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ACADEMIC PAPER

A qualitative
study

A qualitative study of micromarketing merchandising in the US apparel retail industry

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Abstract

Purpose – To examine the variables that influence micromarketing merchandising in the apparel industry in order to help new retailer understand the importance of micromarketing merchandising.

Design/methodology/approach – A model was developed showing the different variables that influenced micromarketing merchandising. General merchandising managers of 20 US-based apparel retail chains were interviewed using a questionnaire developed after analyzing the available literature. A qualitative method of data analysis was conducted and the model was revised based on the findings of the research.

Findings – A qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews indicated that assortment, demographics, pricing and customer loyalty were the primary variables that effected micromarketing merchandising in the apparel retail industry. The sub-variables in the study included lifestyle, ethnicity, store size and location, and customer service.

Research limitations/implications – The research was limited to US-based apparel retailers. Future research could be directed towards in-depth quantitative analysis of each variable influencing micromarketing merchandising.

Practical implications – The results of this study could be used by managers of retail chains to understand the various variables that need to be considered while micromarketing merchandising for their store. Based on the area the store is located in, the importance of each variable can be adjusted to best suit specific stores.

Originality/value – Understanding the importance of micromarketing merchandising can help new retailers study their consumers based on the important dimensions reported in this research and buy the right product for their target consumers.

Keywords Merchandising, Customer loyalty, Pricing, Demographics

Paper type Research paper

The American retail industry is growing at a rapid pace. Large retail chains have stores located in regions that not only differ in climatic conditions, but also in demographics of the population. Some of these stores are located in resort areas, college towns, downtown locations, or even suburban malls. The needs of the population in each of these locations could vary to a great degree, and it is important for a retailer to consider this variation when buying for different regions.



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In addition to changes in retailing, societies are becoming fragmented, and there is a large variation between the customers in one location compared to customers in another. According to US Census data, the minority population rose approximately 34 percent from 1990 to 2000, compared with a growth of 5.9 percent for the Caucasian population. Over the past decade, household income growth of African American (32.5 percent), Hispanic (24.3 percent), and Asian American (23.1 percent) homes far surpassed that of Caucasian households (14.2 percent). This growth translates into increased retail buying power, particularly apparel retail, since minority groups rate fashion as high priority (*Crossing Cultures*, 2002). Hence, retailers are finding that it is important to structure a particular store based on the needs of the local population. Micromarketing has evolved as a tool that retailers use to customize the product offerings in a store based on the taste of the local consumers.

Micromarketing merchandising is the buying of customized products using marketing mix elements at the store level, instead of buying the same products for every store in the chain. Micromarketing allows retail chain managers to take large operation advantages and yet be able to operate with the flexibility of small independent neighborhood stores. In short, it involves buying products based on the requirements of customers of a particular area (Montgomery, 1997). Micromarketing differs from target marketing. In target marketing, retailers aim to sell products that provide only for a certain target market, whereas in micromarketing merchandising, retailers make changes in the product offerings to meet the needs of diverse segments within the target market.

This paper studies various methods of micromarketing merchandising employed by buyers in numerous apparel retail chains. For example, some chains have a standard stock list that requires each store in a retail chain to carry the same merchandise stock, whereas other chains use the optional stock list approach which gives each of the stores flexibility to adjust its merchandise mix to local tastes. We examine the variables that influence micromarketing merchandising in the apparel industry. Moreover, we shed light on the impact of micromarketing merchandising on customer loyalty.

Review of literature

Previous studies in the area of micromarketing merchandising identified numerous variables influenced by micromarketing merchandising. Baumol and Ide (1962) attempted to show how a single merchandise factor – variety – influences sales, costs, and profits. The model developed in their study moved towards profit maximization for the firm, but failed to consider many of the merchandising factors that could be handled at the department level. Dalrymple (1966) attempted to develop a departmental decision model by considering variables like dollar profit, sales volume, square feet of space, average retail stock, initial markup percentage, and markdown in dollars. Dalrymple used a regression model and was limited by the predetermined variables of study. The approach of this study was more qualitative and open-ended, allowing the relevant variables to emerge through the in-depth interviews.

