Henry Grady "Buck" Weaver
Hero, Thinker, Innovator, Practitioner

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Henry "Buck" Weaver, GM's first director of consumer research, was an early pioneer in the field of market research and market-based decision making. Although he found time to publish several thoughtful articles and appeared on the cover of Time magazine, his contributions to marketing have not been well recognized. This paper describes many of his pioneering efforts and relates them to techniques currently in use today, many of which appear to be innovative. In particular, it compares Weaver's efforts to General Motors' AutoChoiceAdvisor website, introduced in 2002. At the time of its introduction, GM believed AutoChoiceAdvisor was conceptually a first for an original equipment manufacturer. Subsequent research, however, surfaced an earlier example -- GM's Customer Research Staff's 1934 brochure "Your Car As You Would Build It" throughout the text, thus allowing readers to compare their own opinions to the official survey results.

BUCK WEAVER: SOME HISTORY

Weaver was an early pioneer in the field of market research and market-based decision making. "Successful manufacturing," he wrote, "rests upon a knowledge of natural laws on the one hand, and a knowledge of human needs on the other hand." (Weaver, Philosophy of Customer Research, 2).

Peter Drucker worked closely with Weaver during the period when he was conducting his research on GM which led to the publication of Concept of the Corporation. In recent correspondence Drucker indicated that Weaver's contributions to GM went beyond market research. He recalled that Alfred Sloan had a very small group of what he referred to as "Brains" of whom Weaver was a member. (Drucker 2003).

As a member of Sloan's team, it was Weaver's job to identify customer requirements and make sure they were considered in GM's decision making process. This role was publicly acknowledged by GM Chairman Alfred Sloan in his 1933 annual letter to stockholders, in which he referred to the importance of "fact-finding in its application to the tastes and desires of the great consuming public--or what is generally described as Consumer Research." (Sloan 1933).

In this letter, Sloan noted that while large scale operations and world-wide distribution had produced great savings for consumers, the same factors had also widely separated those consumers from the corporations that produce their goods. He wrote that via consumer research activities, General Motors "aims to bridge this gap and provide guidance not only with reference to details of design but as regards public relations, advertising, sales, service -- in fact, everything affecting our customer relations, directly and indirectly." (ibid).

He called consumer research not a "functional activity," but rather an "operating philosophy," and emphasized the importance of "weighing every action from the standpoint of how it affects the goodwill of the institution, recognizing that the quickest way to profits -- and the permanent assurance of such profits -- is to serve the customer in ways in which the customer wants to be served." (ibid). In the stockholder letter, Sloan continued:

Furthermore, we are passing through a kaleidoscopic era characterized by swift movements--social as well as economic--and such conditions cannot fail to bring more rapid changes in the tastes, desires and buying habits of the consuming public.
So it becomes increasingly important that we provide the means for keeping our products and our policies sensitively attuned to these changing conditions.

And irrespective of what these changes may be—regardless of what the new economic and social order may hold—I am confident that a more intimate, detailed and systematic knowledge of the consumer’s desires will afford the Corporation a sound and progressive basis upon which to meet the new conditions as they unfold. (ibid).

Weaver thought the best way to accomplish the task outlined by Sloan was to ask the customer what he wanted. As he was often quoted as saying, “For years businessmen have used the expression ‘The customer is always right,’ but it never occurred to anyone to try to find out what it was the customer was right about.” (Time, page 68). In the years between 1932 and 1937, Weaver’s Customer Research Staff identified 170 improvements and changes to GM vehicles, including air conditioning, automatic transmissions, longer bumpers, rubber pads on pedals and a greater emphasis on safety, all in the name of serving the customer in ways in which the customer wanted to be served.

Born in Eatonton, Georgia in 1889, Weaver held many jobs, both automotive and non-automotive, before joining the General Motors public relations staff in 1921. His development of purchasing power indexes by counties won him the Harvard Award for Scientific Research in Advertising in 1925, a prize worth $2000 (approximately $20,000 in 2003 dollars) and publication in the Harvard Business Review. Subsequent publications include a book – Mainspring: The Story of Human Progress and How Not to Prevent It; numerous pamphlets; and articles in scholarly journals such as the Journal of Consulting Psychology, The Journal of the American Statistical Association, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and The American Marketing Journal.

