UNIT 4: CONSUMER PERCEPTION

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 Sensation (Exposure to Stimuli)

4.4 Perceptual Selection

4.5 Perceptual Organization

4.6 Factors that Distort Individual Perception

4.7 Price Perceptions

4.8 Perceived Product and Service Quality

4.9 Consumer Risk Perceptions

4.10 Let Us SumUp

4.11 Further Reading

4.12 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.13 Model Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the concept of Perception
- understand the concept of Sensation
- explain the process of Perception
- describe the Factors that Distort Individual Perception
- explain the concept of Price Perceptions
- understand Perceived Product and Service Quality
- understand the concept of Consumer Risk Perceptions.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

A given situation, event or an object, though similarly exposed to individuals,they react or interpret the same in different ways. This difference in human behaviour is something which speaks of perception. Marketers have understood the importance of perception in consumer behaviour.

Hence this chapter tries to discuss various aspects of perception in consumer buying behaviour.

4.3 PERCEPTION

Perception is the most important psychological factor that affects human behavior. Though different individuals are exposed to same stimuli under same conditions, each individual identifies the stimuli, selects them, organizes them and interprets them in a different way. This uniqueness or difference depends upon his needs, wants, values, personal experiences and so on. Perception is the way a person sees the world around him/her. It is a personal phenomenon on which a person acts or reacts. It is being influenced by the attributes of stimuli like size, colour, intensity and the context in which it is seen or heard or both.

According to Professors Schiffman and Kanuk," Perception is the process by which an individual selects,organizes and interprets stimuli into meaningful and coherent picture of the world."

Mr. Stephen P. Robbins defines perception as," A process by which individuals organize and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment."

In other words, perception is the process of selecting, organizing and interpreting on attracting measuring to the events that are happening in the environment that surrounds us. Perception is fundamentally a cognitive or thinking process.

4.4 SENSATION

Sensation is the response of physical sensory organs. The five senses such as vision, taste, hearing, touch and smell are attached by stimuli continuously both internal and external to the human body and the reaction in particular sense organ take place because of these. The instances of sensation can be a reaction of eye to a colour, ear to sound, nose to smell, mouth to taste and skin to touch feeling. Sensation is related to a very basic behaviour which is based on physiological functioning.

Perception is something more than sensation because it correlates, integrates and comprehends diverse sensations and information from many organs of the body by means of which a person identifies the things or objectives. Perception is determined by both physiological and psychological factors as perception is developed from previous experiences, feelings and motives. Whereas, sensation only activates the sensory organs of the body. Activation of the ears to hear what another person is saying is sensation and the influence of what is heard is perception. Perception is more complex than sensation as it is influenced by too many variables. Comparatively, a person is more or less inactive in case of sensation while in case of perception he is active. Lastly, sensation is a part of perception because, sensation takes place first and paves way for perception. In sensation only sensory organs are active where in perception whole human body is activated.

4.5 PERCEPTION PROCESS

The perceptual process is a sequence of steps that begins with stimuli in the environment and ends with our interpretation of those stimuli. This process is typically unconscious and happens hundreds of thousands of times a day. An unconscious process is simply one that happens without awareness or intention. The perception process includes the perception of select stimuli that pass through our perceptual filters, are organized into our existing structures and patterns, and are then interpreted based on previous experiences. Although perception is a largely cognitive and psychological process, how we perceive the people and objects around us affects our communication. The perceptual process involves three components:

