Psychology of the shopper: driving sales through the senses

Our sense of sound, sight, smell, and touch have a powerful effect on us, and psychological research is just beginning to explain some of the physical, cognitive, social and emotional effects.

Sensory stimuli can influence environments, improve the shopper experience and change the nature of behaviour in ways beyond our consciousness. People perceive the world through all their senses simultaneously, so the more sensory an experience, the more engaging it will be. The right sensory stimuli, if applied appropriately, can calm, relax, de-stress, energize, improve mood, influence decision-making and hence the propensity to spend. It can also have a positive influence on waiting time.

Recent research has revealed that a customer who dwells for 40 minutes is more than twice as likely to purchase as someone who spends 10 minutes. Additionally, shoppers who hang around longer spend, on average, twice as much.

Customers have so many choices – how do retailers get them to shop in their stores? Above-the-line communications (advertisements and online marketing) might be spot on in many cases, but are retailers really listening to shoppers and harnessing the power of below-the-line (point of purchase) and through-the-line schemes (the senses)? Not forgetting what drives shoppers in this era of many to many communications when social media means we are even more connected?

Understanding the shopper

The shopper arrives in a particular state of mind and with a mission/purpose. There are three principal types of shopper missions:

1. **Task/needs shopper.** This mindset is driven by need and therefore requires a pathway to the purchase and perhaps some inspiration along the way. Decision-making tends to be driven by frequency and/or complexity of purchase, for example, milk being a frequent purchase would require little decision-making. The behaviour of shoppers in auto-mode can still be influenced by external stimuli.

2. **Complex purchase shopper.** Champagne is a more complex decision, so the shopper is likely to benefit from the right atmospherics and additional POP marketing material to aid the process. Similarly, to purchase a car, there are three dramatically different stages: research, deliberation and confirmation, followed by the purchase process.

3. **Recreational/browsing shopper.** This mindset is actively seeking inspiration; orientation is not such a big deal and there's a huge opportunity to provide the right atmospherics to entice the shopper to linger and purchase. It is often argued that browsers are of no intrinsic value to retailers but browsing has been proven as a significant form of consumer behaviour and a big opportunity for retailers.

Understanding how to manipulate sensory environments

**Sight**

There are clear advantages, but it is easy to misuse. Grabbing customers' attention with
signage, visual cues from above-the-line communications and images is fine provided the simple rules of minor plus est (less is more), and appropriateness are applied.

If too many screens and other communications vie for our attention at one time, this sensory clutter tends to confuse and customers will randomly deselect or totally ignore.

**Digital in-store**

Digital in-store has the potential to boost sales revenue and increase performance. As a means of communication it is only valuable if targeted in the right manner. Complex messages will be ignored and, as for too many screens; is the short-lived additional advertising revenue from a throng of screens worth the risk to customer loyalty? Digital screens are versatile enough for messages to be varied to suit the audience and they would also work well in a slow-moving queue, although it would be wise not to include sound.

**Colour**

Research has shown how colour influences our moods and manifests itself in our choices. RGB (Red/Green/Blue) low-energy lighting provides a host of low-cost possibilities to vary mood as it can create any shade on the colour spectrum. Yellow is generally the first colour the human eye notices and light blue has been known to lower blood pressure. However, whilst most shades of blue have a calming influence, some encourage reflection and hence have a tendency to make people spend less. By varying lighting levels and colour it is possible to influence how long shoppers linger too.

**Sound**

Retailers who use in-store music tend to pay little attention to what is transmitted when and where or the quality of the acoustics. The impact is clear. We've all had a shopping experience where the music was so loud and/or jarring you felt a need to get out.

Research has established that the characteristics of music such as tempo, rhythm and principal key play an influential role. Studies have revealed the influence on purchase decision, dwell time product perception and store choice. For example, at Principles in 2005 the introduction of a tailored music policy increased sales by 12 – 18 per cent within three weeks of introduction, and stores with music were rated 15 per cent higher than Principles' stores without music. A key element was the "tailored" approach – one size does not fit all.

