In-Store Communication to Improve the Customer Experience

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on in-store communication and investigates how retailers attempt to influence the customer shopping experience through the management of three store dimensions: physical, social and sensorial. This work deals with the in-store communication activities in the Italian pharmaceutical retailing. Results showed as the in-store communication helps retailer to create unique customer experiences. The management of the physical environment, the creation of trustfully relationships and the stimulation of the senses in the store can contribute to create an experience in consumers by affecting their cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to retailer.

Keywords: Experience, In-Store Communication, Relationships, Senses, Store Design

1. INTRODUCTION

Creating favourable prerequisites for attractive customer experiences by designing the service environment allows company to differentiate itself in a particular market.

The service environment is a resource that assists customers in the value co-creation process and enables an emotional connection (Hultén, 2011). Customer experience involves the customer’s cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to a retailer (Verhoef et al., 2009). The design and perception of tangible and intangible attributes of the context in which the service occurs is relevant to stimulate and trigger the pleasure and arousal effects (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2007).

Therefore, in-store communication assumes a key role in interacting with consumers and influencing their perceptions and behaviours. It becomes increasingly more strategic

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to instil feelings in customers (in a retailing context). The in-store communication activities concern all information and communication actions developed within the store that contribute to create a store atmosphere that evokes a positive emotional state of mind in consumers when they are visiting the store and a pleasant memory later (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2007 p. 209). For retailers, in-store communication is an empowering tool that affects the decisions customers make in the store (e.g., in-store promotions) and enhances the store atmosphere, displays, service and layout (Fam et al., 2011). For the customer, in-store communication facilitates his search process (Fam et al., 2011), influences his movements and behaviours in the store and allows the customer to become more skilled (Davies & Elliot, 2006).

The creation of a pleasant atmosphere and the offer of relevant information (e.g., price positioning, brand name, service and marketing communications) increases the customers’ feelings of enjoyment and empowerment and make them more aware and responsible for their consumption choices (Davies & Elliot, 2006). Consumers are also active and empowered thanks to the diffusion of self-service, which promotes brand competition for the consumers’ attention without the direct intervention of a sales assistant. Self-service requires a high level of customer activity (Bitner, 1992) and allows freedom and control over the shopping process and pre-purchase product evaluations. Customers can touch and smell products and examine the texture, weight and packaging of products without time limitations before committing to purchases.

Self-service has also been extended to products traditionally sold through channels and manners that are strongly anchored in the interpersonal relationships of trust between customer and seller.

In Italy, self-service has recently interested a critical business, the pharmaceutical business, which has been concerned by the deep changes resulting from government deregulation (July 2006). The so-called Bersani decree (legislative decree July 4, 2006, no. 233, law no. 248/2006), was a real breakthrough in drug distribution by providing for the liberalisation of drug sales. The main change it produced consisted of extending commercial distribution patterns to non-prescription drugs: over the counter (OTC) and without medical prescription drugs (WMP). Before this conceptual and marketing revolution occurred, customers could only buy drugs in the pharmacies. Since the end of 2006 these products are now available as well inside distribution and para-pharmaceutical shops that have sprouted up inside supermarkets and hypermarkets.

A literature review revealed that although the interest from academics and practitioners concerning the topic of in-store communication is strong, there are few empirical studies and little research about the subject. Moreover, empirical research of the pharmaceutical context is lacking.

This work deals with the in-store communication activities (Fam et al., 2011; Hultén, 2011; Hamrouni & Touzi, 2011) in the Italian pharmaceutical retailing after the deregulation. Specifically, according to the retailer’s perspective the work aims to highlight: i) how retailers manage store dimensions to influence the customer store experience (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Russo Spena et al., 2012; Castaldo & Mauri, 2008) and ii) the similarity/dissimilarity of in-store communication activities developed by these different players inside their point of sales.

2. BACKGROUND

Recently, the marketing literature has been enriched by many contributions that have highlighted how the point of sale is a space in which the preferences and purchasing decisions of the consumer emerge (Bitner, 1992; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982) and stressed that the consumer is more sensitive to the in-store communication activities performed by the distributors and firms.
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