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COMMENTARY

Enhancing Consumer Empowerment

Len Tiu Wright ¹, Andrew Newman ² and Charles Dennis ³

¹ Department of Marketing, Leicester Business School, Bede Island, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH, UK Tel: +44 (0) 116 250 6329
e-mail: lwright@dmu.ac.uk

² Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB, UK Tel: +44 (0) 161 275 0531
e-mail: anewman@man.mbs.ac.uk

³ Brunel University, Uxbridge, UB8 3PH, UK Tel: +44 (0) 185 274000
e-mail: Charles.Dennis@mailhost.brunel

Abstract

Purpose of this paper

Much of the literature on consumer empowerment focuses on consumers' efforts to regain control of their consumption processes from suppliers. Our purpose is to argue that many suppliers achieve success by trying hard to empower consumers. The mechanism by which this takes place consists of researching and providing what consumers want. Consumers feel empowered when they are able to enjoy the consumption process. This is of particular note in shopping, which is not simply obtaining products but also experience and enjoyment.

Design/methodology/approach

Research is examined into the links between firms' efforts to understand what consumers want, atmospheric stimuli, emotions and buying behaviour.

Findings

We find that successful firms' try hard to understand what consumers want and to improve consumer satisfaction and empowerment by providing pleasant marketing environments and apt, relevant information.

Research limitations/implications

The approach is based on prior literature. We examine marketing to consumers in company locations, e.g. stores, malls, restaurants and banks to examine specific evidence of the effects of atmospheric stimuli such as aroma, music and video screen media.

Practical implications

We contend that firms can and do become successful in a competitive arena by providing pleasant environments and information that people want.

What is original/value of paper?

We show how consumer empowerment is an important concept. This paper contributes since there is a dearth of writings specifically about consumer empowerment in the marketing literature. Far from the popular view of consumers being manipulated by firms, successful firms try hard to and succeed in empowering consumers in their marketing activities.

Keywords: Enhancing consumer empowerment, power, consumer choice, atmospherics, images

Introduction

The consumer, so it is said, is the king...each is a voter who uses his money as votes to get the things done that he wants done”.
Samuelson, P. (The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, 1999)

Marketing textbooks tend to portray the marketplace as a battlefield between competing suppliers and between suppliers and consumers. In these contexts the ultimate decisions are made by consumers through their various abilities to exercise their choices of whether to buy or not to buy in the last resort. These are consumer empowerments. We argue that consumer empowerment in marketing is something that is intrinsically peculiar to the individual consumer psyche. Suppliers need to understand the contexts in which consumers exercise their choices and make their views felt. This is all the more important given that the battle by suppliers to win the hearts and minds of their consumers is perceived as taking place in an age of multi-media change and fragmentation, brand proliferation and consumer fickleness, marketing saturation and technological exploration (Gritten, 2006; Sharp, 2006). The consumer is King is described in the above quotation attributed to an economist, Paul Samuelson. Therefore, this paper puts the view that firms ignore consumer empowerments at their peril. It may be also fashionable to criticise firms for manipulating consumers but we contend that many are working hard to improve consumer satisfaction and empowerment. Marketers need to fine-tune and re-evaluate their consumer expectations and their own marketing orientations so that they can take decisions to improve the quality of their offers to consumers. The purpose and effect of such marketing orientations are to increase consumers’ purchasing satisfactions so we contend that consumer empowerment has a beneficial effect in the short and long term of leading to improved business results.

Concepts of power and consumer empowerment

The concept of ‘power’ and its distribution in society for understanding behaviour has been identified in various studies within the social sciences e.g. power distance within different cultures (Hofstede, 1980), obedience to authority (Martin and Hewstone, 2003) and hierarchical to multi-modal distribution of power in internationalization processes by firms (Dana, 2004)). While there are a myriad of insights generated by many European and US writers when studying consumers, their cultural diversities and the impacts on consumer behaviour, the concept of power has no meaning other than in specific contexts. The phrase “power corrupts” is a popular expression, but the concept of power is an abstract e.g. its corollary can take opposite forms, as in the

power to act and the power to stop something. The question as to how far consumers are “empowered” is the question as to how far they are acting on their own volition or at the other extreme, coerced i.e. non-empowered.

In Europe the roots of empowerment thinking can be traced back to the attitudes about liberalism and individualism. However, the biggest single thrust from any country which changed the face of modern consumer empowerment in the 1960s onwards came from the United States with the firm establishment of the consumer movement, consumer protection as embodied in the US Food and Drugs Administration and the concept of consumer sovereignty.

