

The store of tomorrow – a symbiosis between the real and the virtual

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Abstract

At the end of the twentieth century new technologies have revolutionized the economic life but also the consumer behavior. Everything has been accelerated, leading to the development of a new relationship between customer and time. The customer in this new relationship wants to save time and spend it as he pleases, to be able to order anywhere, instantly and with ease. He doesn't want only products, but also complementary services which will make his life easier. He no longer wants to be passive, but instead to be actively involved in his commercial relationship. He wants to be listened to and to have access to a customized offer. To meet these new customer demands, retailers use multichannel direct marketing strategies, which combined with new technologies, will radically change the nature of the client-retailer interaction. Shops and the act of buying will become a symbiosis between the real and the virtual, online retailers will open showrooms while network operators will increasingly integrate the Internet into their strategy.

Keywords: customer behavior; commercial services; multichannel marketing strategies; retailers

JEL Classification: M31; L81

Meeting consumer demands and facilitating the purchasing process

In modern economy, the main variable on which the retailer relies to achieve success is customer satisfaction. Therefore, there is an increasing necessity to introduce a wide range of facilities that, along with the actual product that is subject to the act of buying, contribute to customer satisfaction.

Services help customize a sale point, a commercial network, a business activity because they represent the sum of all elements that make buying easier, more enjoyable and emphasize the aspects that make a certain product valuable. Services also support merchant prosperity. Without their continuous improvement, everything would crumble, regardless of investments,

technical infrastructure, staff etc. The consumer expects the merchants to provide him with more attractive and dynamic commercial services.

By closely following the technological development that contemporary society is witnessing, retailers together with their suppliers conduct many research studies aimed at enhancing distribution channels and discovering new ways to diversify and enrich the offer through a wide and varied range of services.

A study conducted in 2012 showed that the number of people who access the Internet using mobile phones or tablets to do their shopping or seek information on products and services is constantly growing. It also revealed that about half of respondents seek information on their mobile phones before arriving in store and over a third of them access the Internet for information even while in the store.

To meet consumer demands and facilitate the purchasing process, modern retailers have introduced a range of services such as:

- increasing availability for certain information regarding the company's products and services (for example the status of an ongoing delivery) by using email or text messages (SMS, MMS) and the Internet
- direct access to product information through QR codes (two-dimensional barcode that can be read by the camera of a mobile phone. It can contain different types of information including a web address; in this case reading the QR code connects the mobile to the corresponding web site.) placed on shelves
- direct access to virtual stores through QR codes strategically placed in subway stations, train stations, bus stations or even in supermarkets
- mobile applications that allow the customer to access the online store, to get information regarding customer loyalty plans, to save vouchers, to find the nearest stores on the map and to check the availability of certain products.

A service introduced 4-5 years ago on the Romanian market which has seen exponential growth is the introduction of pay points in shops. Its development was influenced on one hand by the efforts made by vendors towards network expansion and promotion and on the other hand by the increasing consumer confidence in this type of payment.

The offer for this kind of services evolved from basic ones such as prepaid recharge, payment of various utilities or money transfers to magazine subscriptions, discount coupons, buying music, games or software, vignettes or bus tickets.

Future shops will incorporate the advantages of the Internet

Research conducted by the American company e-Marketer highlighted the fact that there isn't currently a single sector in the world more dynamic than the online sector. According to the company's estimates, the fastest dynamics are recorded in Asia, where forecasts for online sales in China and Indonesia reach 65 and 71% this year. In Western Europe online market value will increase from \$ 291 billion to \$ 388 billion in 2016. In the US and Australia but also in Western European countries such as the UK online share is close to 10% of total sales of goods and services to end consumers. According to the estimates, in the following years online sales worldwide will reach 20% of the turnover. This will be achieved by introducing new technologies in shops.

Studies undertaken by European researchers on a great number of medium-sized and large retailers in Northern and Western Europe, emphasized that the difference between the two types of stores will depend heavily on the implementation of digital technology in their structure. It has also been highlighted that some European retailers, and particularly British ones, are interested in implementing advanced payment methods such as: contactless cards, multipurpose cards that can be used as debit, credit or prepaid cards, devices that can be attached to key chains or payments made via mobile phone. In the near future, 22% of retailers are expected to allow customers to automatically scan their products. Label systems based on radio frequency identification are likely to be introduced by 34% of retailers in order to facilitate the inventory process and also to decrease the effort of providing customized promotions.

Other studies focused on the design of future stores. According to them, the shops of major retailers will include large displays showing current discounts, big interactive screens with suggestions of related products, reviews from customers and indications regarding product placement and of course free Wi-Fi.

The way future stores will look was also the subject of many of the discussions at the EuroCIS 2013, the largest fair for retail technology that takes place in Germany. Thus it is

estimated that online retailers will start opening showrooms while network operators will further integrate the Internet into their strategy.

Dramatic changes in the field of mobile technology and tablets, the integration of the Internet, and social media were some of the topics of great interest for the suppliers and retailers participating at the fair. More and more companies rely on multichannel marketing strategies in order to satisfy their desire to better manage customer relationships and increase sales. Their number has increased significantly, almost doubling from year to year, one out of two companies considering the use of integrated marketing communication in the future.

Conclusion

The advance of technology and the diminishing of boundaries between TV, social media and mobile technology will enable tomorrow's operators to revolutionize ways of identifying, understanding and recognizing clients and prospects, radically changing the nature of communication with them.

The Internet will continue to have an important role in direct marketing, its use will not be limited to emailing or e-commerce but will extend to all new devices interconnected, providing unique and customized services to prospects and customers.

Whether we refer to major regional players or international chains of stores in the offline environment, retail companies will want to benefit from the online boom. Therefore these companies will develop a multi-channel distribution. Multichannel commerce will become the standard for retailers worldwide and will be the essential factor for companies to achieve success.

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