



## Factors Affecting Customer Behavior in Organized Retail Counters

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### ABSTRACT

*Customer behavior in retail stores usually deal with identification of customers and their buying behavior patterns. The aim of the research paper is to ascertain who buys where, what, when and how. In addition, such studies endeavour to learn about customer response to sales promotion devices.*

*The results of these studies are useful in the solution of an assortment of marketing problems.*

*These studies are gaining importance in marketing research. It is safe to predict that interest in them will increase greatly in the next decade. This paper summarizes the writer's experience with such studies in grocery stores. However, the principles and techniques discussed here are also applicable to other types of retail stores.*

*The "why" of customer behavior is a separate and very difficult subject; it is not treated here. Knowledge of customer behavior must precede any consideration of the reasons for the behavior.*

### KEYWORDS :

#### Introduction

The terms customer and consumer are not synonymous. A customer is a purchaser of a product or a service; a consumer is a user of a product or a service. The buying behavior of the customer is influenced by the needs and preferences of the consumers for whom the products are purchased. Here, however, we are primarily concerned with customers' buying behaviour rather than with consumer preferences.

The strict definition of customer as purchaser, valid as it may be, is sometimes impractical because it is not always simple to identify a purchaser in a store.

A husband and wife shopping together may represent two customers, or one customer and one bundle carrier, and it is not always possible to tell which is which. A boy accompanying his mother may influence decisions in selection and purchase of several items, even if the youngster has no purchasing power of his own. Therefore practically every person who enters a store is a potential purchaser and represents a unit in the store's customer traffic.

Identification of customers seeks to ascertain who the customers are. It is not sufficient to study buying behavior patterns without knowing whose buying behavior is involved. Hence it is necessary to identify the competition and origin of customers.

#### Customers

Customer includes many characteristics, such as sex, age group, color, economic and educational status, occupation, religion, nationality origin, and so on. Both consumption and buying behavior are affected by these characteristics; and the relative significance of each of these characteristics varies greatly, depending on the nature of the problem. The extent to which any one or all of these customer characteristics should be studied can be determined only on consideration of the purpose for which the data are to be used. In studying customer behavior in retail stores it is generally impractical or unnecessary to ascertain all of the customer characteristics enumerated here.

Where do a store's customers come from? What is the geographic distribution of their homes and how far do they travel to the store? The answers to these questions supply useful data on customer origin, which in the sense used here is a composition characteristic. Origin tells us whether the customer is a large-city apartment dweller, a suburbanite, a ruralise, a transient, and so on. The food buying behavior pattern of a customer who lives in a congested apartment area of a large city is markedly different from the rural customer who has a large vegetable garden and a home freezer.

#### Customer Buying Behavior

To buy is to purchase. To shop is to visit business establishments for inspection or purchase of goods. Therefore shopping is an element of customer behaviour in buying. A customer placing an order over the telephone is buying, not shopping. For this reason it may be desirable to standardize on the use of the term buying rather than shopping when the totality of customer behavior is under consideration.

Similarly a distinction should be made between buying habits and buying behaviour patterns. Habit is a tendency toward an action which by repetition has become spontaneous. A pattern is a design or type. Each customer has his or her own buying habits. Buying behaviour patterns represent the design of behavior of a large number of customers.

A run on stores to buy and hoard sugar, nylon stockings or toilet paper in response to a shortage scare or to proposed rationing is not a buying habit; it is a manifestation of the imperfections in our education, in our faith, and perhaps even in our frequently exalted way of life.

Customer buying habits or behaviour patterns are not permanently fixed, and certainly not sacred, even though some habits tenaciously resist change. Many factors are operating in combination to change customer food-buying behaviour patterns. Among these are the automobile, the super market and self-service, the progress in the development and merchandising of frozen foods, prepared flour mixes, brown-and-serve baked goods and concentrated fresh milk; the increasing availability of suitable facilities in the customer's home for preserving these and other highly perishable raw and prepared foods; and the public's receptive disposition to easier and less time-consuming ways of living. Similar and perhaps even more pronounced changes are affecting customer buying behavior patterns of non-food commodities.

Customer buying behavior patterns can be grouped in relation to:

**Place of Purchase:** In general, customers divide their purchases among a number of stores. They shop in more than one department store and in many specialty stores. Even in buying food there is a division of purchases.

Where customers have the choice of purchasing the same goods in a number of stores, their patronage loyalty to any one store is by no means permanent.

Witness the grand opening of a new super market! Many of the customers who flock to the opening are abandoning old patronage loyalties. Hence, length of patronage also deserves study.