In these pamphlets and articles, Weaver expounded on his theories regarding market analysis and consumer research. Notably, he pointed out that “all other things being equal,” a manufacturer who hoped to sell products at a profit required two important factors: “first, the manufacturer’s knowledge of the consumer’s needs, tastes, and desires; and second, the consumer’s knowledge of the manufacturer’s product and services.” (Weaver 1935. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 93).

He believed that therefore, “sound industrial planning involves (a) continual study of the consumer in his relation to the product and (b) continual study of the product in its relation to the consumer.” (ibid). This operating principle will be discussed in greater detail in a later comparison between the industrial mechanical world of “atoms” in which Weaver operated, and today’s more knowledge-based world of “atoms” and bits.

Weaver’s premise was a relatively new concept in its day, as noted in a 1935 book by John Jenkins, then an assistant professor at Cornell University, and later chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Maryland. In Psychology In Business and Industry, Jenkins wrote, “Where industrial organizations were once content to grind out products which they hoped would please their customers (or which they hoped their customers would buy, whether pleased or not), there is today a growing tendency to find out what the customer wants before the product is manufactured.” (Jenkins 1935).

Jenkins pointed to GM as a practitioner of this new approach, and later used a GM questionnaire to illustrate the value of using pictures in surveys regarding attributes that customers want to see in their vehicles. He also used the GM survey, “Your Car As You Would Build It” as an example of a document containing effective, non- loaded multiple-choice questions. (ibid).

Though later held up as a leader in the field of consumer research, General Motors was not originally convinced that such study was either necessary or valuable. In fact, Weaver began his customer research career through his own initiative, not because a specific position existed within the corporation.

In the late 1920s, the concept of automotive “free-wheeling” was popular among GM executives, who thought it should be included on GM vehicles. Weaver, then on Sloan’s personal public relations staff, “wondered what the public thought.” On his own he sent out two questionnaires a few months apart to several hundred automobile owners. The surveys, which described free wheeling as allowing the car to coast on its own momentum by merely closing the throttle (not unlike the coaster brake on a bicycle), indicated declining interest in the feature, and GM subsequently abandoned the idea. (Time 1938 page 68).

In 1923, Weaver positioned one of his PR staff members in the lobby of Detroit’s Statler Hotel for three days. The staffer sat glancing at a magazine containing GM’s corporate advertising entitled, “A Famous Family,” developed by Bruce Barton (Marchand 1991) and starting conversations with strangers asking them about General Motors. (Deisler 1986).

In 1925, Weaver wrote letters to people who had recently bought new cars to better understand how their decision processes worked; and in 1927 he conducted group sessions at colleges asking students to fill out questionnaires. His study of advertising was new as well. In 1928, Weaver conducted an informal study of New Yorkers and the relationship between their reading and driving preferences. In subways and commuter trains he noted the newspapers and magazines that people were reading and inquired about the types of cars they owned. (Deisler 1986).

Although GM had not yet created a customer research department, Sloan took the first step by sending Weaver to try out customer research for the automaker’s Canadian affiliate in 1931-32.

In that position, Weaver conducted a comprehensive, quantitative research study among new car buyers, studying advertising and dealer selling practices. This was the first
mailed study of its size ever attempted by a car manufacturer using an independent name list firm (R.L. Polk) to obtain new car buyers’ addresses (Deisler 1986).

Following Weaver’s success in Canada, customer research was extended to the entire company in 1933. GM management formally created an organization positioned to accomplish what Weaver had believed for some time. In his words, “Customer Research is not merely a matter of sending out questionnaires – calling on car owners – compiling a lot of dull statistics – These are ONLY INCIDENTS (Weaver’s emphasis.) It’s really a matter of recognizing the retail buyer as the HUB about which all our activities revolve.” (Weaver, *Philosophy*, 8).