- Perceptual Selection
- Perceptual Organization
- Perceptual Interpretation

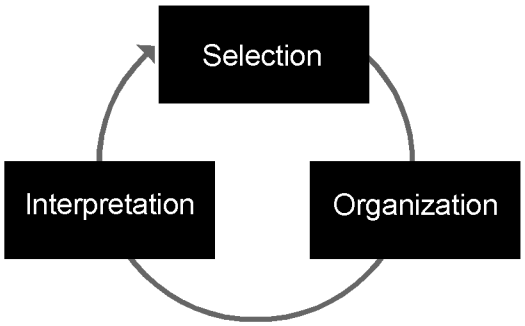


Figure No.4.1: The Perceptual Process

- **Perceptual Selection:** We take in information through all five of our senses, but our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that it is impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all. So, as information comes in through our senses, various factors influence what actually continues on through the perception process. Selecting is the first part of the perception process, in which we focus our attention on certain incoming sensory information, certain aspects of stimuli are screened out and others admitted. Consumers will identify and choose marketing stimuli based on their needs and attitudes. For instance, a consumer intending to buy a sports bike will be more attentive to motor bike ads. For the stimulus and then perceptual selection to actually take place, the consumer must first see or hear to it. There are three processes which defines selection:
  - **Exposure:** When a consumer's senses- sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch are activated by a stimulus, exposure is said to have occurred. For an individual to be exposed to a stimulus there is need for that stimulus to be present within the person's relevant environment. But their interest and involvement with the stimulus will be reflected at the level of attention they devote to it.
  - **Attention:** Attention is defined as the momentary focusing of a consumer's cognitive capacity on a specific stimulus. For example, when consumer take notice of a TV ad, a new product displayed in the retail outlet or a new vehicle in the company showroom, it is said that attention has taken place.

People will be selective in their choice of receiving various kinds of information for different products and services based on what interests them rather than the message content and also selection of the media. This is nothing but selective attention. Through selective exposure people try to avoid coming into contact with or avoid a message that may go against or be contradictory to the strongly held beliefs and attitudes. Thus, the individual normally puts a censorship on the stimulus (inputs) to avoid disturbance of his existing beliefs and values. In today's age of e-technology, when consumers are bombarded with a lot of information,it becomes humanely impossible to take in all of it. So, they indulge in selective exposure.

- **Selective Perception:** Consumers will perceive marketing experiences stimuli selectively because each person will be unique in terms of needs, attitudes, experiences and personal characteristics. Selective perception means that different persons may perceive the same product, advertisement, package in a different way.

- **Perceptual Organization:** People do not experience all the stimuli selected by them as separate and discrete sensation, rather they tend to organise them into group and perceive them as a unified lot. This method of perceptual organization enables individual to view life in a simplified manner. This specific principles underlying organisation are sometimes referred as Gestalt psychology.

  Gestalt is a German word and means 'pattern' or 'configuration'. The basic principles of perceptual organisation focus on 'figure and ground' relationship and 'grouping and closure' relationship.

  - **Figure and Ground:** Consumers tend to perceive an object in the context in which it is shown. While organizing information, people have the tendency to keep certain phenomenon in focus and some other phenomenon in the background. This is said to be the working of the figure and ground principle. According to Gestalt psychologists, when individuals organize stimuli into wholes, they will distinguish

stimuli which are prominent (the figure that is generally in the foreground) from stimuli which is less prominent (those in the ground or background).

- **Grouping:** In grouping, the perceiver groups the different stimuli based on the principles of similarity, continuity and proximity. This means all those stimuli which are grouped together are likely to be perceived as having the same characteristics. This perception of stimuli as groups of information will facilitate easy memorizing and recall by consumers. This principle helps marketers to enable consumers to get a unified picture and co-relate desired connection with their products.
- **Closure:** Individuals have a need for closure, they have the tendency to fill in the gaps themselves so as to gain a more meaningful information. In the event that they are exposed to a pattern of stimuli, which in their view is incomplete, they tend to perceive it as complete by fulfilling in the missing pieces.

- **Perceptual Interpretation:** Perception being a personal phenomenon, people exercise selectively in terms of stimuli they perceive. The interpretation of stimuli is also individual, since it is based on previous experience stimuli are generally highly ambiguous. In that case an individual interpret them in such a way as to serve to fulfil his needs, wishes, interests and so on. How close a person's interpretation is to reality depends on the clarity of the stimuli, the past experience of the perceiver and his motive and interest at the time of perception. Thus have selected, after consumers have selected and organized stimuli, they interpret them. Consumers are able to interpret marketing information by making use of two principles:
  - **Categorization:** This principle is with reference to the tendency of consumers to process and place information into their interpretation of logical categories. For example, "this new ad of mineral water must be probably just like 'Bisleri mineral water'".
  - **Inference:** This principle refers to consumers reasoning out and developing an association between two stimuli. For example,

consumers might associate herbal extracts in body care products with natural ingredients.