Studies of customer buying behaviour patterns with respect to place of

purchase are useful in selecting store locations, in choosing distributors for a product, and in merchandising.

**Items Purchased:** Every customer purchase and every store sale consists of a transfer of one or more specific commodities. No one customer purchases all the different items for sale in a store. Over a period of time a customer will purchase a substantial selection of the total items available in the store, but that selection will vary somewhat with each customer. Therefore, in studying customer buying behaviour patterns it is necessary to ascertain (a) what items and (b) how much of each item customers purchase.

Rarely does a customer purchase a single potato or a single carrot. On the other hand, very seldom does a customer purchase more than one watermelon at a time. The amount of each item purchased depends on many factors, of which the following are probably the most important: number of consumers for whom the item is intended; perishability of the item; storage requirements and facilities available; purchasing power and ready cash; unit of sale; and price.

The introduction of new products and changes in dietary habits also affect the customer's choice of items and the amount purchased. As previously pointed out, in so far as the customer is the purchasing agent for a family or a number of consumers, the purchases reflect the characteristics of all the consumers involved.

From the distributor's, manufacturer's and producer's point of view it is essential to study what items and how much of each the customer buys by brand or quality, by size or weight, by price, by type of container, and by season.

**Time and Frequency of Purchase:** Store operations must be geared to mesh with the customers' time of purchase pattern. Store buyers and merchandisers must keep on schedule with it. Merchandise must be available in the store in adequate supply if maximum sales are to be achieved.

Attempts by retailers to modify customer time of purchase behavior patterns, with the view of improving service to customers or raising efficiency of operation, have by no means been entirely successful. The long lines of customers waiting impatiently to be checked out in super markets during peak periods in contrast to the buying inactivity at other times illustrate a continuing troublesome store operations problem created by the customers' time of purchase pattern.

An automobile which in American life has become indispensable to the pursuit of happiness is turned in for a new model every few years. On the other hand, the addicted pleasures of cigarettes go up in smoke so rapidly that the frequency of purchase is generally a daily performance and, allegedly, men will walk a mile for their favorite brand.

Frequency of purchase also varies among customers. Some shop in food stores daily, others only once a week. The size of the total purchase, the number of items and the quantity of each item bought all vary with frequency of purchase. The more frequently a customer visits a store, the more is that customer exposed to the impact of sales promotional devices used in the store.

**Method of Purchase:** Whether a customer buys on a cash and carry or on a charge and delivery basis, whether a customer shops alone or is accompanied by someone else, and whether a customer walks or rides to the store are some of the elements in method of purchase.

The importance of providing adequate parking facilities to accommodate the customer who shops or who would like to shop by automobile needs no elaboration. Even department stores are building branch units to meet, among other things, the parking problem.

Size and frequency of purchase in grocery stores are definitely affected by the mode of travel to make the purchase.

Couples shopping in super markets buy more per transaction than does a woman or man shopping alone. The same applies in other type stores. Many a woman will invite her husband to help her select a purchase; the husband influences the choice and frequently approves the acquisition of a more expensive item.

**Response to Sales Promotion Devices:** Those who have goods to sell use many devices to induce consumption and to promote purchase of these goods. The sales promotional devices used in stores can be grouped under the following headings:

**Displays** In so far as possible or practical, consumer goods are packaged to create eye appeal when put on display.

Thus the shape, size, label and packaging material of the product all play their part in sales promotion. The manner in which an item is arranged on a shelf or table, in a display case or window, the space and position given to it, and the type of point of sale promotional material (posters, signs, etc.) used for reinforcement are also influencing factors.

**Pricing** Regular and bargain prices, combination deals, coupons, prizes, contests, and unit pricing where the price quoted is for two or more units of an item are all pricing devices to promote sales.

**Demonstrations** This device aims to influence customer purchases by getting them to sample a product or to learn about the uses or other merits of the product.

**Sales Talks** Whether expressed orally or in writing, in advertisements or by a sales clerk, the aim of all sales needs no explanation. Self-service merchandising has somewhat shaken the retailer's faith in the efficacy of the store sales clerk. Yet, the magic of a winning personality, a well-turned phrase, and even a friendly smile of an attractive blonde are still potent attributes or devices for causing cash registers to ring.

Study of customer behavior in response to sales promotion devices in retail stores deserves a great deal more attention than has been given to it thus far. Much energy and money is spent on sales promotional devices without factual knowledge of what these really accomplish. In this terra incognita every merchandiser remains at liberty to indulge in his personal pet beliefs, prejudices, and hunches.