Consumer studies carried out by firms have an objective of uncovering consumer needs and these, in turn, have encouraged more and not less consumer empowerments when these firms improve their provisions as a result of such studies. The ability of consumers to have control of their own choices has been reported to be central to the experience of empowerment (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). As an example, for decades marketers and researchers have been aware that shopping is not just a matter of obtaining tangible products but also about experience and enjoyment (see for example Martineau, 1958). Marketers attempt to satisfy peoples’ needs and wants and according to Byrne (2003) activates the mechanism that empowers consumers:

“In a well-functioning market consumers who dislike a product... will turn to another one, punishing the producer who has not fulfilled their expectations, and rewarding those who are in tune with their demands. This is what increases competition and competitiveness”

Cues, stimuli and environments conducive to enhancing consumer empowerment

Since Kotler’s early observations in 1974, the marketing and retailing literature has consistently pointed to the importance of the *inanimate* marketing environment (see also detailed work of Langeard *et al.*, 1981), and the degree to which cues such as product messages and colourful displays can affect atmospheres. Improving the environment for consumers serves to draw in customers. Earlier reference to the potential effects of retail atmosphere on buyer behaviour was evident in the 1920s (Copeland, 1927). The use of the physical setting to create atmospheric impact as a form of marketing communications can be traced as far back as 1908 and the American Telegraph and Telephone (AT&T) Company, which utilized the visual impact of its organization’s building (Grinig, 1993). Of equal importance, the images that attract or repel customers and ultimately shape the atmosphere of the marketing environment are also attributed to the social phenomenon present (Martineau 1958; Rich and Portis 1964; Tauber 1972; Pessimer, 1980). For example, other clientele’s physical appearance and behaviour can shape the setting (e.g. Zeithaml *et al.* 1985) and inconsistent images may downgrade environments for other users (Prus, 1986). This paper addresses such issues and attempts to present several managerial propositions so that firms can create desirable atmospheres.

There is considerable academic research and practitioner experimentation on the extent to which desirable images and the atmospheres they create can influence positive emotions and behaviours. Much of this theoretical and philosophical debate centres on the constituent parts of atmosphere, and whether there are managerial benefits to be gained from deeper understanding. More recently, the tangibility

created by marketer-generated atmospheres, and related customer perceptions, has seen widespread application in the services marketing field. An abundance of work in this context draws credence from the physical and social effects of atmospherics on customers, and the evaluative benefits of these images as a basis for customers to assess the quality or standard of the goods and services on offer (see, for example, Bitner, 1990; 1992). Hence, the customer's affective state resulting from such sales encounters influences their appraisal of quality, and plays a more critical role in influencing both customer satisfaction and, consequently, company performance (Babakus, Bienstock and Van Scotter, 2004).

In marketing terms, the perceived clarity of a company's image (and arguably reputation) is therefore intertwined with the perceived *legibility* of the setting in which the consumption (whether aesthetically or economically driven) takes place (Newman and Patel, 2004). In this instance, the use of the word 'legibility' alludes to the importance of the interface with the customer, and the need for clarity of offer or proposition. To deal with the underlying processes of image and atmosphere generation we now turn to the point at which environmental psychology dovetails with the marketing and services marketing literatures. On first examination a plethora of studies suggest that service customers value the atmospheres created in marketing environments by marketing management as a means of ranking organizations (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1981; Upah and Foulton, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; and Baker *et al.*, 1994).

Writers have given evidence to supports the notion that place atmosphere is linked to enjoyment and entertainment factors *vis-à-vis* aesthetic enhancements during shopping (e.g. Babin *et al.*, 1994; Sit *et al.*, 2003; Yoo *et al.*, 1998), and such augmentation may be subsequently reflected in consumer spending (e.g. Donovan *et al.*, 1994; Jones, 1999; Machleit and Mantel, 2001; Sherman and Smith, 1987; Smith and Sherman, 1993). It is the intangible areas that often make the most impression and where marketing management have the control and generate the rules that influence customer behaviour (see Branthwaite 1984). This is by no means surprising as marketers have been continuously drawn to the prospect of shopping as a major experience rather than just a utilitarian act of obtaining products, as touched on in the early stages of this paper (Martineau, 1958; Kotler, 1974; and Dennis *et al.*, 2002).

