

# Spektrum Marketingmanagement

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# Sales Promotion Management in Retailing: Tasks, Benchmarks, and Future Trends

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There is an on-going debate in research and managerial practice on how retailers can improve the management of sales promotions, thus increasing promotion effectiveness. The authors contribute to this debate by offering a systematic process that structures the key tasks in promotion management and providing benchmarks on key promotion policies.

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Sales promotion management has become a key priority for manufacturers and retailers. While prior research on sales promotion management has mainly focused on the manufacturer's standpoint (Ailawadi et al. 2009), the present paper focuses on retailer promotions – promotions that are initiated by the retailer and targeted at the consumer. Typical examples of retailer promotions are temporary price cuts, where the retailer reduces the price of the promoted brand for a limited period of time with the main goal of stimulating quicker and/or increased purchases of consumers (Kotler/Keller 2012).

In retailing, and in grocery retailing in particular, promotions have seen a dramatic increase in recent years and are now omnipresent in most Western countries. Today, in German grocery retailing nearly every fifth Euro (nineteen per cent) is made on promotion (GfK 2014). In product categories like coffee retailers already make more than forty percent of their revenue on promotion (IRI 2014). Despite the wide prevalence of promotions in retailing, retailers still struggle to implement an effective promotion management. Hence, not surprisingly, studies on promotion effectiveness in retailing show that more than 50% of all promotions are not profitable for the retailer (Ailawadi et al. 2007).

Promotion management in retailing is extremely complicated since it involves many tasks at different hierarchy levels. On a weekly basis managers have to plan and implement promotions that are in line with the overall promotion strategy, communicate them effectively to the consumers and ultimately evaluate their effectiveness. So the present paper aims to provide an overview of key tasks in promotion management and to establish representative benchmarks on retailers' promotion policies with a view to getting a grip on the complexity in retailers' promotion management.

*“Despite the wide prevalence of promotions in retailing, retailers still struggle to implement an effective promotion management.”*

## Key Tasks in Retailers' Promotion Management

To identify and structure the main tasks in retailers' promotion management we reviewed relevant academic literature and conducted expert interviews with six senior managers from retailing, consumer goods and consulting. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted either in person or by telephone. Since the interviewed experts as well as the analyzed scanner dataset are from the German FMCG industry, the primary focus of this paper will be on grocery retailing. However, we will include examples and findings from other industries where relevant.

**Figure 1** provides an overview over the various tasks in promotion management. Professional promotion management starts with selecting measurable goals which are in line with the overall retail strategy. To implement promotion strategies, retailers have to decide on the intensity of promotions

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(frequency and magnitude), the products to promote (product category and brand), the promotion instruments (e.g., coupons vs. temporary price discounts) and how to communicate the promotions to the consumer (e.g., feature advertising and/or displays). Finally, the retailer has to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of promotions.

### Strategy

Promotion strategy starts with the formulation of promotion-specific goals. According to our interviewed experts, managers often fail to define clear goals for promotions, since they view promotions as a necessary evil to sustain market share in a promotion-intensive market environment rather than as a strategic tool. In the following, we will discuss the key short-term and long-term promotion goals and explain the importance of targeted promotion strategies.

### Promotion goals

A basic distinction can be made between short-term and long-term goals. The key short-term goals associated with promotions are usually an increase in quantity and in the Euro value purchased by the retailer's regular customers and a shortening of consumer purchase cycles (Ailawadi et al. 2009; Kotler/Keller 2012). In addition, promotions are designed to attract customers of competing stores (Ailawadi et al. 2006).

Medium- to long-term goals of promotions are to induce consumers to switch from low-priced brands (mostly lower-margin brands) to more expensive brands (higher-margin brands) and to turn new customers into store-loyal customers after they have been lured into the store with promotions (Simon/Fassnacht 2009). A main long-term goal of promo-

tions is to create a favorable price image, mostly by using high discount promotions on frequently purchased national brands (Fassnacht/Königsfeld 2012).

An example of this strategy is the increasing number of promotions for Coca-Cola in Germany. After the German discounter chain ALDI announced to list Coca-Cola in October 2012, supermarkets such as EDEKA immediately increased the intensity of their promotions on the Coca-Cola brand. Promotion prices often significantly undercut the prices for Coca-Cola at ALDI, thus challenging ALDI's image as price leader and successfully supporting the competitive price image of supermarkets.

*“A key requirement for professional promotion management is that customer needs are understood and integrated.”*

### Targeted promotion strategy

A key requirement for professional promotion management is that customer needs are understood and integrated in promotion management. Hence, before running a promotion, retailers have to decide which customer segments should be targeted by the promotion (Grewal et al. 2011). If this question remains unanswered, promotions run the risk of being imprecise and not appealing to any of the retailer's customer segments.

