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What Women Want in a Relationship (with Retail Salespeople)

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Abstract
The purpose of our study was to examine what women shoppers seek in establishing relationships with sales associates and stores. Based on 70+ personal interviews in 4 countries, we found that women seek a variety of relationship types. It is incumbent upon the retailer and sales associates to assess each customer and determine the level and type of interaction each customer is seeking. “One size does not fit all” when it comes to forging relationships with customers.

Keywords
Customer Relationships, Retailing, Staff Training, Customer Loyalty
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Introduction

Competition for market share is fierce in today’s over-stored retail marketplace. Volumes have been written about establishing a “relationship” with customers as a way to gain competitive advantage, yet most of the discussion focuses on frequency or reward programs rather than on the quality of interaction between customers and salespeople (Landry, Arnold & Arndt (2005). There is no doubt that the role of sales associate has changed significantly with the introduction of new technology. Yet the focus on customer relationship management has distracted some attention for the need for relationships to occur in store. For a relationship to exist, human interaction must be involved on some level. Further, one must recognize that relationships are reciprocal, adaptive, and voluntary. Both parties must have some basic understanding of one another’s needs if a relationship is to work. For relationships to deepen, one must invest time and effort. While some retailers invest in “relationship marketing”, they may not be focusing on the interpersonal skills necessary to form a relationship with the customer and make it grow. Hu & Jasper’s (2006:29) quote neatly captures the critical nature of this relationship: “…the exchange between salesperson and customer—is the defining moment in a store’s existence.” Yet, it is not clear that we understand what the customer wants to happen in this exchange. The purpose of our paper is to examine what women shoppers seek in a relationship with a retailer (and its salespeople) and to present the findings of a qualitative study.

Spending Power and Economic Decision Making of Women

Our study focuses on women because of their tremendous spending power. Of the 111 million women over 18 in the US (U.S. Census Bureau 2, 2005), sixty percent are employed either full or part time. These women control decision-making in over 80 percent of consumer purchases. This equated to control over an estimated 366 billion dollars of retail expenditures in 2005 (Snapshot International 2005). Women’s spending power and economic decision-making influence means that retailers must pay close attention to their wants and needs.

Retailer’s investment in Retail Salespeople

Surprisingly, wholesale and retail trade spends less on training than any other industry, averaging only $179.59 per employee in 2004 vs. $1278.16 per employee in finance, insurance and real estate (Rhode, 2006). Yet, training can pay off in establishing a brand identity and assist employees in representing the retail brand (Brown, 2002). Companies spending an average of $900 per employee per year on training were 57 percent more profitable than those that spent one third as much (Cole-Gomolski, 1998). While some retailers make a major investment in sales training, many do not. An
informal survey of retail sales associates revealed “associates often exhibited annoying customer service behaviours such as either a lack or an overabundance of care.” (Nagle, 2002: 7). Pettijohn & Pettijohn (1994) examined the scope and deficiencies in retail sales training and found that only 22% of salespeople received extensive training. Further, retail sales training frequently lacked instruction in selling skills. Nagle (2002) observed that seldom do retailers provide training in both product knowledge and customer service. To build customer relationships, retail salespeople need to acquire both product knowledge and an ability to assess customer service requirements. Is the investment in training providing the right skills to understand customer interaction styles and what customers seek in a relationship? Do all customers want the same thing and if not, what differences exist among women customers? To best serve customer needs, we need to address these questions.

Review of literature

There is a variety of definitions for relationship, which are often contextual, such as exchange relationships (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds & Lee, 1996:223) or relationship marketing. We define the store to customer relationship as a temporary accord or alliance to meet the needs of the customer.

Only a few studies examined the nature of the relationship between sales associates and retail customers. This topic was approached in different ways, either by classifying sales service problems (Dotson & Patton, 1992) or identifying success factors in forging sales associate-customer relationships. Beatty et al (1996) examined the factors involved in building successful sales relationships. They interviewed sales associates, senior business managers, and conducted in store customer interviews and concluded that there are three factors that facilitated the development of long-term customer relationships. The first was a top management-customer orientation; the second was employee-customer orientation and the third was the patronage of relationship-motivated customers. The study did not examine nor reveal any diversity in the types of sales relationships that were sought by customers.

