Chapter 6

Adoption of Emerging In–Store Technology Interfaces for the Apparel Retail Employee

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ABSTRACT

Technology use in apparel retail stores is on the rise and changing the way that employees work and customers shop. In spite of increased use, advanced technology deployed within apparel retail stores has yet to match the rapid pace of growth for technologies adopted by apparel consumers enabled by mobile devices and sophisticated digital applications. Apparel retail employees are the first line of contact for customers and are often engaged with them at several points in the service interaction, including assisting with the initial selection of apparel based on customers’ desired product features, the try-on of clothing, and unique in-store services like personal shopping. In this chapter, the authors examine employee usage intent for technologies supportive of these various points of service interaction. The likelihood of employee usage of technology as well as employee characteristics that influenced the extent of technology adoption were also measured.

INTRODUCTION

With increased use of personal mobile technology by consumers, such as smart phones and tablet computers, services traditionally provided by store employees have become available outside the retail store to shoppers via web-based digital formats. For example, the RedLaser software application enables smart phones to read barcodes for price checking items; and, another application, MySizeFinder, matches customer measurements with clothing from different brands in its database. As consumers take advantage of these self-service technologies as part of their shopping
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experience, store employees could benefit from access to advanced digital tools beyond point-of-sale (POS) technologies in order to increase work effectiveness. In fact, Kilcourse and Rosenblum (2009) have observed that:

Because of the fundamental power shift to the consumer in the past decade, retailers have had to rethink their most valuable assets: their people and their stores. When a customer potentially knows more about products and prices than the store employee does, the retailer needs to excel at value-adding services that draw the consumer to the store…. And retailers need to analyze not only what sells, but what doesn’t. Their best chance of capturing that information is by engaging in a digital dialogue with the consumer as she browses the store. (p. 20)

The Occupational Information Network (2011) listed the current tools and technologies associated with work done by retail salespersons; these include barcode scanners, calculators, computerized cash registers, credit card readers, and software—each supporting accounting, human resources, and point of sale functions. Such technologies are capable of supporting traditional service interactions with customers, but they do not enable the “digital dialogue” proposed by Kilcourse and Rosenblum (2009), nor the more innovative design and customization activities that also interest apparel consumers. These activities include: designing apparel within the store with the help of an employee (Lee, Kunz, Fiore, & Campbell, 2002); the integrated use of virtual communication, body scanning, and databases for apparel customization (Wood, 2002); and the creation of digital product information (Fiore, 2008). According to Pollack, Maxwell, and Feigan Dugal (2007), the use of technology for customization and new shopping experiences was predicted to increase and become more pervasive by the year 2015, enabled by technologies like body scanning, social networking, interactive digital media, and virtual try-on. This same report predicted that retailers would have to meet the demands of their digital generation consumers who seek to create their own products using technological tools. These tools are presently available but have not yet been widely adopted by apparel retailers as an essential part of their store operations. In this chapter, we examined existing advanced technologies that have been used by apparel retailers to explore how the technologies may provide unique service functions for consumers and some non-traditional job roles for apparel retail employees.

BACKGROUND

The Nature of Retail Work

Service

As the first contacts with retail customers, store employees play an important role in customer service, but need to be engaged and interested. This research explored how apparel retail employees reacted to three emerging technologies – body scanner, product configurator and social networking. It analyzed whether these technologies offered a strategic opportunity to support employees in their work as service providers. Problems with store service were the main causes of customer dissatisfaction in a 2007 study by the Wharton Business School and included such customer complaints as not being able to find anyone for help, insensitivity to long lines, feeling as if one was intruding on a sales associate’s time or conversation and lack of politeness. Hochschild (1983) referred to service jobs as emotional labor, implying the requirement of service workers to not only perform some physical tasks but also possess the ability to adjust their attitudes and personalities for the purposes of interacting with customers. Albrecht and Zenke (2002) offered some insight into why good service is such an issue in retail by pointing out that many service