It appears that the American public was also primed for such research efforts, and were more likely to respond to Weaver’s questionnaires than they might have been a decade earlier. Scholars point to the 1930s as a turning point in the world of polling, as the pollster became more established in American culture. This was especially true after the Crossley poll correctly predicted Franklin D. Roosevelt’s election in the 1936 presidential race. (Wright-Isak and Prensky 1993, page 21).

Five years after the establishment of Weaver’s consumer research department at GM, *Time* magazine featured an extensive profile of the man and his work at General Motors, placing Weaver’s photo on their November 14, 1938 cover. The article, which heralded Weaver as “chief promoter of a new industrial concept,” noted that only a few major corporations could be considered “important corporate users of market research.” In addition to GM, *Time’s* list included Procter & Gamble Co., Lever Bros., Eastman Kodak Co., General Foods Corp., Du Pont, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., American Telephone & Telegraph, General Electric Co., Coca-Cola Co., Standard Oil of Indiana, Swift & Co., and Bristol-Meyers Co. (*Time*, page 66).

The article went on to note that of the few U.S. companies that were using market research in a noticeable way “General Motors makes the biggest splash, spending something less than $500,000 a year for the purpose.” This half million dollars represented a full 11% of the estimated $4.5 million in total market research spending throughout U.S. industry at that time. (Ibid).

Significantly, GM’s biggest rivals were not engaged in similar research efforts at the time. According to *Time*, “Elsewhere in the No 1 U.S. industry, Ford depends almost entirely on its dealers’ reports on consumer tastes. Chrysler’s Head Statistician John Scoville spends most of his time studying registration tabulations, dealers suggestions and sales records, checks his findings with occasional direct surveys of buyer opinion. General Motors alone carries on constant customer research in the full sense of the word.” (*Time*, page 66).

Throughout the early years of market research, and for decades after, Weaver and General Motors received recognition for their innovative techniques. Weaver’s influence was noted by Lyndon Brown in his 1937 volume, *Market Research and Analysis*, regarding the way in which Weaver posed questions, and the importance he placed on customer opinion. Like Jenkins, Brown was impressed by Weaver’s use of pictures to help customers choose between various types of car options. In one notable example, Weaver presented numerous “faces” of the vehicle, asking respondents which front grill they preferred. (Brown 1937).

The same technique was cited nearly 30 years later by Harper W. Boyd and Ralph Westfall in their 1964 book, *Marketing Research: Text and Cases*. In a chapter on data collection forms, the authors noted that “General Motors developed a classic questionnaire to get consumer opinions on car styling. Few consumers could describe the type of car grill work that they liked best, but, if they were shown pictures of ten cars, they could point out the grill they liked best. The pictures made it possible for the respondent to report his answer.” (Boyd and Westfall 1964, 298).

D.M. Phelps, in a 1937 study entitled, *Marketing Research: Its Function, Scope, and Method* noted that, “Many concerns make periodic surveys to determine whether their products are entirely acceptable to the consumer. A good example of such work is furnished by the studies of the Customer Research Staff of General Motors.” In his references, he listed Weaver’s 1935 article, “Consumer Research and Consumer Education,” in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Phelps 1937).

Weaver made a point of injecting humor into his surveys, and employed unusual techniques to increase his returns. Experts in the field cited GM as an example of a company using sketches and humor in their questionnaires, with good results (Burtt 1938). Weaver also found that sending out an extra copy of a survey or suggesting that no reply was required increased returns significantly. (Blankenship 1946).

One of Weaver’s techniques for plumbing the minds of potential car buyers was to ask them to submit suggestions for design changes by sketching their ideas on a skeleton outline of a vehicle’s basic shape. It is interesting to note that some respondents could not resist offering ideas that went beyond mere suggestions on appearance. Drawings included everything from a pneumatic bumper [Figure 1] (eventually introduced by GM in 1973) and glass sunroofs [Figure 2] (first introduced in the late 1960s)

Not only did the surveys themselves invite innovation, but Weaver’s methods for distributing them were unique as well. His primary means of distribution was through the mail, but he encouraged consumers to request them also. GM took out full page ads in *Colliers*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Time* inviting readers to request questionnaires and participate in Weaver’s “Proving Ground of Public Opinion” survey. (Advertising Age 1960).
WEaver AND THE "BOUNDARY LINE OF PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE"

Peter Drucker recalled Weaver’s understanding of the implications of changing demographic patterns, pointing out that Weaver recognized as early as the 1940s that American families would shift from owning one car to two. “This underlay GM’s totally unfashionable decisions in the late war years to expand, and which guaranteed GM’s leadership for the next 30 years,” Drucker said. (Drucker 2003).

