIYers. And, such programs are also available on DVD for relaxed viewing at home. Overall, DVD and CD-ROM technology allows potential DIYers to have a virtual mentor and guide within their own home for the DIY task they wish to perform.

It is worth noting that not all services can be converted into a DIY activity. For example, no matter how angry a consumer may be with their bank or insurance company, there is no DIY substitute for these service providers.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The limitations of this study are similar to those for exploratory research in general: 1) use of small samples that may not fully represent the population of interest, 2) potential for over-

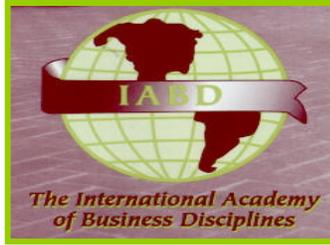
reliance on the responses of certain individual participants who just happen to express themselves well, and 3) potential for misinterpretation of open-ended responses by the investigator. In addition, probing and follow-up to open-ended responses in the present study was somewhat constrained. For all of these reasons, the ability to generalize the findings to a broader population is limited.

Future research on this topic may wish to investigate the relationship between personality type, strongly held individual values, and the tendency to engage in DIY service performance. Certain personality types and/or values may make the person more likely to DIY. Additionally, the finding in this study of a decision to DIY after a service failure suggests that experience (as opposed to personality and values) may have an influence on DIY activity. Finally, the strong affect that results from service failure may interact with personality and/or values in the final decision to DIY.

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