In recent years considerable attention has been focused on impulse buying which presumably was not planned by the customer before entering a store, but which resulted from a stimulus created by a sales promotional device in the store. The surveys on impulse buying in food stores which have come to my attention are too few (and these suffer from too many defects in research methodology) to be more than merely suggestive, preliminary introductions to this subject. This, however, does not hamper the courage, of the eager users of these published data on impulse buying in their advertising and sales talks. Perhaps it is another manifestation of "where to know little is to dare easily.

#### **Research Techniques**

The marketing research techniques used in studying customer behavior in retail stores are:

#### **Analysis of Records**

In a well-run business records are kept on many operating and merchandising results, but few businesses and this applies even to the most progressive come anywhere near making maximum use of these records. Many a sales manager might be inspired with the by products which a skilled analyst could distil from these records.

#### **Observation**

The sex, color and age grouping of a customer can be easily observed either as the customer enters, leaves, or shops in the store. By observation it is also possible to learn what a specific customer does in the store. A very wide range of customer activities are observable without the customer knowing that such observations are being made. This is all to the good, as nothing should be done to interfere with "normal" customer behavior.

In some studies it is necessary to follow the customer in the store in order to observe various activities, but this is generally a troublesome and costly procedure.

Unless the investigator has had extensive experience with such customer observation studies in stores, it is necessary to formulate procedures carefully, to pre-test them, and to make sure that the observers are thoroughly trained for the work.

Such records should be made in code whenever possible. The recording can be done in a notebook, on a suitable form, or on a specially designed mark sense card. The data are processed manually or mechanically.

### Interviewing

Some information on customer characteristics and buying behavior is most readily obtainable by interviewing customers in the store. Questions on mode of travel to the store, frequency of visits and length of patronage are easily asked and readily answered. Many other similar direct and simple questions can be handled successfully in store interviews.

The best time to interrogate store customers is at the conclusion of the purchase. Such interviews consume very little time and are inexpensive. Not to spoil a good thing, however, one should avoid asking too many questions at one time.

On occasion it is desirable to follow up a store interview with another interview in the customer's home, with or without disclosing for whom the information is being obtained.

Studies of impulse buying depend on customer interviewing in the store, supplemented by observation. The customer is interviewed on entering the store and again after the completion of the purchase.

The investigator ascertains whether the customer has a written shopping list or a mental list. The items enumerated on such lists are recorded. On completion of the purchase, the items purchased are checked against the listed items. Omissions, substitutions and additions are noted.

The trouble with this technique is that (i) it depends on spontaneous recall which at best is incomplete and (2) it is unable to differentiate between (a) impulse, (b) postponement of decision, and (c) studied decision at the point of purchase.

The housewife who has no shopping list (written or mental) may still be deliberate in the choice of the items which she does purchase. A more satisfactory technique remains to be devised for the study of impulse buying.

Stores offer a unique laboratory for conducting controlled experiments to ascertain the behavior and response of customers to products, methods and devices. From the facts discovered by such small scale

experiments it is possible to reach broad conclusions.

In controlled experimentation two (or more) groups of comparable stores are selected. One of these groups is designated as the control group and the other as the test group. In the control group "business as usual" goes on. In the test changed condition is the element or variable to be tested. This element can be a product, a method, or a sales promotion device. The element is exposed to the store customers and it is anticipated that their buying behavior will be affected by it. Results are measured in terms of sales produced not on the basis of opinions. Differences in results between the test and control store groups are interpreted to be due to the one variable in the experiment.

Where a problem involves more than one element, it is necessary to select several comparable store groups and conduct a number of tests simultaneously, or to run, in succession, a series of experiments in two groups of stores, each experiment testing only one element.

The technique of controlled experimentation is very exacting. There can be no controlled experimentation without stringent controls. It is a complicated, slow and expensive technique, yet one which merits a prominent place in the marketing researcher's tool kit.

### Recommendation

- Product range must be increased in the store in order to attract more and more customers in the stores. The width as well as length of the varieties of the product must be substantially increased.
- Products must be made available all the times in the stores. Because customers have a tendency to perceive unavailability if not get their desired product even once in the stores.
- There is also a sudden need of addressing the issue of visual merchandising in the stores. As, it is one of the strongest tool for attracting, converting and retaining customers in the stores.

### Conclusion

The endeavour has been made here to show along what lines and with what techniques studies of customer behaviour can be made in retail stores. Possible uses of the results for the solution of marketing problems have been suggested or indicated. To spell out fully and systematically the many practical uses to which such studies can be put by producers, manufacturers and distributors would require a series of articles perhaps a book. This article is intended to stimulate those who can gain the most from such studies to take advantage of the opportunities for learning more about customer behavior in the market-place.