This was not the first time that Weaver looked ahead, using indirect sources to complement what consumers were telling him they thought they wanted. An illustration of this can be found in a 1932 edition of GM’s market research newsletter, The Proving Ground of Public Opinion, in which Weaver addressed the issue of “Streamlining from the Consumer Viewpoint.” Weaver sensed the desirability of straight, rakish lines, low hung construction and a tendency toward the aero-dynamic design,” noting that “...the Boundary Lines of Public Acceptance in this direction is in advance of the industry’s offerings to date.” The report also suggested that the change in preference might be coming from the younger generation’s interest in toy airplanes and models. (Weaver 1932).

GM researchers at that time referred to articles in Popular Science Monthly, Popular Mechanics, and Scientific America and called attention to newsreels, futuristic motion pictures, and the Buck Rogers comic strip. (ibid).

Weaver pointed out that with a population of 22 million males under the age of twenty (according to the 1930 U.S. Census), toy shops were selling well above 5 million toy airplanes each year. He also observed that toy cars had typically been four to five years behind current designs whereas they were now (in 1933) more likely to have an ultra-modern, streamlined design.

His conclusion was tied to an understanding of the customer decision-making process. Recognizing that he could not prove his theories statistically, he pointed out that GM studies suggested the following:

1. The choice of an automobile is a family problem
2. The head of the house concerns himself primarily with durability and economy.
3. The wife asserts herself primarily on matters of upholstery, hardware and point.
4. Youth takes a strong position on body lines. (ibid).

The report’s conclusion tied Weaver’s philosophy of integrating knowledge of human wants and needs with the application of engineering and manufacturing skills: “Of course no one doubts the ultimate eventuality of streamlining – but Consumer Research indicates that it may come about much sooner than one would think. The boundary line of public acceptance does not seem to constitute any barrier and some may go so far as to suggest that streamlining may bring about radical changes in chassis construction over the next few years.” (ibid).

Weaver did not rely exclusively on the general population to collect that information. He also tapped into the thoughts of his “Motor Enthusiasts,” who were generally 18 months ahead of the curve. His estimated how far in advance the Motor Enthusiasts were ahead of Regular Motorists by sending both types of customers the same question over several years. Figure 4 shows a question about preference for the rear contour of a car that was sent to both “Regular Motorists and “Motor Enthusiasts.” In October 1935, over 31% of Motor Enthusiasts favored a smoother rear contour compared to 24% for Regular Motorists. It took until early 1937 for other Regular Motorists to respond to the idea with the same degree of enthusiasm and their preference eventually reached 40% by the end of 1937, well after Weaver’s methods provided an early indication of broader market preference the smoother rear contour. By listening carefully to Motor Enthusiasts,
Weaver learned to anticipate many of the general public’s wants and needs.

**Figure 3**
Determining Rear Contour Preference

![Rear Contours](image)

This example demonstrates Weaver’s appreciation for the need to balance the requirements associated with drawing a true random sample and the need to make sure that what was being collected was relevant to decision making and accurately reflected what the consumer was thinking.

In Weaver’s words, “While there are thousands of text books on statistical analysis, there is a dearth of literature on questionnaire technique. There is a general tendency to overestimate the mechanics of the thing and to neglect what we might call the art of extracting information.” (Weaver 1935. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 183-184). As he pointed out:

Whether the consumer’s vote indicates 75 per cent preference or 95 per cent preference, the action taken would, at best, be more or less arbitrary and probably the same in either case.

The principal value of the findings will, in many instances, lie not so much in any one isolated figure, as in comparisons of different figures, not only of different items but also of results obtained in different years. This fact further emphasizes the necessity for exercising the greatest care in the initial framing of the questions. This is easily the most important problem with which we have to deal. (ibid).