In the past, when competition was less intense, a store could target a wide range of customers. However, retailing trends indicate that it is becoming more important to target a specific group of customers and then provide the products appropriate to that

group's needs. Since demographic trends are becoming more diverse, it is important to determine the target customers' needs and satisfy them (Murray, 1998).

In addition, retailers are spending more time attempting to identify customer characteristics of different geographic locations. Some retailers have tried to cluster customers based on similarities then cater to their needs. These needs are determined by computer-generated maps and sales data in the different geographic areas. These data are then used to create micromarketing strategies for each unique cluster (*Progressive Grocer*, 1994).

A study conducted by Montgomery (1997) for creating micromarketing-pricing strategies using supermarket scanner data showed that 75 percent of all profits are made on the products sold at the everyday price. Currently, some retailers practice zone pricing which is a form of micromarketing. But, changing the prices of individual products (e.g. changing the prices of private labels in affluent neighborhoods where the market is not price sensitive) can result in higher profitability. Montgomery (1997) demonstrated that customizing prices at store level could increase profits at the chains by 20 percent.

Furthermore, studies that examine the effect of culture on retail prices indicate that geographic areas of the domestic market that have large ethnic or immigrant populations have unique cultural environments. These sub-cultural environments impact the marketing mix, including pricing strategies that are appropriate for the local population (Ackerman and Tellis, 2001).

Beninati's (1997) study on assortment management found that most retailers are effective at stocking a product in a store at the appropriate time. However, Beninati suggests that matching the appropriate product to the store is a much more difficult task. Often retailers find that supply exceeds the demand. The decision-making on the appropriate product assortment becomes quite complex when a buyer is considering several diverse geographic locations. Buyers located in the home office are most aware of the sales trends, seasonal fashions, and competitors' strategies; whereas, local store managers and sales staffs are more aware of the needs of their particular customers, their changing requirements, and local events.

Lee and Kunz (2001) conducted a study that showed the importance of assortment diversity in financial productivity. The optimal size of the assortment for customer satisfaction depends on the activities and lifestyle of the customer. The implication of this study is that managing product assortment at the individual store level may be more effective for profit maximization.

The purpose of micromarketing is to group stores into separate marketing units in order to satisfy the needs of a unique customer group. The logic behind this approach is that reaching the customer with the appropriate product would increase sales, loyalty, and ultimately in the long run, profitability of the store (Mathews, 1995). Markdowns that a store needs to do at the end of a season or for a slow moving product can influence the sales of the store. Understanding the customer's needs and wants could reduce unprofitable markdowns.

Retail stores are finding that to maintain their positions in the market they need to adapt to the changing needs of the customer. Kalish (1991) argues that those retail stores that meet the particular needs of their customers tend to have greater customer loyalty. Kalish also points out that customer profiles constantly change and retailers require strategies that build market share through customer loyalty. The results of his

study suggest that successful retailers will market not to the masses, but to individuals.

Integrating the literature above, several variables are identified that are important to micromarketing merchandising: product pricing (Montgomery, 1997), markdowns (Beninati, 1997), assortment management (Beninati, 1997), net retail sales (Mathews, 1995) and customer loyalty (Kalish, 1991). Based on previous literature, we developed a model that maps the relationships of these variables to micromarketing merchandising.

Methodology

This study, based on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1990; Corbin and Strauss, 1990), attempted to develop or generate a theory for micromarketing merchandising. Based on our literature review, we identified an a priori set of variables (Figure 1) that may influence micromarketing merchandising. However, we did not limit ourselves to these variables, and several new constructs and relationships emerged via data collection.

In-depth interviews, ranging between 15 and 30 minutes in length, were conducted with 20 general merchandising managers for the apparel division of various retail chains. Theoretical sampling was utilized for data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The following criteria were used to select the stores: volume of business (above \$20 million); number of stores and location of stores (in various geographic locations with different local populations or different climatic conditions); and type of store (either department store chains or family clothing store chains). Based on the above criteria the stores were selected from the list of Departmental Stores and Family Clothing Stores in *Sheldon's Retail Directory* (2002). We compiled an initial list of 50 stores and randomly selected 20 stores for data collection. An initial telephone call was made to the stores selected, and on their consent to participate in the study, an appointment was scheduled for an in-depth phone interview. The interview was tape-recorded and then transcribed.