Interpersonal influences such as greetings and assistance were amongst a number of social cues from sales associates studied by Hu & Jasper (2006). Their study revealed that customers had a more favourable attitude towards merchandise and service quality when the sales associates provide social cues such as greetings and assistance with locating goods. This study provides useful input into the value of different responses by sales associates when interacting with customers, but once again the study does not reveal the diversity of relationships sought by different types of customers. Hence we sought to add to the knowledge of store to customer relationships by undertaking a study that focuses on ascertaining what it is that women want in the sales relationship in store.

Methods

We used a qualitative approach for our study and, between 2003-2006, conducted over 70 in depth face-to-face interviews in Australia, the UK, South Africa and the USA. We
posed several open-ended questions to women about whether they had relationships with retailers (and their salespeople) and what they sought such relationships. The 30-60 minute interviews were audio taped and transcribed. We coded the transcripts individually to identify underlying themes and collaborated to condense these themes.

**Findings**

We found that retail customers seek different types of relationships with sales associates. We defined a relationship as an accord or an alliance. For any relationship to survive it must be reciprocal, i.e. both parties need to derive a benefit from the alliance, regardless of the amount of time spent on the activity. All the relationship types that emerged from our analysis were reciprocal, even when that notion appears counterintuitive; as in the first finding that we call (with apologies to Greta Garbo) “I want to be alone”. Many women said to us that they wanted to spend their time in the store uninterrupted, apart from an initial greeting from the sales associate. They were seeking time out from their own schedules to browse and have some time alone to see what is new, fresh or interesting in store. This Lone Browser (Minahan and Beverland, 2005) wants a cordial, but distant, relationship with a sales associate that is built on respect and trust. As the following quote illustrates: “She said Oh hi, how you doing? And how’s your day going? And she was just really friendly. And I said... great ...doing great, well she goes is there anything specific that you are looking for? And I said no I’m just browsing, looking for fall clothes, she goes feel free to look around for as long as you want and if you need anything just let me know I am here to help you. Which I just love, I feel welcomed in a store like that but I don’t like a salesperson right at my side just looking over my shoulder to try to help me. I kind of like to be free to browse but if I have questions I like somebody fairly near by to be able to ask questions”

However, the Lone Browser does not want to be ignored, being greeted is very important, as is knowledge that the store staff will available when she needs help. “I don’t want someone following me around right on top of me, but I want to know that if I have a question I can find somebody without having to look too far to find them. It’s true though, it’s interesting when I think about that because even in stores that are a couple of my favourite stores that I would shop in, if I went in there and was completely ignored by everyone in there, I probably would leave.”

Far from wanting to be alone, we found that many women actively seek stores with associates who can provide her with the knowledge and expertise that she is seeking. High involvement purchases, from the latest electronic gadget to the selection of knitting patterns and yams, led one of the interviewees to be loyal to particular stores and to recommend them highly to others. The Expertise Seeker is an investment shopper and spends regularly, with quality and understanding of the product high on her agenda. So she seeks stores that have that provide expertise in their sales associates. This respondent calls them her “go to people”. Alternately she will actively reject the stores that do not have well trained staff.
You’re spending a lot of money, so I’m thinking that the people that work there should be able to tell me stuff. They don’t know nothing! I hate that. I don’t understand. I don’t understand that as a concept. Just think how much more stuff you can sell that the people would be happy with. They would have bought the right thing if they had somebody that understood the stuff. Now, on the flip side of it, I don’t have an Apple, but I have an I Pod, and they have these little Apple stores. Those people are well trained in the Apple stores, and that is a different experience. You know, they got the stuff sitting out, and you can play with it, and ask questions about it like at Williams Sonoma you know William Sonoma? I spend a lot of time in there, too. ... but that’s one of my little places that I usually go like once a week, and there is a gentleman in there, I love the fact that the person that’s the most knowledgeable person in the cook shop is a man, but he’s my go to person.