Weaver used simple questionnaires to identify what customers wanted, and, more importantly, how much each item was worth to them. For example, in his Proving Ground of Public Opinion questionnaire, he introduced a dozen or so new features — things like an automatic starter, doughnut tires, a variety of radiator styles — and then measured respondents’ preference for each of these. At the end of the survey, he also gauged their willingness to pay, with a gentle reminder to consider the effect of each on the total vehicle price. (Weaver 1932).

**APPLYING WEAVER’S PRINCIPLES DEVELOPED IN A WORLD OF “ATOMS” TO TODAY’S WORLD OF “ATOMS AND BITS”**

The distinction between atoms and bits is drawn from Nicholas Negroponte’s book *Being Digital*. In that book he made a strong case for how the world would move from an industrial world of products made up of *atoms* to a knowledge-based world of products made up of *bits* of information. Since that time, the remarkable growth and eventual decline of purely *bits* based business has given way to the belief that the opportunity is not a future world of solely *atoms* or *bits*, but a future world of *atoms* and *bits*. (Negroponte 1995)

With that context in mind, it is intriguing to observe the similarity between Weaver’s principles of addressing and encouraging the implementation of solutions to customer needs and GM’s recently-introduced Internet tool, AutoChoiceAdvisor. AutoChoiceAdvisor intends to provide an unbiased vehicle consideration set based on the consumer’s requirements and desires, establish a dialogue with online automotive consumers and gather quick feedback on consumer preferences. In other words, it attempts to engender trust while improving communication between GM and consumers and gathering up-to-the-minute understanding about those consumers.

The site allows consumers to submit their vehicle requirements and instantly receive a list of ten vehicles to consider in their final purchase. The vehicles are drawn from a list of every make sold in North America. The message to users of the service is, “By helping you identify those vehicles that best meet your needs, we gain valuable insight in how to improve our own GM products.”

At the time of its introduction, GM believed that AutoChoiceAdvisor was a conceptual first for an original equipment manufacturer. That was until Weaver’s “Your Car As You Would Build It” questionnaire was found. The introduction read as follows: “In line with General Motors policy of building its products definitely in keeping with the tastes and desires of the practical motorist we are sending you this questionnaire in the hope that you may be willing to take a few minutes of your time and ‘cast your ballot’ on the points covered.” (Weaver 1932).

This story would be more interesting if we could say that through diligent research, GM employees scoured the GM archives looking for inspiration from decades past, and discovered this interesting historical application.

In truth, a search for GM-related materials on e-bay turned up a 1934 "Your Car As You Would Build It" brochure that seemed, at best, to provide further insight into GM’s historical accomplishments. What a surprise to find out that the brochures advanced many of the same concepts that the AutoChoiceAdvisor team was proposing nearly 70 years later, namely:

Three Similar Concepts
1930’s and Today

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1. Transparency between enterprise and customer, which forms the basis of trust.
2. A desire to reach out and communicate on a more personal basis, even using influential people who might help communicate with the broader public.
3. Providing consumer-based guidance to GM's scientists, engineers, and designers — those who could actually use it.

**AUTO CHOICE ADVISOR IN BRIEF**

The premise of AutoChoiceAdvisor, much like "Your Car As You Would Build It," is quite simple. GM tells customers, "By answering a few questions (which takes about 10 minutes) we will provide you with a list of 10 vehicles — each of which has a score that is based on how close the vehicle comes to meeting your needs. The list will include vehicles from all manufacturers."

The site is accessed both directly and through non-GM channels. The approach uses current technology to achieve what Weaver wrote in 1935 in the *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, "all other things being equal," a manufacturer who hoped to sell products at a profit required two important factors: "first, the manufacturer's knowledge of the consumer's needs, tastes, and desires; and second, the consumer's knowledge of the manufacturer's product and services." (Weaver 1935, 93).

"First, the manufacturer's knowledge of the consumer's needs, tastes, and desires"

Once they have reached the site, shoppers answer a series of questions about their needs. For example, how will they use the vehicle? For commuting? Carpooling? To haul a trailer? What is their price range? What body types and brands do they like? What vehicle attributes do they prefer? Do they care about repair history? Fuel economy? Cargo capacity?