Following Corbin and Strauss (1990), the transcribed data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. First, the researchers analyzed the text for general categories of information. Using the constant comparative method with each interview transcript, we attempted to saturate the categories and develop subcategories for the findings. When creating the categories, the variables under study were noted.

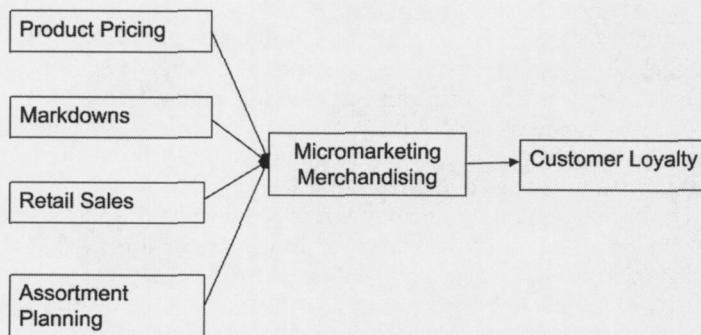


Figure 1.
Factors impacting
micromarketing
merchandising

Other variables, which have not been taken into consideration but occur frequently in association with micromarketing merchandising, were noted to add new dimensions to the theory. Moving to axial coding, we examined the relationships of the various categories as they relate to our central construct, micromarketing merchandising. The data were re-assembled, using a logic diagram, which centered on micromarketing merchandising and associated micromarketing merchandising with the variables that influence the phenomenon. Finally, we utilized selective coding to integrate the findings into a theory and tell a story closely related to the context of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Four main factors emerged as variables that relate to micromarketing merchandising: assortment, demographics, pricing, and customer loyalty.

Findings

After analyzing and interpreting the data, we developed a conceptual model to pictorially represent the theory of micromarketing merchandising (Figure 2). Unlike the flow model shown in Figure 1, which was based on previous research, Figure 2 purposely omits directional arrows. Many of the identified variables in the revised theory of micromarketing merchandising were intertwined, overlapping and contextually bound, making directionality between the constructs difficult to determine. Hence, we leave the testing of the directional relationships to future research.

Micromarketing merchandising is influenced by assortment, demographics, pricing and customer loyalty. Assortment, in relation to micromarketing merchandising, is influenced by lifestyle, ethnicity and store location and size. Demographics and pricing are both influenced by store location and size. Customer loyalty, in relation to micromarketing merchandising, is achieved through service and customer loyalty programs. We have discussed only the main variables in details, as they were the main areas of interest in data collection and the sub variables were identified during the interviews.

Assortment

Large retail chains usually have a single corporate office and manage the buying for all retail stores from that location. As a result, it becomes important for the buyers to differentiate across stores in order to supply each store with the best selling products.

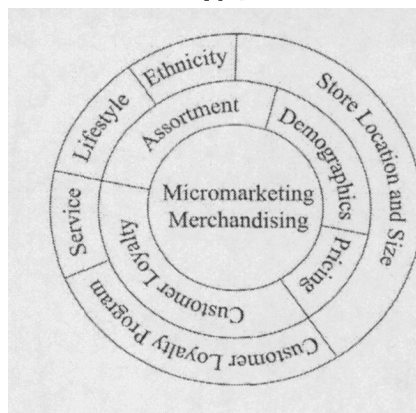


Figure 2.
Final model for factors
impacting micromarketing
merchandising

Most of the managers that we interviewed used one or more of the following techniques to determine the individual requirements of a store:

- (1) zoning or grouping of stores into segments;
- (2) checking daily sales figures;
- (3) relying on regional merchandisers;
- (4) interacting with store managers;
- (5) visiting stores; and
- (6) consulting with market researchers.

