

# The path to consumer empowerment: Climbing the empowerment tree

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BLOGS



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In today's marketplace, the balance of power shifts. Consumers, once passive recipients of products and services, now hold more influence than ever before. With access to vast amounts of information within a click, consumers now have greater information and control over their consumption-related decisions. They become more willing and vocal to shape their consumption experiences. Empowered consumers are informed, engaged, and influential—expecting brands to be pledge for transparency, ethical behavior, and responsiveness. For businesses, understanding how to foster this empowerment is essential to building trust, loyalty, and long-term relationships. Studying consumer empowerment is vital as it provides insights into how brands can meet these evolving expectations. It's about creating meaningful interactions towards enhanced autonomy and collaboration. As consumers demand more transparency and ethical practices from brands, businesses must focus on empowering their audience in ways that build lasting, authentic relationships.

To truly grasp how this empowerment unfolds, we can envision it as a journey through a **tree of empowerment**—rooted in knowledge, strengthened by co-creation, and growing through continuous feedback and benefits.

## The roots: knowledge and learning as foundation

Every empowered consumer's journey begins at the roots. Just as a tree cannot grow without a strong root system, consumers cannot feel empowered without the information and understanding needed to make informed decisions. In a series of research articles on online consumer learning, our work has highlighted that consumers are self-directed learners, deciding when, why, and how they want to seek information and learn about products or services to increase their consumer knowledge, and distancing themselves from "push" information from brands. Yet, our research shows that a brand's role as an information facilitator—providing the right information at the right moment in the customer journey—enables consumers to gather product information, compare options, learn product use and make decisions with greater confidence.

In particular, some of my research has examined how consumers leverage online resources, such as video tutorials or user-generated content, to build their own foundational knowledge, learn about product use, and make more informed and responsible consumption-related decisions. These studies have demonstrated that well-structured learning opportunities help consumers reduce uncertainty and take the first steps toward becoming more autonomous decision-makers.

## The trunk: participation and co-creation

As the consumer journey progresses, the trunk of the tree comes into focus. Symbol of co-creation, these brand initiatives support the consumer's growing sense of empowerment. My research on creative crowdsourcing has explored how consumers can actively engage with brands, contributing ideas and innovations that shape products and services. They are willing to share their ideas on how to improve existing or new products and services, helping the company to benefit from their creativity and experience as customers.



However, as participation increases, it becomes critical to address the ethical dimensions of this engagement. Empowered consumers not only seek involvement but also expect fairness, transparency, and ethical treatment in their interactions with brands. Current and future research examines ethical consumer empowerment, focusing on how brands can foster transparent and ethical knowledge exchanges. Ensuring that consumer input is valued and treated with respect is essential to building trust and sustaining long-term engagement.

### The branches: Benefits and feedback loops of empowerment

As consumers move further along their journey and up the empowerment tree, they reach the branches, representing the practical applications of empowerment. Consumers now apply the knowledge and engagement they've gained to make independent decisions and actively co-design their consumption experience. May it be through knowledge or crowdsourcing, my research showed that consumer empowering initiatives directly **impact brand strategies**, driving real change in product development and marketing. Empowered consumers can become **ambassadors** for the brand in their social circles. This level of empowerment extends beyond the individual, as consumers become influencers and advocates within their communities.

Empowered consumers also provide critical feedback that helps brands evolve. Brands can harness consumer insights to refine their strategies and improve the overall customer experience. Moving forward, I am particularly interested in understanding how this feedback process can be made more transparent and ethical. As consumers increasingly expect brands to operate with integrity, it becomes vital to ensure that feedback loops are not only effective but also fair and transparent. Ethical empowerment involves creating systems where consumers feel their contributions are recognized and where knowledge exchanges are conducted with respect to fairness and privacy. This key focus of my ongoing research aims an improved alignment of consumer empowerment with ethical business practices.

Hence, my research illustrates that the path to consumer empowerment is a dynamic journey that moves through knowledge acquisition, autonomy, co-creation, and feedback. The empowerment tree metaphor illustrates how each element—roots, trunk and branches—plays a crucial role in creating and **sustaining consumer empowerment**. This journey is continuous, with feedback driving further learning and engagement, ensuring that the relationship between consumers and brands remains strong, adaptive, and mutually beneficial.