Seeking good product knowledge is very important to the Expertise Seeker. Whereas for others, the importance of building a relationship with sales staff involves the ability to negotiate the best arrangement and price possible. We spoke at length with a mature woman who saw it as very important that she build relationships with sales staff and their managers that allowed her to negotiate. She was committed to getting what she wanted, when she wanted it; the pay off for the store being that she spends lots of money on a regular basis. She said:“ I will tell her or him, “Now,... I really like this article, I really like this dress” or whatever it might happen to be, “but it’s way overpriced, and you’ll probably be putting it on sale. Would you like to check with the manager and see if he can do that now?” Termed the “Give and Take” shopper, the relationships built with these salespeople allow her to go into stores ahead of time to take advantage of good prices. For example, the week before Senior (discount) Day she will...“ go through the store, and I’ll say, “This I want for Senior Day, and this I want for Senior Day,” and then when Senior Day, when Wednesday comes, they just charge it to my charge card. ... And then the next Friday when I’m back in town, I go by and pick up my stuff”

Ms Grab and Go, coined by Minahan and Beverland (2005), describes a woman who is time poor or does not enjoy shopping. She wants to get in and out of the store as quickly as possible. Her relationships with the sales staff involves them recognizing her presence, helping her locate the goods and proceeding rapidly through the point of sale so she can finish the transaction and leave the store quickly.

“I shop by myself because I don’t like the waiting for people to look at things and I like to get in and out of a store without wasting time”.

This type of customer does shop and does spend; she just does not want to have to spend a great deal of time doing it. Hence her relationship with sales staff will be a long and loyal one if the sales staff can give her the prompt service she wants.

“The service the people that will come up to me and help me. I can tell them what I’m looking for, what I need, and they help me out, and I can get in and out as quickly as possible. I’ll always go back to a place like that, because I just, I can’t search for things”
Some women are attracted to shopping as a stress reliever, for social interaction, or to raise their spirits in difficult times. This customer is seeking Retail Therapy. “I think shopping can be therapeutic. It truly relaxes me when I am stressed out… I do like to shop when I am depressed; it just makes me feel better, if I buy a pair of shoes specially (I have a shoe fetish), and just some nylons or socks. It’s very relaxing to me.”

This type of customer will build relationships with store staff to provide her with social interaction. Although some women do want sales staff to form relationships with them, that relationship does not necessarily have to be with a particular individual. “I’ll definitely go back to the store, it’s not a relationship in that whether she’s there or not probably will not make a difference as to whether I’m going to shop there. That experience though was very positive and I’ll definitely go back hoping maybe the next salesperson is like that too. But it’s not to the point that the relationship is so that I decide my shopping because of that particular saleswoman.”

To summarize, there appears to be a continuum of relationship types that women seek with salespeople. At one end is the shopper who wants to be greeted and then left alone; at the other end, the Grab and Go shopper wants immediate and efficient attention from sales people and there are women who are seeking concentrated social interaction with the sales staff.

Conclusions and Recommendations
We conclude that “one size does not fit all” when building relationships between retail salespeople and customers. One common thread was that women want to be greeted and made to feel welcome, confirming Dotson & Patton (1992). Retailers should provide training that will allow salespeople to interpret body language and other non-verbal cues to recognize each type of customer. Recent work by Franke and Park (2006) indicated that sales performance was improved when sales associates used adaptive selling techniques. We see an opportunity to link adaptive techniques with the findings of our study to pinpoint what occurs when the needs of the customer are identified and responded to correctly. Some women will be very direct (e.g. Ms. Grab and Go): when you ask them if they want help, they will immediately say yes and tell you what they need. The needs of other types are more difficult to discern. For the “I want to be alone” customer, if she says she doesn’t want help, she means it. Just give her space to browse, but be attentive if she makes eye contact with you; if she does, then, she probably does want help. Sometimes the best service is simply learning to observe behaviour, listen carefully to what is being said and responding appropriately.

References


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