Assortment planning appeared to be one of the most important factors in micromarketing merchandising. In general, the assortment of products seemed to depend on the climatic conditions of the store location, store size, ethnicity and the lifestyle of the local consumer. All the retail chains that were a part of the study grouped their stores into zones to enable micromarketing merchandising. Though there were differences in the method which retail chains grouped their stores, the most common method of grouping was based on geographic location. The stores were grouped as northern stores or cold climate stores and southern stores or warm climate stores. Some of the groupings were also done based on the culture of the local population. Resort stores and Hispanic stores are some of the examples of grouping based on the local purchasing population. For example: "As we have so many stores in so many different areas, if we do not have grouping of stores we would be putting wrong merchandise in the stores and we would also probably be mistiming the products like putting sweaters in a store that does not require it at all. Our stores located in the resort areas get a large number of tourists and we need to have completely different kind of range of apparel to cater to their requirements. The choice of colors is much brighter and the prints bigger" (GMM4).

The example shows that to a large extent store sales depend on the assortment of apparel. All the store managers mentioned that they gain knowledge regarding the kind of assortment best suited for each store with experience. When a store is supplied with the wrong assortment, the products usually end up getting marked down. A good assortment in a store results in a satisfied customer and hence has the customers returning to the store.

Most of the managers that we interviewed indicated that their retail chains had a store manager who gave constant feedback regarding assortment planning to the corporate office. This helped the buyers paint a more detailed picture of the consumers in each unique location. Some companies use market researchers that formally obtain information about the demographics of the store location. As the demographics of a location do not remain constant, market researchers play an important role in keeping the information updated. This gives an idea about the composition of the target population and in turn helps the buyers decide the sizes, colors and styles that they need to buy to achieve better sales.

Climatic condition

Most of the managers interviewed indicated that their firms zone their stores based on weather, thus creating warm or cold stores. According to the kind of weather condition that the store has at any given time, deliveries are made based on what the store will

sell in that season. Often the different stores within a chain carry the same cold or warm weather clothes, but they differ at times because of varying weather conditions. Based on grouping of the stores, a cold weather store would carry long sleeve shirts and heavier outerwear, a warm weather store would carry a short sleeve shirt and lighter outerwear, whereas a tropical store would carry only a windbreaker as an outwear garment. This assortment would help satisfy the needs of individual stores. For example: "We make sure that in our Northern stores, we send winter clothes before we send them to our Southern stores. We have merchandising tiers where the merchandisers buy based on the climatic conditions of the store location. Due to the large quantity orders that we need to place in order to get better prices of products, we place the entire order together, but we make sure that the product reaches the store when the store really needs it. If we send warm clothes to our southern stores at the same time as we send them to the northern stores, we will only be collecting more products for markdown" (GMM18).

Store size

Many companies determine the size of the store that they open in any location based on the buying capacity of the consumers living in that area. Hence, the assortment is often influenced by the store size. If a store is larger in size, then it usually has the capacity to sell more and will carry a wider range of colors and styles. Due to increased degree of competition, the larger stores need to be stocked with more variety in order to retain their customers. Also, larger size stores tend to be located in cities with higher populations. Store size is also a primary factor in deciding the assortment of products to be stocked in the store. For example: "Most of our stores carry the same products. Our larger stores carry more variety in terms of more colors of the same style and more quantities. As the larger stores cater to a larger population we sell larger quantities. Also, the store size is bigger in metros where the competition is more intense, hence we need to provide a wider choice to our customers or they will move on to the next store" (GMM17).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity of the region plays an important role in what will sell in retail establishments. Some of the stores that were represented in our sample have a category of "Hispanic" stores in their store zoning, if the local population is largely Latin American. Understanding the ethnic preferences not only helps in deciding the assortment of colors and styles, but also the sizes of the garments that a store needs to carry. Though buying different sizes for each store location did seem to be a factor that would increase the store sales, very few stores actually have managed to successfully implement it.

Buyers have realized over a period of time that it is not possible to buy the same products for each store. With the influx of people of different nationalities, it is getting more important to study the ethnicity of the population as the choice of colors, designs and sizes varies to a large extent. For example: "We know that in certain areas of the country we sell more small sizes than large sizes and maybe those areas are highly concentrated with Hispanics. If the market has more Asians it will sell more petite clothes, some areas are more upscale and we can sell more expensive clothes, some areas are more casual and we can sell more casual clothes. We try to target our assortments to best satisfy those customers" (GMM15). "Our stores located in areas

with high black populations sell brighter colors and pastels colors do not perform well. The stores located in Michigan sell more large sizes as there is a concentrated Scandinavian population. We learn all this with experience and then plan our buys accordingly” (GMM11).