**Smell**

Of all the five senses; smell is the closest linked to emotions because the brain's olfactory system detects odours, fast-tracks signals to the limbic system and links emotions with memories. Smell is particularly powerful as it allows the brain to be occupied with other thoughts. Ambient aromas have been found to increase customer dwell time.

Scents can be used to get shoppers to linger, to evoke emotions and to purchase. The success of coffee outlets in book shops is well renown, but some combinations do not work as one coin operated launderette chain discovered in the US when they introduced a bar – the smell of soap suds and beer did not work for their customers.

**Touch**

In fashion and furnishings so much decision-making is tactile. Shoppers try to picture through touch, the weight of cloth and how it would feel to wear, so touch fuels emotions for rational decision-making. Wooden tables are often used for display as they tend to prompt shoppers to touch items on them, thereby increasing the likelihood to purchase.
Paco Underhill, the shopping behaviourist, has used video cameras to research touch and one interesting finding has been the “butt brush” theory that shoppers are likely to be irritated if touched from behind, for example by stepping back in a narrow aisle.

Peoples’ sense of touch plays an important decision-making and behaviour role in the retail environment.

**The retail space**

As the entire retail space, or store layout, forms part of a shopper’s visualscape it can influence the entire experience and hence the propensity to spend.

At Ikea customers are channelled on a set route, which delays their mission, with visual messages formulated around design, and the whole experience finally culminates in a marketplace and generally a queue for the checkout. Due to this process, along the way shoppers buy so much on impulse as they feel they should treat themselves due to the delay and in many cases due to time limitations they don’t want to repeat the experience again too soon. It has been found that 67 per cent of purchases in Ikea's marketplace are made on impulse. There are short cuts around, but these are difficult to locate.

**Technological advances**

Technology provides the potential to accurately measure effects, but these methods can be costly. Neuro-imaging has opened up the ability to peer inside heads and test shopper responses by studying brain activity. Previously researchers have had to rely on customer responses after the event, not the best approach when so much is unconscious.

Simulating environments can be an ideal way to test the effect and save money, as found recently by 20th Century Fox when an array of potential posters were superimposed across a “virtual” Paris. After gathering customer feedback, much expenditure was saved as the wording was able to be fine-tuned and it was discovered that far fewer sites would be needed.

With the advent of computers with the capability to infer a person's mood, how long will it be before we could deliver truly tailored communications – perhaps we need to draw up guidelines now between innovation and intrusion, as already, so much of what we experience is outside of our control?

**Some outstanding sensory environments**

Some companies have clearly begun exploring sensory enhancement to their retail space, for example, the music, colours, lighting, décor and coffee aroma of upmarket coffee outlets such as Starbucks and Caffé Nero are designed specifically around customer needs. Research by Nespresso found that 60 per cent of sensory experience of drinking espresso comes from the retail environment, so they launched a chain of upmarket coffee outlets partially to enhance the appeal of their home-prepared product.

Apple with its ‘come and play’ feel and Nike with its sporty imagery both express their brands superbly through their store environments. Shoppers feel they are inside the brand; it is like an interactive emporium where they are welcome to browse at their leisure.

The fruit drinks company Innocent has launched grass and daisy chillers, which have already doubled sales for many of their stockists. This “touchy, feely” approach adds differentiation and excitement to a fast growing category.

Louis Vuitton gained much media coverage when they used a giant LV valise to hide the scaffolding during the construction of their Champs Elysee Store in Paris. Such a high impact attraction generated free publicity, with a positive impact on the launch budget.
Psychology of the shopper

Shoppers often have a sound conscious reason for making a purchase but subconsciously emotions play a huge role. Make them feel happy. Mood is the main contributor to any individuals’ mindset and retailers are yet to grasp its potential value to the bottom line. Getting to grips with the unique aspects of shopper missions is a starting point. The time of day, day of the week, location and generic customer profile all hold the key to ensuring an appropriate experience that engages particular shopper clusters.

Every environment has sounds, sights, smells and textures even when devoid of music, lighting and signage. Crafting it to fit the people in that space pays huge dividends. Shoppers will be more likely to spend if they feel good about themselves in their interaction with that environment and they will want to revisit. By running a bespoke study, retailers will discover what works best at each location.

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