The Use of Mobile Applications in Shopping: A Focus on Customer Experience

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper focuses on the use of mobile applications in shopping from the customer activation point of view. Empirical survey data was collected from 23 mobile shopping application users, and the major findings indicate that mobile applications present a modern and flexible channel for supporting and intensifying customer participation. However, in order to guarantee a long-term customer relationship, the application must be integrated with the service development and refinement activities of a service company. It is also essential that applications have a high technological quality and create a long-term relationship between the customer and the company based on a cumulative learning process. In addition, the motivation to upload the application is strongly based on the perceived benefits of using the application. Therefore, it seems beneficial to develop mobile applications in conjunction with customers. In all, more research is needed, ideally involving close co-operation between practitioners and academic researchers.

KEYWORDS

Customer Activation, Customer Involvement, Mobile Applications, Shopping

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this exploratory paper is to focus on mobile applications in shopping from the customer participation point of view. User experiences of mobile applications are extremely important as positive experiences are an imperative for any increase in customer participation. Simultaneously, the topic of customer activation generates great interest, and subsequently various authors have stated the lack of sufficient up-to-date research in the area (see Nysveen & Pedersen, 2014; Brodie et al., 2011; Doorn et al., 2010). Ilie et al. (2009, p. 22) have introduced the term “customer engagement,” and argue that this consists of customer involvement, customer commitment, and customer participation. Furthermore, they see customer involvement and customer commitment as attitudinal dimensions, whereas customer participation is viewed as a behavioral dimension. In this study, however, customer
participation covers both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions and, consequently, is seen to be an outcome of customer involvement, customer activation, and customer commitment. Therefore, the term customer participation is used throughout the study and it integrates company activities supporting the participation and customer activities.

Consumers use smartphones and mobile devices in all areas of life, including shopping. They use mobile devices to browse and shop more than ever, and the overall growth rate of mobile commerce is estimated to be much higher than that of overall retail revenues (see Wang, Malthouse, & Krishnamurthi, 2015). Despite mobile shopping having become increasingly prevalent amongst consumers, few academic research projects have focused on mobile shopping and the implications for customer behavior, and on the strategy formulation (ibid, p. 222).

The focus of this paper is pragmatic, as customer participation is not viewed only as an on-the-spot activity. One of the biggest advantages of mobile technology is that the use of applications is not dependent on time or place. In other words, the rapid technological development has drastically changed the entire setting, and customers may be activated before, during, or after the actual service encounter.

According to many authors, service company customers may be characterized as co-producers or partial employees of the company. The emerging “service-dominant” logic challenges the traditional view of buyers as passive consumers (Xie, Bagozzi, & Troye, 2008). In other words, customers do have an active role in the co-creation of value, and that co-creation captures participation as an essential part of the service offering (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 8; Schneider & Bowen, 1995; Greenwood & Lachman, 1996; Ackroyd, 1996). In the case of mobile shopping, co-producing is quite natural due to the nature of the service. All activities and interactions carried out by the customers and other actors may result in memorable experiences. Edvardsson and Tronvoll (2013) use the term “experience drivers” to describe these activities and interactions.

The rapid development of the customer/client and service provider view draws on the fact that the traditional approaches to customer relationships do not necessarily correspond with the prevailing operative marketing processes. New generations of clients are partaking in service production and delivery together with highly professional staff (Lachman, 2000, p. 617). When rapid technological development and the active use of mobile applications are added to the picture, we are dealing with a revolution in the companies’ marketing activities. This is not only a completely new challenge for any service company, but also a unique opportunity to gain additional competitive advantages (Grönroos, 2008, p. 301).

This paper is an attempt to increase our knowledge about customer behavior, experiences, and activation in the mobile shopping context, and by using that knowledge, to help us invent new operative procedures that support customer participation. The approach is rather pragmatic and the main focus is on the practical usability of the application. This paper is based on two principal research questions: 1) What are the user experiences from the use of DISE Shapply application and 2) How do these experiences support customer participation? The contribution of this paper should be positioned somewhere between theory development and implicative development of operational services management. Also, as a by-product, the used methodology’s suitability for such research is operationally tested. How well these findings can be generalized to other types of buying settings remains to be seen. However, one has to keep in mind that this study is based on a relatively limited sample of 23 consumers and a single mobile shopping application. Therefore, some caution is needed in generalizing the results, but – at the same time – the results may well function as a preliminary foundation for theory development.

This paper consists of six sections. After this introduction, a brief discussion is carried out about theories around customer participation. After that mobile applications in shopping are discussed in general and the methodology used in this study is presented. The most central findings are presented and at the end they are discussed together with conclusions and some managerial implications.
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