A targeted promotion strategy is exemplified by the German hypermarket chain REAL. Based on customer purchase data collected through the customer loyalty program Payback, REAL identified ten different customer segments (Rode

Fig. 1 Key Tasks in Retailers' Promotion Management



Source: authors' illustration

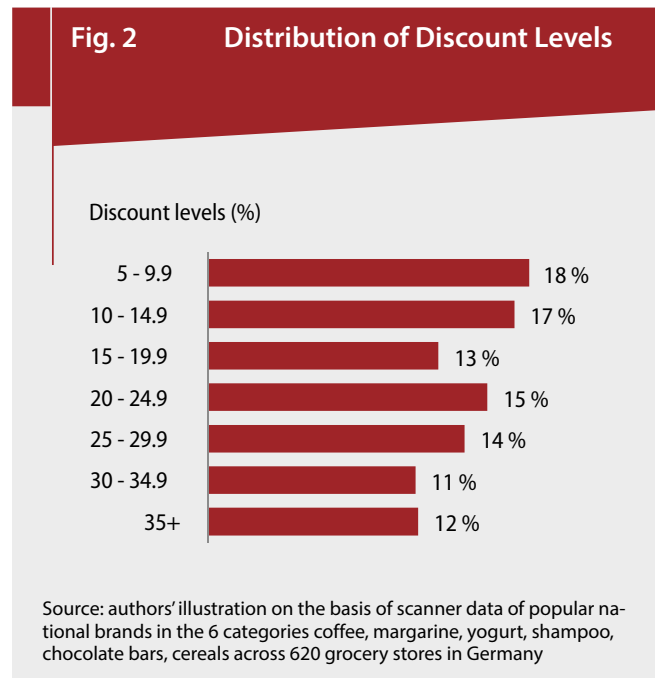
2011). This customer segmentation helps REAL to better target specific customer segments with promotions. If, for example, REAL wants to address the customer segment “Young Family with Baby”, it can advertise price discounts for diapers in their weekly store flyer.

### Implementation

Traditionally, designing effective retailer promotions has been about deciding on the right promotion intensity, i.e., promotion magnitude and frequency. However, research shows that many other factors, mainly the type of promotion, the product category, the brand and promotion communication significantly influence promotion effectiveness (Ailawadi et al. 2006). In the following, we will briefly discuss the key decisions a retailer faces when implementing promotion strategies. Furthermore, we will develop representative benchmarks on discount magnitude and promotion communication across product categories based on a two-year scanner dataset obtained from IRI Germany. The dataset comprises weekly data on popular national brands from 6 product categories of 620 grocery stores in Germany and includes information on key variables of promotion strategy such as discount magnitude and the use of displays or feature advertising to support promotions. The analyzed product categories were the same for all stores and included coffee, margarine, yogurt, shampoo, chocolate bars, and cereals. These categories were chosen since they are fairly large and important categories across grocery stores of all formats (e.g., discounters, supermarkets and hypermarkets). Further, these categories are very diverse and hence represent a broad spectrum of categories in a grocery retailer’s assortment.

### Management Summary

Promotion management in retailing is complicated and continues to be a key challenge for retailers. For tackling the complexity of promotion management in retailing the authors develop a systematic process that structures the key tasks in the retailers’ promotion management. Moreover, on the basis of scanner data from German grocery retailing the authors establish benchmarks on key promotion policies, such as discount magnitude and promotion communication.



### Promotion magnitude

Figure 2 provides an overview over the frequency of different discount levels during promotions in German retailing. Consistent with research studies showing that promotion discounts often have to pass a threshold of 10% (Van Heerde et al. 2001) to be effective, the price discount applied by German retailers usually exceeds 10% by far. We find that the average (median) price promotion discount is 21% (20%). Further, figure 2 shows that there is no typical percentage discount by which the price for a brand is reduced during promotions, but that the percentage discount varies across promotions. A main reason for the differences in discount magnitude for promotions is that promotion intensity differs strongly across categories, which will be illustrated in the following section “promoted product category”.

### Promotion frequency

Selecting the right promotion frequency is crucial. If promotions are too frequent, consumers will become conditioned to buy only at promotion prices. As soon as consumers learn to anticipate future promotions, they will stop buying the product at the regular price and will delay the purchase until the next promotion (Lodish/Mela 2007), thus reducing retailer margins. Product categories like coffee are promoted nearly every week. So consumers have learned to buy coffee from deal to deal and have stopped buying regularly priced coffee.