4.6 FACTORS THAT DISTORT INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION

Several factors lead us to form inaccurate impressions of others. These barriers to perception are inaccurate impressions of others. A number of factors influence individuals that are likely to distort their perception. They are as follows:

- **Physical Appearance:** Personality of the perceiver greatly influences the perception process. Research findings have shown that people have a tendency to perceive others to be having the same attributes or qualities as themselves. People have the tendency to associate certain persons with others who may have certain attributes, irrespective of whether they consciously recognise the attributes or not.This is why, advertisers give a lot of importance to the selection of models for advertisements. This can automatically induce the consumer to develop a positive attitude and behaviour towards the product. For instance, using celebrity, to endorse a product or brand is more appealing to the consumer's mind.
- **Example of celebrities endorsing certain brands are:**
  - Hema Malini - Kent water purifier, Malabar Gold
  - Amitabh Bachchan - Reid & Taylor, Boroplus Antiseptic creame
  - Juhi Chawla - Kurkure snacks
- **Stereotypes:** This term 'Stereotype' is used to describe 'biases' involved in perceiving people. This means that there could be a bias involved when the perceiver sees/perceives the person or individual on the basis of a single class or category to which he or she belongs.Stereotypes also convey another meaning that is there is a general concurrence on the attributed traits and also the possibility of a discrepancy between attributed traits and actual traits. Accordingly, stereotypes may attribute favourable and unfavourable traits to the person being perceived.For

example, statements such as:"All salespersons are fast talkers and bluff a lot." Stereotypes indicate the expectations from certain specific stimuli and how these (stimuli) will ultimately be perceived.

- **Halo Effect:** The term 'Halo effect' is used to describe a process, in which judges use the general impression (either favourable or unfavourable) to evaluate certain specific traits. Here 'Halo' acts as a barrier or screen to keep the perceiver away from actually seeing the trait he is judging.The broad difference between the halo error and stereotyping error is that in stereotyping the person is perceived on the basis of a single category, while under the halo effect the person is perceived on the basis of one trait or event.According to consumer behaviourists, 'halo effect' includes the evaluation of multiple brands (say a product line of a firm) by evaluating just one dimension (either the brand name or celebrity endorsement). Going by this perspective of halo effect, marketers can extend the use of a brand name associated with one line of products to another.The knowledge or familiarity which consumers have with the product or brand is likely to influence their perception of the brand and extensions, if any. For example, Amul with the 'Taste of India' tag line has successfully been extended to its ice creams.Horlicks brand name has been successfully extended to its Horlicks biscuits also.
- **Irrelevant Cues:** Sometimes, consumers form perceptual judgement based on their giving importance to irrelevant cues. In the case of purchase of automobiles, at times, consumers' purchase decisions are based on the importance given to the look, colour, leather upholstery etc. rather than giving due consideration to the mechanical and technical superiority.
- **First Impressions:** There is a very old saying which goes as "First impressions tend to be lasting ones" However, this wisdom will depend on the context and also on the extent to which the perceiver is aware of the relevance of the stimuli considered by him or her. Firms have to exercise care, especially when launching new products and trying to create a good first impression on the minds of the consumers. If the

product fails to make the desired 'first' impact, a 'second chance' to taste success may not occur. And, any subsequent attempts at communicating the advantages may not be sufficient to delete from the consumer's mind about its (unsuccessful) earlier attempts.

- **Hasty Conclusions:** Often people have the tendency to arrive at conclusions very quickly, before examining all the relevant evidence. This behaviour can be based on the person's attitude, motivation level, interest and past experience also. Consumers at times develop the attitude of drawing conclusions based on limited receipt of information.There is one ad which appears on the mass media, showing a spokesperson for 'consumer rights' cautioning consumers against blindly accepting the packaged product received from the shopkeeper.Consumers are advised that rather than jumping to conclusions about the verbal assurance of the contents, it is the consumer's right to ask the retailer to measure and verity the same in their presence. Thus when a person remarks, "Short men are shrewd but dangerous" it may be true but for not all short person.
- **Perceptual Inference:** Consumers draw inferences about brands, outlets, and associations. For instance, consumers may associate a Tanishq watch with quality. This inference could be drawn on the basis of word of mouth communication from peer group, friends or advertisements. We can understand this better by having a look at discussions, on product symbols and semiotics.
- **Product Symbols:** Many of the symbols we see in the ads and packages are socially and culturally derived. For example, Air India's Maharaja symbolizes royal treatment, even the usage of orange, white and green colours on many of the packages can be associated with patriotism.Symbols can affect the consumption process. For example the advertisement of Bajaj Discover DTS-i can be associated with fantasy (computer graphics showing how the pipes follow the bike rider) and conveys the message that the bike is fuel efficient.However, advertisers have to remember that consumers will perceive symbols selectively. For example, Blackberry may indicate the iconic status to

some while there could be others who may find it too fanciful for usage.