Indeed, enhanced moods and higher spending on unplanned purchases are all associated with pleasant atmospheres, which assist consumers with their attainment goals (Spies *et al.*, 1997). For example, the Tesco Extra superstores try as far as possible to provide everything to everybody, on the basis of knowing what customers want. The slogan "Every little helps" can be found on the back of its till receipts to its consumers. Consumers consistently choose shopping locations for the pleasantness of the atmospheres and pleasant store atmosphere can be linked explicably to the profitability of the business (Newman and Patel, 2004). However, a major factor influencing the usefulness of atmospheres in precision marketing is the degree to which we understand how consumers evaluate and respond towards them. Firms must try hard to satisfy consumers because this is such a competitive arena. Consumers want to exercise choice in favour of firms that provide pleasant atmospheres.

Hence, when an environment such as a retail store or shopping mall is considered pleasurable, consumers will assign an overall assessment or ranking based on

alternatives drawn from memory. Ranked attributes encapsulated within a survey design more than often form the basis for these evaluations, and rankings will vary according to the nature and emphasis in the setting. In illustration, as management goals vary with the strategic messages so may the emphasis: settings may thus demonstrate purpose, trends, quality and expertise in specific types of undertakings. In psychological terms, consumers' emotional responses (pleasure) and impulse purchasing can increase in a store with a pleasant atmosphere compared to an unpleasant one (Ang and Leong, 1997; Spies *et al.*, 1997). Environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell (1974) tied this emotional response theoretically to the *information rate* or affective stimulation. It is evident from the marketing and psychology literature that a degree of mental abstraction is applied when people recall images of environments (e.g. Boulding, 1956).

The presumption is that people respond emotionally to environmental stimuli, and that marketing environments provide a certain level or rate of information (Russell and Snodgrass, 1991). This *rate* adds to the complexity of the environment as it compounds the level of information to be processed. Increases in information such as aroma (e.g. Chebat and Michon, 2003; Spangeberg *et al.*, 1996), music (e.g. Dubé and Morin, 2001; Herrington and Capella, 1996; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001) and video screen media (e.g. Clarke, 2003; Thomke, 2003) are generally related to increased emotional response, which in turn can moderate the desire to remain (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Hence, the rate at which the surrounding and immediate environment stimulates positive behaviours (or information rate) is a function of the physical and social stimuli. These multifarious cues affect the emotional states of individuals, which in turn influence their behaviour and in pleasurable atmospheres enhances shoppers' moods (e.g. Sherman and Smith, 1987; Spies *et al.*, 1997). The atmospheres of marketing environments such as shops (Dubé and Morin, 2001), malls (e.g. Chebat and Michon, 2003), banks (e.g. Thomke, 2003) and restaurants (e.g. Booms and Bitner, 1982) can be designed to function in a manner that leads to positive emotions, increased consumption and satisfied consumers. For example, Thomke's (2003) research suggests that in retail banking distinct improvements in customer perceptions are evident from the use of video screen media in service settings. A system such as this has a social as well as commercial benefit. Appropriate informative and entertainment content improves the customer experience and perceived atmosphere. Banks and other marketers want customers to feel more empowered as this leads to more business in a competitive arena.

Most work on the effectiveness of marketing environments has sought to demonstrate the degree to which marketing environments are a substantial and quantifiable component of image and consumer purchasing behaviours (see shopping mall performance: Dennis *et al.*, 2002; share of household spending: Hildebrandt, 1998; and store loyalty: Sirgy and Cocksun, 1989). Firms use a variety of qualitative and quantitative research techniques to evaluate the effects of environments and thus improve consumer information and satisfaction (Wright and Crimp, 2000). Qualitative techniques are particularly relevant here as consumers often have free rein of what they want to say and firms frequently act on what they say, thus empowering consumers. For instance, consumer narratives are particularly rich in terms of specifications about personal buying histories. A qualitative orientation permits researchers to gain richer insights into both the social interactions that may occur and, perhaps more importantly, the dynamic interpersonal processes that may help to shape

the type and level of information content (*vis-à-vis* information rate). A qualitative approach is likely to reveal the contextual and social dimensions of the person-environment interaction.

Consumer research

Firms often carry out consumer studies. For example, the UK and international supermarket group, Tesco continually evaluates the atmosphere and information provisions of stores e.g. evaluating the effectiveness of video screen media. As a direct result of qualitative primary research, the firm has adopted video screen media in its malls across the UK, improving their competitive position by providing satisfaction and empowerment for millions of consumers. Tesco's slogan "From mouse to house" indicates its view of the growing importance of the internet as an additional sales channel for home purchase and deliveries. By taking advantage of the Internet it has established itself as a supplier of Broadband and a host of services and products that consumers can buy from Tesco (www.Tesco.com accessed Feb 2006).