Once these questions have been answered, the advisor asks users to rank their priorities. Do they care most about price range, or are other attributes most important? Is body style an important consideration, or would they prefer better fuel economy?

To guarantee the unbiased response to the shopper's answers, the measurable characteristics of each vehicle in the system (both GM and competitors' products) come from an independent company that provides these services to the automotive industry. Furthermore, the information on vehicle quality comes from J. D. Power and Associates, a highly respected independent market research company specializing in measuring customer satisfaction.

Because trust is so important, every precaution possible is taken to ensure confidentiality. The site makes it clear that the information consumers provide will remain confidential. No General Motors representative will contact them about their responses unless they ask for the contact. The individual information is aggregated so that personal information is anonymous. The confidentiality process has been certified by Trust-e, which requires GM to document what information is collected, how it is stored, who has access, how the company tracks users, etc. AutoChoiceAdvisor has no persistent cookies and requires no registration, which makes it even more trustworthy to users.

"Second, the consumer's knowledge of the manufacturer's product and services."

The site takes the customer's input, synthesizes it with a database of customer preferences gleaned from thousands of consumers who completed hour-long and much more detailed trade-off interviews compiled over the last 12 years. Using Bayesian statistical techniques, answers from AutoChoiceAdvisor are related to a more detailed existing database, which offers vehicle suggestions to them to consider from the over 250 makes and models currently in the marketplace.

GM vehicles appear only if they truly match the consumer's preferences. In the instance when no GM vehicle surfaces in the initial consideration set, the respondent is offered an opt-in opportunity to view the GM vehicle that comes closest to his or her preferences. This option allows the company to educate consumers about a GM vehicle that may also meet their needs.

Eventually, AutoChoiceAdvisor also will be able to ask what Weaver would surely have insisted be asked, "What would make this GM vehicle more appealing to you?" Answers to this question would be particularly useful to GM designers and engineers. The user also has the option to learn more about a given vehicle, and even to link to that manufacturer's web site. And if they choose this option, AutoChoiceAdvisor saves their inputs and search results in a password-protected file so they can review them at a later date. With thousands of visitors per month, users have been overwhelmingly pleased with the results. They believe they are receiving unbiased, accurate information that will actually help them choose a new vehicle, regardless of make or model.

**ATOMS AND BITS**

**WEAVER'S PRINCIPLES STILL APPLY**

It seems fair to assume that Buck Weaver would not be surprised by the techniques and results of AutoChoiceAdvisor. As pointed out earlier, both Weaver's early surveys and AutoChoiceAdvisor have three enduring principles in common.

**Enduring Principle 1: Trust**

GM consumer research indicates that AutoChoiceAdvisor works so well in large part because of the site's "transparency," a concept that is quite prominent these days. The 2001 Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel was awarded to George Akerlof, Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz for their analyses of
markets with asymmetric information. In essence, if customers do not know that you have exactly what they want, they may buy something less to their liking for a lesser price and possibly not from you. Also, if you don’t know how to best serve your customers, it is more difficult to earn the right price for the products you do develop and, therefore, more difficult to achieve your growth and margin objectives.

AutoChoiceAdvisor and “Your Car As You Would Build It” are both transparent from the customer’s perspective. The information presented is totally unbiased and the quality of the outcomes after the customer goes through the process confirms its objectivity. Furthermore, unlike sales brochures and some commercially-based sites that attempt to provide the same service, “Your Car As You Would Build It” and AutoChoiceAdvisor contain no unwanted solicitation (advertising, in the case of Weaver’s day, or in digital technology, intrusive pop-up banners), and customer names are not sold or used without permission.

**Enduring Principle 2: Communication**

Communicating with consumers on a more personal basis was as important to Weaver as it is to GM today. In both applications, GM entered into a true two-way personalized dialogue with the consumer. Because the AutoChoiceAdvisor dialogue includes procedures to guarantee confidentiality, GM has been able to ask for input and provide specific, relevant information, based on the consumer’s input.