- **Semiotics:** The study which examines the role of signs and symbols in assigning meaning to objects is called semiotics.Semiotics tries to determine the meaning consumer's assign to symbols through three components:
  - The object or product (say, Kent Mineral RO)
  - The symbol associated with the object (water purifier)
  - The interpretant or meaning of the symbol (domestic, pure and healthy water).

  For marketing purposes, semioticians view the symbols used in the packaging as a kind of culture or consumption dictionary, where the entries are considered to be products, which are culturally defined. Now, going back to the example of Kent Mineral (RO), Water Purifier, assume that the associations mentioned are what the company wants the consumer to associate with the symbol (water purifier).In reality, if the consumers were to associate with the symbol positively (i.e., as the company hoped to elicit), then it can be said that the consumer's perception matches with that of the company's symbolic representation. Under such circumstances, a positive perceptual inference has taken place suggesting that consumer perception has positively interpreted the said symbol.However, if the meaning many consumers associate with the symbol (Kent Mineral RO water purifier) does not match with what the company had hoped to elicit, the very purpose of using the symbol, by the company, is defeated.

4.7 PRICE PERCEPTION

Consumer perception of prices is very significant even from the angle of marketer so that he can modify his product prices to the requirements of consumers. Whether a consumer perceives the price of a product or service as 'high', 'low' or 'fair' is having deep impact on his or her buying intentions and post purchase satisfaction. The price perception is quite complex. An example to this could be taken back from the 1980's

market of ball point pens, when Parker Pen tried to introduce low priced pen to meet the growing market of cheap ball point pens. The result was not only discouraging but also disastrous as Parkers image was not consistent with its price. It was because Parker was known for high price and quality. The company had to revert back in 1989 high priced pens. The implications are: Consumers have certain expectation of what the price is of a product or service. Such expectations may or may not reflect the actual price of the product or service and the consumers very often associate price of a product or service to its quality.

According to one research study consumers react to price variable as under:

- Consumers seemingly use price as an indicator of product quality and as an indicator of purchase cost.
- Consumers develop reference, price as standards for evaluating prices they see in te market place. A reference or standard price is any price that consumers uses as the bases for comparing another price.
- Consumer's reference prices are not constant and get modified by shopping experiences. That is, exposure to higher or lower than the reference. Price is likely to result in upward or downward movement of the reference price.
- Consumers tend to develop a range of acceptable prices around the reference or standard price. Prices above or below the reference price are likely to be judged as unsuitable and may lead to decreased willingness to purchase the product.
- Factors like brand-image or store-image can often strengthen the perceived price quality relationship.
- In case the prices for different alternatives are perceive as similar, then price is unlikely to influence the choice between these alternatives.

Dimensions of Price Perception

The key dimensions of price perceptions are listed below:

- **Price-Quality Relationship:** Consumers perceive price as the prime indicator to presume the quality of the product. Many consumers believe that high priced products attribute better quality and lasts longer. Thus,

price signals the quality. If prices are marked lower than the level of consumers paying capacity they conclude it to be of low quality. Improvements in quality of products can trigger the mind for the first time and can convert the consumer into a loyal consumer as well.

- **Price-Consciousness:** It is defined as consumers' degree of focusing for paying less in buying. The high price conscious consumers tend to do a lot of research work before buying that particular product. The economic theories have also indicated that price has the significant roles in buyers' preferences. The buyers generally try to maximize their benefits while purchasing and price plays a influential role in their buying process.
- **Value-Consciousness:** This concept follows the price quality evaluation of the consumer. It comprises of what a consumer get on behalf of what they have paid for the products or services. If consumer thinks that quality is less then what they have paid, they tend to get dissatisfied and henceforth stops purchasing that product. The vice-versa of the situation leads to turning them into regular or may be loyal consumer. Consumers who are capable of making this sort of evaluations are called "Value Conscious Consumers" They generally don't mind paying higher prices if the quality of product justifies it.
- **Price Mavenism:** This could be defined as the consumers being experts about the lowest priced stores and starts sharing the information by informing them. These consumers evaluate different aspects of product to justify it with the price bracket into which they are offered and compare it with other stores to get the best benefits out of it. The consumer's socio-economic character, previous experiences and learning processes play an important role. The price information collected is shaped by rational and emotional motives of consumers. These types of consumers are experts in the product information's and thus may be called as 'advisors' by other consumers.
- **Sale Proneness:** Sales influence consumers' price perceptions significantly. The consumers generally evaluate their last purchases with the current ones. Sales, price discounts aim to increase the total