Lifestyle

Lifestyle of a region can be defined as the standard of living or occupation of the majority of the population of a particular region. The assortment that various stores carry differs based on whether the store is located in a college town, business area, downtown, resort area, or rural area. If a store is located in a business area, it will carry more formal clothing. The stores that are located in resort areas tend to carry more bright colors and beachwear. Lifestyle influences the assortment of the apparel that is stocked in a store. For example: “A store located in resort areas needs to carry bright prints, beachwear and other casual wear apparel. Only if a store carries products based on what a customer would be looking for in that particular area, will it be a popular store and have the customers returning”. For example: “We carry t-shirts with local football team logos in our stores. The stores that are located in college towns carry a section of white garments during Fall. The stores also carry large quantities of ‘back to school’ products. Our stores located in Washington DC carry a lot more formal clothes as compared to our Florida stores. We try to customize our stores based on the requirement of the local population, only then can we have people coming to our stores” (GMM 3).

Demographic factors

Among our sample, micromarketing merchandising was strongly influenced by the demographic factors in the area where the store was located. Other than the influence of demographic factors in the assortment to be carried in the store, it also was apparent that the demographics play a major role in the way the stores are grouped based on location. The grouping is done based on whether the store is located in cold or warm climate, the ethnic makeup of the people in that particular region, and whether the store is located in urban, rural or resort areas. For example: A store located in Texas ten years ago might have carried the same products as the store located in Florida due to similar climatic conditions. Now, due to a large number of Hispanic immigrants, the demographics of the area has changed and the stores need to carry the products that would suit the requirements of an Hispanic population. Hence, it is important for a store to update the demographic information of its stores and provide the stores with suitable merchandise. As one manager stated: “If you are emphasizing the right demographics and the right color palette then you should be maximizing the sales. Without that, if you were placing your goods regardless of temperature, regardless of information available to you, you would experience lower sales and higher markdowns and soon be closing doors. We slice and dice our stores in many different ways based on demographics. We have marketing and geo-demographic departments that look at the demographics and sales on a quarterly basis and continue to update the information so we can make the changes in our buying as we go. Regional merchandising managers are our eyes and ears in the field, and they provide us with information regarding the needs of the consumers” (GMM3).

Pricing

The initial idea that some stores price the same product differently based on the store location did not hold true in our data. With the exception of one large volume department store, most retail chains had one price for a particular product nation wide, irrespective of location. The only variation is that some stores will carry an entire new range of products with higher prices, based on the location and size of the store. If a store is located in an area with higher average income or if a store has demonstrated the capability of selling higher priced products, it will then carry a brand that has a higher average selling price. Some of the stores introduce higher priced products in a season and follow the sales trends. Based on their observations they either continue or stop the supply of higher priced products to the store. For example, a chain store manager that has stores in large cities, as well as small towns mentions: "Our bigger stores carry Ralph Lauren as we know that the customers that come to these stores will buy the high priced products of this brand. We do not send Ralph Lauren to our smaller stores as the customer profile of our smaller stores will not buy the expensive apparel. Also, we do not price the same product differently for different stores. We have been considering the option of differential pricing" (GMM 8).

Customer loyalty

Micromarketing merchandising and customer loyalty go hand in hand. Our data indicate that the retail chains achieved customer loyalty mainly through providing good quality products, good designs, the right price, and the appropriate products for the local customer. Two main ideas that most retail stores seemed to follow for achieving stronger customer loyalty were superior service and customer loyalty programs.

Relationship marketing by means of superior service was the most popular practice among the retailers. The sales staff works on building better relations with the consumers to make them feel important. Making each consumer feel that he/she can find anything they are looking for and providing them with the best service is the goal of most retail establishments. Some of the companies have made service their focal point. The stores believe that personally greeting customers, guiding them through the store and assisting them until the sale is made could increase the sales and build loyalty.

