

## **METHODS OF SHOPPING AND COMPLAINING MAY CHANGE AS A RESULT OF TECHNOLOGY, BUT ONE THING REMAINS THE SAME: CONSUMER SATISFACTION REIGNS SUPREME**

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### **EDITORIAL**

Retailing and the examination of consumer satisfaction can be viewed from the perspective of (a) before the 21<sup>st</sup> century and (b) 2000 and beyond. Prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “the consumer was always right...even if the consumer was wrong.” Retailers were classified as brick and mortar, wholesale, direct marketing or catalog. Internet retailing was in its infancy stages; consumers as a whole were not necessarily comfortable with online shopping. Corporate success was measured by the number of SKUs sold. Consumer feedback was typically in the form of product returns; if a product wasn’t as promised, it was returned. Sometimes, although not often, consumers would enter the store and give verbal complements. More often than negative comments required consumers to physically call or enter the store. An angry consumer could be identified by the ram-rod straight posture and the fierce look on his/her face. Employees would run from disgruntled consumers and hide in the stockroom, pretending to do something “important”. Tempers could get out of control and surrounding customers would forget about shopping (and buying); instead they would watch the “show”. Once home, all who witnessed the upset consumer would retell the story embellishing it until it no longer resembled the truth. These messages are called word of mouth (WOM).

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology is changing retailing more than the industry

could have ever imagined. One of the most obvious ways technology influences retailing is the advent of Omni-Channel Retailing. Consumers have more shopping opportunities than ever before. Many large retailers have multiple channels including brick and mortar stores, online stores and outlets. In addition, strip malls, big box stores, discount stores, large enclosed malls, park-like outside shopping areas, boutiques and online retailers are all competing for their attention, loyalty and dollars. Each purchase requires consumers to make a series of decisions: (a) purchase at a brick and mortar or online, (b) purchase online but deliver in the store, (c) once a type of retailer – brick and mortar vs online – is selected, who to visit first. The decision strategy required by consumers can become complex and overwhelming (Machin, 2016).

Technology empowers retailers to become more competitive, strategic and assertive in delivering the merchandise and services desired by the target market. Consumers are able to view products online, comparison price shop using an iPad, purchase merchandise from across the world and have it shipped within five (5) business days, or identify which big box retailer has the exact 52 inch TV in stock and ready for delivery in time for Super Bowl Sunday.

Likewise, technology is used to enhance the method of communicating between the retailer and consumer, among consumers and between consumers and manufacturers. Technology simplifies and in

many ways encourages to consumers communicate with friends, retailers, vendors and even complete strangers about shopping experiences and purchases. Retailers' websites encourage consumers to provide feedback on purchases. Social media sites (e.g., Facebook) is used to spread information on the number of "likes" a company has on a particular product or service.

Employees are no longer hiding in stockrooms; stockrooms no longer exist in retail stores. Instead, employees are monitoring social media sites for consumer feedback. Technology provides consumers with a convenient tool for providing feedback to retailers. We share our thoughts and feelings without leaving the comfort of our car, home or office. Even better, no one sees our face. The anonymity is perfect, particularly if we are going to rant and rave about a company. Granted, many online sites have built in parameters whereby companies can selectively block particular messages. Messages that are posted might be seen by hundreds if not thousands of viewers. WOM feedback using technology is becoming increasingly valuable as data for companies. Companies are able to identify specific areas of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. From these statements, marketing and promotional messages can be identified that will be particularly relatable to the target market (Naylor, 2016).

Every year the Super Bowl features what marketers and consumers hope will be "the best" commercials of the year. Following the game, consumers at work, in coffee shops and on social media discuss the commercials that made them laugh, cry, and say "that was a waste of money". Some marketers believe that WOM, such as discussions of the Super Bowl commercial, is the result of a successful marketing campaign (e.g., Pruden & Vavra 2015). I think the WOM of any marketing campaign

means that it is memorable but not necessarily successful. To be successful, there must be an increase in sales and profits after the marketing campaign was revealed. Ah, but remember this is an editorial.