sales and also create positive purchases evaluation. The best price evaluations can be made during the sales or discount prices.

- **Prestige Sensitivity:** It is a psychological dimension. Consumers can perceive high price as positive and even as a negative. The high pricing of the product can be perceived as a way of losing the money. Consumers buying these sorts of products generally consider it as a part of their status. They tend to purchase on their emotional moves. A prestigious product is considered to be a symbol of wealth and living above standards. Prestige sensitivity is the factor behind the same and can happen because of difference of socio-economic characteristics of consumers. This concept can be used in developing high quality and distinct product image.
- **Domestic-Foreign Product Sensitivity:** The product sensitivity amongst domestic-foreign product also plays an important role in price perceptions. The place of product manufacturing also influences the the buying behavior and hence leading to think upon the pricing being perceived by consumers as well. Thus this dimension is also necessary to be included into the consumers' experience of judging the price. Brand recognition, effects the quality and price perceptions. Origin of country is also not untouched by it and influences the consumer. The products from developed country are generally regarded as the high quality and costly. The domestic and foreign products are also viewed emotionally and symbolically. This dimension is unique to evaluate and hence included in describing price perceptions.

4.8 PERCEIVED PRODUCT AND SERVICE QUALITY

Perceived quality can be defined as the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives. Perceived quality is, first, a perception by customers.

It thus differs from several related concepts, such as:

- Actual or objective quality: the extent to which the product or service

delivers superior service

- Product-based quality: the nature and quantity of ingredients, features, or services included
- Manufacturing quality: conformance to specification, the "zero defect" goal Perceived quality cannot necessarily be objectively determined, in part because it is a perception and also because judgments about what is important to customers are involved.

Perceived Product Quality: Consumers are likely to assess the quality of a product on the basis of variety of information they relate to a product. These cues or the stimuli are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic cues relate to the physical attributes to the product like size, colour, smell, taste which are used to measure the quality level of a product. Thus, the quality of a product is judged on the bases of fragrance, colour, physical appearance of the container and the packaging. The extrinsic cues or stimuli are brand image, price or even the country of origin, not excluding ads, packaging or group pressure. Consumers initially judge the quality of the product on the basis of extrinsic cues, they relate 'high quality to high price'.

Dimensions of perceived quality: the product context

- **Performance:** How well does a washing machine clean clothes?
- **Features:** Does a toothpaste have a convenient dispenser?
- **Conformance with specifications:** What is the incidence of defects?
- **Reliability:** Will the lawn mower work properly each time it is used?
- **Durability:** How long will the lawn mower last?
- **Serviceability:** Is the service system efficient, competent, and convenient?
- **Fit and finish:** Does the product look and feel like a quality product?

Perceived Service Quality: It is really difficult to evaluate the quality of services as opposed to products because of its special characteristics like intangibility, perishability, inseparability etc. In order to compare and judge the quality of services the consumers use extrinsic cues or stimuli. Thus, a doctors service can be judged on the bases of educational qualifications, hospital, staff, the way patents are consulted

and treated etc. A wrong treatment of a patient is permanent loss leading customer dissatisfaction and hence fall in the service image. Consumers evaluate service quality on the basis of magnitude and direction of the gap between the expectation of service and consumer's perceived value of the service actually delivered.

Dimensions of perceived quality: the service context

- **Tangibles:** Do the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel imply quality?
- **Reliability:** Will the accounting work be performed dependably and accurately?
- **Competence:** Does the repair shop staff have the knowledge and skill to get the job done right? Do they convey trust and confidence?
- **Responsiveness:** Is the sales staff willing to help customers and provide prompt service?
- **Empathy:** Does the bank provide caring, individualized attention to its customers?