There is evidence of the strategic importance of providing aesthetic enhancements for consumers during their shopping experiences, supporting previous researches (Booms and Bitner, 1981; and Zeithaml et al. (1985) about consumer desire to search out tangible clues to aid service evaluation (Shostack, 1977). Where stimuli generate a pleasant atmosphere with relevant information, this is likely to increase feelings of enjoyment and empowerment. Relevant information includes price positioning, brand name, country of origin, pack, service and atmosphere or ambience (if a restaurant) and marketing communications (Wright et al, 2001).

The key factor is the degree to which consumers respond to such stimuli put in their path by firms. Given the theoretical assumptions drawn from the work of Boulding (1956) who notes that the human mental abstraction process operates to alleviate complexity, the rate of information (Russell and Snodgrass, 1991) positively increases emotional responses of consumers and subsequently reinforces the desire to remain in the setting (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), to explore and seek out the various broadcasts, and related images, in other parts of the centre. The power of visual techniques to bolster pleasure, arousal and even spending has been recognised by firms and increasingly implemented over recent decades (see: Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Spies *et al.*, 1997).

Firms know that they need to sustain the value of information content with regular and timely updates in order to keep the interest of consumers. Knowing that consumers make choices and feel empowered in doing so, firms need to remind them, e.g. with guidance on shopping hours, the layout and information to facilitate car parking and customer services, potentially provided by information on video screen media.

Researchers have drawn attention to the importance of the setting *vis-à-vis* indicators of quality and purpose, and the value consumers place on marketing environments as a means of ranking quality and/or expectations (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1981; Upah and Foulton, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; and Baker *et al.*, 1994). Increasingly, fuelled by growing prosperity and availability of credit, European consumers seek ways of enhancing their buying situations in order to make more pleasurable what otherwise could be an unexciting chore.

In the case of advertising messages, it is recognised that a greater impact is likely where stimuli are available to consumers for longer time periods. This presumes a behavioural reinforcement approach (Foxall and Greenley, 2000) and that the higher levels of information processed leads to the retention of messages in subjects' learning histories. For example, according to Newman and Foxall (2003), retail environments need to be fine-tuned and constantly re-evaluated and altered to follow the pattern of customer expectations, and (quality) marketing orientation.

The future and implications for management

We know from the literature that the degree to which consumers are prepared to, and actually do spend time in buying locations such as malls, stores, restaurants and banks is a function of their attractiveness. Consumers increasingly want to patronise the 'one-stop shop' with added services. Banks, for example, are increasingly expected to be available twenty four hours and seven days a week through the year, to be accessible *via* a range of channels (e.g. high street branch, ATM, Internet or telephone), not just to deposit and withdraw money, but for a range of services including paying bills etc. The perceived attractiveness of such retail centres has been explained in the discussion as linked empirically to a range of image related attributes and pull factors.

Given the competitive nature of marketing environments, it is clear that successful firms need cutting edge marketing approaches. A successful strategy will necessitate frequent realignments to a range of tangible as well as intangible factors, such as pleasing atmosphere, to stay in line with and anticipate customer wants and expectations. It is the intangible areas that often make the best impressions and where firms have the opportunities to increase consumers' positive emotions and empowerment.

Improvements in the information content of 'broadcast' media, e.g. increased number of TV channels, podcasting, 'press red', the Internet and RSS are leading to 21st century consumers being far more discerning about the stimulants that drive their behaviours. Studies have demonstrated that atmospheric stimuli can act to increase positive emotion, atmosphere and consumer empowerment. This in turn leads to consumers spending more time and money in the marketing environment, improving firms' performances in the competitive business arena. The need to encourage consumers to remain in a marketing environment is secondary only to the task of attracting them there in the first instance. It is therefore our contention that the degree to which dwell time converts to spend may also be determined by the pleasantness or attractiveness of the shopping environment.

Finally, this paper has explored the conceptual development of consumer empowerment and the links between mood inducing atmospheric stimuli and management efforts to enhance market environments. These, we note, have helped consumer empowerment. Organisations aim to attract consumers by being pleasant to them and by providing cues and stimuli wanted by people. When consumers enjoy the experience of being in their shopping, banking or other service and internet environments and are also presented with timely, interesting and relevant information, they are likely to stay longer and spend more. We contend that this process of organisations improving their marketing activities is not exploiting consumers but, on the contrary, empowering them by providing them with what they want.

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