Of course, this type of communication involves some risk. It took a lot of people a lot of time and financial resources to provide these types of services to customers. And they put GM in the unusual position of appearing to recommend competitors’ products. But without risk there are few rewards. By taking these risks GM is able to gather an unprecedented volume of accurate, timely data on consumer preferences and in the process, express confidence that its products are competitive. The company can also engender trust because of the unbiased approach in providing this service.

Respondents seem to value in the information both techniques provided. In the case of “Your Car As You Would Build It,” many people forwarded their friends information on how to receive it, and with AutoChoiceAdvisor, a recent test indicated nearly 80 percent of respondents say they would recommend it to a friend. (GM internal documents).

Ultimately, GM wants to know what these people think and what matters to them. The concept is not new. Weaver referred to the axiom, “The customer is always right,” but today GM has amended that to say, “An informed customer is always right.” Informing the customer requires an open dialogue that surfaces the articulated and unarticulated needs and desires of the customer, and in return, advises the customer of the extent to which you are capable of meeting or exceeding their requirements.

**Enduring Principle 3: Using Consumer Knowledge**

The third principle that AutoChoiceAdvisor shares with Weaver’s work is equally important: namely, the ability to use consumer knowledge. In both eras, GM considered how to best feed the knowledge gained from the consumer dialog back to the marketing specialists and product planners who sell the current vehicles and design the company’s future offerings.

Weaver pointed out that he was not completely responsible for any of the changes that took place during his tenure at GM. Most of them had already been thought of by GM engineers. But he knew how to listen to his customers. In his words, he set about to “identify the boundary lines of public acceptance.” And the fact that the public wanted certain changes was often the deciding factor in their adoption. (Time 1938 p. 68).

Weaver knew exactly what his successors at GM know today, and because he applied it effectively, using the latest technology of his day as appropriate, he was successful. Of course, technology is only one part of the equation. As the best researchers still do, Weaver put as much emphasis on using the information as he did on collecting it. Today, GM is also focused on using information. From the start, the company recognized that to be effective, AutoChoiceAdvisor would enable GM to focus scarce resources on customers who are in the market for a new vehicle. As with the communication efforts described earlier, traditional and new research methods work together.

GM’s Product Development organization has been involved in the design and build of AutoChoiceAdvisor from the beginning, and they have identified areas where the AutoChoiceAdvisor data can be used for various types of analysis.

Weaver saw his efforts as part of a democratic service. The Internet, too, is truly a democratizing technology, just as its founders intended. In his book *Weaving the Web*, Tim Berners-Lee envisioned the Web as much more than a tool for research or communication. He described it as a new way of thinking and a means to “greater freedom and social growth.” (Berners-Lee 1999).

**Weaver’s Legacy... a Victim of Short Term Success**

How did Weaver fall into such obscurity? And why is GM rediscovering what it apparently already knew, 70 years after the original discovery? Market factors tell much of the story. For the duration of World War II GM stopped production of personal vehicles. In the period following the war, the American economy and the movement to the suburbs led to unprecedented demand for new vehicles. GM and other manufacturers were able to sell everything they made. This practice – coupled with belief in their success – led to an attitude of “we know what the consumer wants, better than the consumer knows – and we have the sales records to prove it!” However, as the decades progressed, demand far exceeded supply in the American automobile market. As new competitors from overseas entered the market, customers suddenly had more options, and GM suffered. To get back on the road to recovery to where it is today, GM once again had to
get back to basics -- as Weaver put it, “finding out what people like, doing more of it, finding out what people don’t like, doing less of it.” (Time, page 66).

Buck Weaver knew what the developers of GM’s AutoChoiceAdvisor know today: customers can tell a company a lot (but not all) about what they want. It’s up to the company to use that information and its own ideas wisely.

In 2002, GM’s North America Market Research group’s performance was recognized by the publishers of the Research Department Report, an independent research newsletter that profiles effective market research departments at leading companies. Andy Norton, director of the department, was named the 2002 Market Research Director of the Year as a result of the department’s innovative approach to conducting research with greater speed and at lower costs. Buck Weaver would have been proud!

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