Store Atmosphere Effects on Customer Perceptions of the Retail Salesperson

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Previous studies have neglected the impact of a good salesperson when creating a pleasurable store experience for a customer, focusing their attention to store atmospherics. Yet with the shift to relationship-based selling, a retail salesperson can decide the fate of customer expenditure and future patronage behaviour. This paper explores how store atmospherics and retail salespeople interrelate with re-patronage intentions. Findings reveal that store atmosphere does not have a direct relationship with patronage intentions, but does influence customer’s perceptions of the retail salesperson. Satisfaction mediates the relationship between the retail salesperson and patronage intentions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Store atmospherics have been at the centre of numerous discussions recently as a means of creating a pleasurable consumption experience; engaging and luring customers, with hopes that they will increase their likelihood to purchase, revisit and recommend to others (Baron, Harris and Harris 2001; Kozinetz et al 2002; Schmitt 1999). Researchers have focused upon individual elements of the store, such as music, lighting and aroma and have found that they influence customer mood, satisfaction and patronage intentions. However, the role of the retail salesperson has been considerably ignored in the store atmospheric literature in determining how the two interrelate and work together to affect customer perceptions of the store.

At present, the focus on relationship selling has been studied mostly in more upscale stores where these types of relationships are typically expected. Sharma and Stafford (2000) suggest that customers have a higher need to affiliate with salespeople working in nicer retail environments or ‘prestige ambience environments’—which should lead to an increased level of credibility for the salesperson, and subsequently a higher likelihood to purchase (Sharma and Stafford 2000). However, the ‘prestige’ and ‘discount’ ambience stores have been hard to define in the literature, with most researchers testing atmospherics in isolation, and not at a holistic perspective (Turley and Milliman, 2000). Baker et al (2002) first tested multiple environmental cues within the design, social and ambience clusters of atmosphere, and were found to effect customer perceptions of quality and time, with subsequent effects on patronage behaviour, however the interaction between the store atmosphere, its expectations on retail salespeople and patronage intentions were not explored.

Reynolds and Beatty (1999) state that future research should examine other retail store environments where customer-salesperson relationships may exist to increase understanding in this area. Furthermore, customer service quality measures typically given when examining low sales interaction stores should be compiled in conjunction with relationship selling and other measures that influence the customer experience to understand if relationship selling is necessary in these other retail settings.

Furthermore, while consumers form expectations of what a retail salesperson should be like within a retail context, there can be a difference between expectations and the perception of the actual delivery. If the salesperson does not live up to the customers expectations, the perception of the actual encounter may be negatively confirmed, leaving the customer feeling dissatisfied (Oliver 1977). If a salesperson meets or exceeds customer’s expectation, the customer will be positively confirmed, leaving the customer satisfied, which could increase purchase intent, loyalty, or spreading word of mouth.

This research examined and tested the direct relationships that the retail salesperson and store atmospherics have on patronage intentions, and explored the effects of store atmospherics on expectations of the retail salesperson, and its subsequent effects on satisfaction and patronage intentions. A factorial experimental design with two merchandise categories, two store atmosphere levels, and three sales person interactions was implemented to test the above described relationships. The study used written hypothetical choice frame scenarios and a subsequent questionnaire to collect data from the respondents. Respondents were told that they needed to purchase an item from the particular category (depending on the scenario given) and were given a description of a store that they would be able to purchase the product from. The experimental group read a scenario that included the interaction with the retail salesperson as well as the store atmosphere, merchandise type scenario.

Univariate ANOVA confirmed a significant difference in patronage intentions when respondents received a high level retail salesperson compared to a low retail salesperson, showing support that a retail salesperson’s orientation has a direct relationship on patronage intentions. In contrast, there was no significant difference in patronage intentions between the high and low store atmospheric levels. It is noteworthy to mention however that there were distinct differences in patronage intention results dependent on what treatment the respondent was exposed to. If in the control group, respondents were more likely to give a higher rating to patronage intentions that the experimental group, who received a scenario with a retail salesperson interaction.

Store atmospherics did have a significant impact on customer expectations of the retail salesperson, but in behaviour only. A higher perceived store ambience resulted in higher expectations of a retail salesperson’s behaviour, but a higher store atmosphere did not result in higher expectations of a retail salesperson’s credibility. The findings from this study reconfirm the significance of the relationship between store atmospherics and the retail salesperson interaction upon re-patronage intentions. Store atmospherics manipulate customer’s expectations of the retail salesperson behaviour, subsequently affecting customer satisfaction if the retail salesperson does not match expectations. However, store atmospherics in isolation are not as powerful as first thought. This study has found the retail salesperson to be the dominant variable influencing customer behaviour. Future research will be directed into the exploration of characteristics of the salesperson and store atmospheres to determine the optimal blend for certain store environments.

REFERENCES


Oliver, R. L. (1977), Effect of Expectation and