So you may wonder why bring up the Super Bowl when this edition of the *Journal* is about Omni Channel Retailing. After the excitement of the Super Bowl, many consumers will do what consumers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are expert at doing...get on an iPad, PC or cell phone and surf the Internet. With commercials fresh in their minds, the scrolling begins. Consumers may not go to the commercials, but sure enough, many will begin shopping.

The primary reason, and indeed benefit, companies conduct consumer research on consumer satisfaction is to identify methods of generating positive relationships and long term loyalty (Palmatier et al 2006). Relationships can be built and developed into long term loyalty, superior consumer satisfaction, product and service purchases and ultimately increased market share (Dahl & Peltier, 2015). In other words, consumer satisfaction and building relationships with the consumer have the potential for market dominance. For anyone who disagrees, think of the success of (a) Amazon, (b) Zappos and (c) Walmart.

Clint Eastwood starred in a fabulous movie called "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly". I have often thought of that phrase when reading consumer comments about a product or service. All companies strive to be in the "good" category. Based on the number of companies that go out of business or simply limp along, I suspect they can be classified as "bad" or "ugly" in a variety of categories (e.g., product category, service, delivery). Companies today actively encourage consumers to provide feedback on products and services. Indeed, companies want to hear about the good, the bad and the

ugly. If a product is being returned, they want to understand why the consumer doesn't want the product (e.g., fit, color, size). Data mining information is becoming critical for companies to better understand the target market. Likewise, obtaining feedback acts as a method of building a relationship with the consumer. It says "we care about you and your needs". The stronger a company is able to build a social connection with the consumer, the greater the probability the consumer will remain a long term consumer (Johnson & Ross, 2015).

Store and brand loyalty are often used in marketing campaigns as a method for decreasing consumer dissatisfaction with the decision strategy (Machin, 2016). For example, Zappos created the 365 day free return policy so consumers wouldn't worry about purchasing shoes, particularly if they didn't fit. Many online retailers realized that the shipping costs were the reason consumers stopped the purchasing process. Problem fixed...shipping free with purchase over a certain amount.

Perhaps more than any other type of company, online retailers are finding it necessary to be fully aware of differences in values among cultures (Blodgett, Bakir, Saklani, Bachheti & Bhaskar, 2015). Companies are required to understand what levels of service is expected, differences in terminology to use in marketing messages and how to accommodate dissatisfied customers. Remediating unfortunate situational factors in the United States may take a different route than that in the United Kingdom, Germany or Asia.

Within this issue of *The Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior* we offer the reader insight in the varied nature of Omni-Channel retailing. WOM once reigned supreme as one consumer told experiences to another customer. We learn in this issue that

consumer satisfaction and motivation for purchase are often obtained through online consumer reviews. It doesn't matter that the reviewer is known only by a pseudonym, what matters is that the consumer believes the review is honest and not driven by the company and/or marketer.

At the beginning of this editorial, I mentioned that at one time retailers professed that "the consumer is always right". Those in retailing know that the consumer isn't always right; nor is the retailer always right. Decisions can be flawed. Technology and Omni-Channel retailing have enabled companies to minimize the damage of inferior decisions. Consumer surveys, feedback, Facebook and other forms of social media provide companies with the ability to communicate with consumers. Companies are able to identify (a) why consumers shop, (b) why they leave products in an online shopping cart, (c) attributes required to build trust, and (d) attributes that encourage loyal patronage across retailing channels.

This special issue focusing on Omni-Channel retailing was proposed in 2017. At the time, the thought was to focus on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the various retail channel members. Two years in the retailing industry can be a significant amount of time. Two years in the technology industry is an eternity. Combine technology and retailing, the changes in the environment are fast, exciting and definitely revolutionary. Consumer satisfaction reigns supreme, similar to the retailing industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main difference is that retailers are able to obtain time sensitive information on consumers' attitudes, preferences and behaviors. Retailers are also able to directly and immediately respond to individual consumers as well as consumers globally. These changes make the industry more responsive, progressive and able to instill consumer satisfaction and loyalty. It is

an empowering time to be a consumer. Retailers who are diligent to technology, social media, and onmi-channel retailing have the ability to capture an increased market share. Regardless of the changing times, the consumer really does reign

supreme because he/she makes the purchasing decisions; retailers simply need to capture as much information as possible to make wise decisions.

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