

## RESEARCH ABSTRACT

# Treatment of Consumers by Internet-enabled Businesses: Assurances Calibration

The Me2B Alliance, a nonprofit organization, conducted a qualitative study of consumers' reactions to prototype Me2B assurances of the ethical behavior of online businesses, services and products. Based on previous ethnographic research, the study explored participants' understandings of the key themes of trust, fairness and control of information and interactions that undergird these assurances. The objective was to calibrate proposed Me2B certification criteria to be used for the Me2B seal.

Two primary research questions guided the methodology of this small-scale study, which used open-ended inquiry and structured elicitation: 1] Is each prototype assurance meaningful, comprehensive and essential? And, 2] Do users believe it is possible to trust a connected product/service? Participants offered insights about the need to distinguish between protections against fraud and other security concerns. For example, those unfamiliar with the notion of having a relationship with a company when just browsing a product or "window-shopping," when prompted allowed that data may be collected from them in this circumstance; and that they would value having an assurance that this practice was not taking place.

One other key finding was that participants overwhelmingly felt they were getting a fair deal for paid products. The concept of 'paying' for a 'free' service with non-monetary currencies (such as personal data) was not top-of-mind for most participants. However, after prompting, they did mention some of these units of exchange. For 'free' products, participants also felt they were

getting a fair deal, though they seemed less certain of this and spent more time justifying it in their responses. Some felt exchanging data/information for a 'free' service was not only 'fair,' but also desirable because it gave them more customized content.

These and other findings indicate that assessing the fairness of the deal (or quid pro quo) and the extent that data collection subsidizes online services would be helpful to consumers.

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