4.9 CONSUMER RISK PERCEPTION

Whenever consumers make decision to buy any new brand, there is an element of uncertainty of the consequences and perception of risk is involved in most of such buying. Risk perception is the consumer's perception of uncertainty that they face when they are unable to foresee different consequences of their purchase decision. The relevant risk dimensions are the uncertainty and the consequences. The influence of risk depends upon the individual's perception. That is, the risk actually may or may not exist and even if a real risk exits but is not perceived, it will not influence consumer behaviour.

Among several types of risks, the most important ones are:

- **Financial Risk:** it is the risk of not matching cost with value. That is, the price paid is not really compensated by the product quality and quantity.
- **Performance Risk:** The risk of not performing of what it is expected to

perform. The person may spend a lot on its repairs or bring it to the order.

- **Physical Risk:** Possible harm caused to user and others by actual usage.
- **Social Risk:** It is a kind of risk of not meeting expectations of reference group or groups causing social embarrassment.
- **Psychological Risk:** It is a risk caused by loss of self esteem or self image as a result of poor choice and making a person feel stupid.

The degree of risk perception depends upon the consumer as a person, product, situation and the culture etc. Consumers who are high risk perceivers avoid risk and limit the product choices to a limited number of safe alternatives. Consumers who are low risk perceivers tend to consider their choices from a wider range of available alternatives. However there are different ways by which the consumer can reduce the risk involved in their purchases such as:

- Acquisition of additional information helps consumer to assess the risk involved in much better way.
- Consumers play safe by remaining loyal to a brand which already tried by them. There is greater risk in tying on untried brand.
- Wise and smart customers learn from the mistake of others. A tried and trusted brand is definitely a popular one.
- Consumers go ahead with their purchases on the quality price realizing higher the price better is the quality.
- While selecting the products, they select the retail outlets which is trust worthy.
- Customers should learn to reduce the level of expectations, this will certainly reduce psychological effects.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Perception is a ---------- factor affecting consumer behavior. (Fill up)
2. Sensation and perception are the same.(True or False)

3. Consumer is a ---------- risk perceiver when he evaluates wide range of product alternatives. (Fill up)
4. When the perceiver sees/perceives the person or individualon the basis of a single class or category to which he or she belongs is called as ----------.(Fill up)
5. Consumers initially judge the product on the basis of extrinsic cues. (True or False)



4.10 LETS SUM UP

- Perception is the process by which an individual selects, organizes and interprets stimuli into meaningful and coherent picture of the world.
- Perception is determined by both physiological and psychological factors as perception is developed from previous experiences, feelings and motives. Whereas, sensation only activates the sensory organs of the body.
- The perceptual process involves three components:

  Perceptual Selection

  Perceptual Organization

  Perceptual Interpretation
- A number of factors influence individuals that are likely to distort their perception such as Physical Appearance, Stereotypes, Halo Effects, Irrelevant Cues, First Impression, Hasty Conclusions, Perceptual Inference, Product Symbols, Semiotics.
- Consumer perception of prices is very significant even from the angle of marketer so that he can modify his product prices to the requirements of consumers. Whether a consumer perceives the price of a product or service as 'high', 'low' or 'fair' is having deep impact on his or her buying intentions and post purchase satisfaction.
- Perceived product or service quality can be defined as the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives. Perceived quality is, first, a perception by customers.

- Risk perception is the consumer's perception of uncertainty that they face when they are unable to foresee different consequences of their purchase decision. The relevant risk dimensions are the uncertainty and the consequences. The influence of risk depends upon the individual's perception.



4.11 FURTHER READING

1) OrganisationalBehaviour - By Dr S.S. Khanka
2) Narain'sOrganisationalBehaviour - By S. Sachdeva
3) Modern Marketing Principles and Practices - By R.S.N. Pillai &Bhagavathi



4.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Psychological

Ans to Q No 2: False

Ans to Q No 3: low

Ans to Q No 4: Stereotype

Ans to Q No 5: True



4.13 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Define Perception. Is it same as 'Sensation'?

Q 2: Explain the stages of perception process.

Q 3: How consumers perceive quality and price. Explain with examples.

Q 4: What is perceived risk? How consumers reduce the risks involved in purchase decision?

Q 5: 'Perception is the only part of processing information'. Explain.

Q 6: Describe the factors distorting individuals' perception.

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