Many of the managers we interviewed emphasized that their retail chains have customer loyalty programs, which mainly consist of tracking store brand credit card purchases that would be used to earn further discounts. Extended credit periods also entice the consumers to buy from a particular store. These loyalty programs provide information to send mailings to regular consumers and inform them about sales or other store events. The personalized mailings help develop better relations with the customer.

One of the managers belonging to a store that practices high level of relationship management methods states: "Our store has three levels of charge cards based how much the customer spends in our store. Each time the charge card customers buy from the store, it helps us track what our regular customers like and we can then target them better. We have additional sales associates in our stores, send thank you notes, we invite our customers to the stores for special shopping. Most of our store managers are encouraged to spend most of their working day on the floor. We have customer

response cards in our store where the customers can let us know what they are looking for and we can try and meet their requirements. So, we try to make our customers feel important and try to keep a one to one relationship on daily basis" (GMM10).

Customers in different parts of the country behave differently in relation to the kind of service they expect in a store. A customer visiting a store located in busy office area would expect to be left alone to shop in a hurry and leave, whereas a customer visiting an expensive store would like feel important and be escorted around the store. Also, there are differences in the kind of loyalty programs that would work with different segments of population. Hence, dividing the stores based on the type of service expected would help the stores in building customer loyalty.

Discussion

Micromarketing merchandising is a new concept in the apparel retail industry. Many retailers are beginning to understand the importance of this concept and have started making efforts towards its implementation. Our findings clearly indicate that retailers understand the unique needs of customers across geographic locations. Unless retailers manage to differentiate their buying patterns based on the differences in the population, climate and ethnicity, they will not be able to compete in the highly competitive market.

The results of this study suggest that retailers need to make extra efforts towards understanding the demographics of the population surrounding their local stores and work towards planning the optimal assortment of apparel products. The differences in the ethnicity of the population is changing at a faster pace due to influx of immigrants, hence a store planner needs to conduct regular research to track these demographic changes. A thorough research study is needed to understand the lifestyle patterns of any location prior to opening a store.

The differences in the purchasing pattern of local customers, and their comfort level with various types of services offered in the store are important factors that the retailer needs to consider when creating loyalty programs. A research team specifically hired to track various differences in the customer profile for each store would be beneficial in increasing store profitability. Store management needs to understand all aspects related to micromarketing merchandising in order to succeed in the highly competitive apparel retail industry.

The results of this study could be used by managers of retail chains to understand the various variables that need to be considered while micromarketing merchandising for their store. Based on the area the store is located in, the importance of each variable can be adjusted to best suit specific stores. Application of the information gained through this study could help to increase sales and hence profits to a great extent.

The study also gives direction to the concept of micromarketing merchandising specific to the apparel retail industry. The variables that have emerged during the data collection process bring to light many different aspects related to micromarketing merchandising. Thus, further research can be conducted in similar areas.

Limitations and further research

Specialists Boutiques, which are more prevalent in countries outside the United States, would be even more likely to practice micromarketing merchandising to meet the requirements of a diverse population. However, these types of retail outlets are beyond

the scope of this study. Further research should examine the micromarketing merchandising variables relevant to a specialist boutique sample. The results of such a study may provide competitive insights for larger retail chains interested in better utilizing this form of marketing for profit maximization.

Future research in micromarketing merchandising should also include store visits to verify whether the micromarketing merchandising practices of the stores are being carried out effectively. In our study, stores located in various regions of United States were selected on purpose, in order to better understand micromarketing merchandising. Hence, due to time, financial, and geographical constraints, visiting individual stores was not possible.

This study is limited to the US retail industry, but the findings could be applied to any country that has diversity in the population based on geographic location. Similar research should be conducted in different countries and settings to develop a deeper understand of micromarketing merchandising. Further research can also be conducted quantitatively to determine the extent to which the variables used in this study influence micromarketing merchandising. Some other factors like markdowns which did not appear as significant factor in the study could be studied further. Markdowns could possibly be influenced by the demographics of a location. Thus, further research to determine the influence of demographics on markdowns could make markdowns an important variable in micromarketing merchandising.

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