Hence managers can only be advised not to exaggerate promotion frequency.

**Promoted product category**

The importance of promotions for the retailer highly depends on the category. While categories such as coffee, where consumers have shown to be most price sensitive (GfK 2011), are promoted nearly every week with high discounts, categories such as cereals are promoted rather infrequently and with moderate discounts. **Figure 3** provides an overview over the distribution of different discount levels during promotions in the promotion-intensive category coffee and the less promotion-intensive category cereals. As illustrated, coffee brands are generally promoted with much higher discounts than cereal brands. Coffee brands are promoted with an average (median) percentage price discount of 26% (27%), while cereal brands are only promoted with an average (median) percentage price discount of 15% (13%).

**Promoted brand**

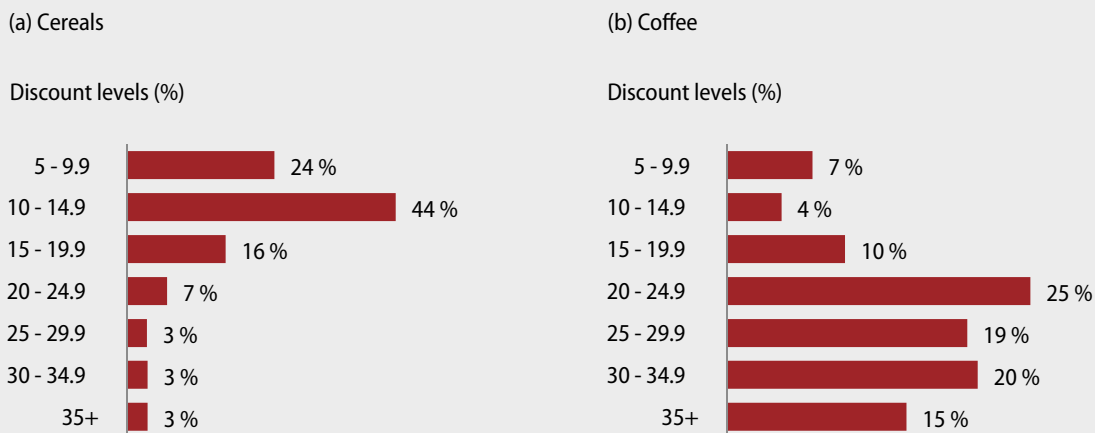
Promotions of high-price tier brands such as Lindt chocolate usually increase sales for the promoted brand much more than promotions of a low-price tier brand such as Alpia chocolate (Allenby/Rossi 1991). The main reason for this asymmetric effect is that promotions for relatively high-priced brands will induce shoppers of low-price tier brands to switch to the pro-

motored brand, since they assume they will get better quality for a discounted price. Regular shoppers of high-price tier brands, however, will not respond to the promotion of a low-price brand, since they are unwilling to purchase products below a “self-defined quality level” (Kamakura/Russell 1989, p. 385). The greater attraction of higher-priced brands probably explains why German retailers mostly select national brands (usually high-price tier brands) for promotions rather than store brands (usually low-price brands) as outlined by our interviewed experts.

**Promotion instruments**

Popular promotion instruments in grocery retailing are temporary price cuts, multi-item promotions, usually in the form of “buy three, get one free”, coupons, and loyalty promotions which usually require the consumers to make several purchases before they qualify for the discount (Gedenk et al. 2010). The effectiveness of these promotion instruments heavily depends on which customer segments the retailer tries to target with the promotion. A multi-item promotion, for example, will on average be more effective in addressing larger households with a relatively high consumption than single households. Similarly, the placement of coupons in the retailer’s weekly store flyer might be especially effective in targeting very price-conscious customers who keep informed about deals prior to making a decision on where to shop, while they

**Fig. 3 Distribution of Discount Levels for Cereals and Coffee**



Source: authors’ illustration on the basis of scanner data of popular national brands in the cereals and coffee category across 620 grocery stores in Germany

will be less effective in targeting time-constrained customers who do not search for promotions before entering the store.

**Promotion communication**

Retailers usually use various promotion communication instruments, also called deal support instruments, to draw the shoppers' attention to the retailer's most attractive deals, i.e. high discounts on popular, frequently purchased brands. Traditionally, promotion communication instruments play an important role in the promotion management of retailers, since they significantly strengthen the impact of promotions (Ailawadi et al. 2009). While retailers experiment with apps and online coupons (see below), feature advertising (e.g., store flyers, newspaper inserts, etc.) and in-store displays are still by far the most important communication instruments in grocery retailing. **Figure 4** provides an overview over the usage of displays and feature advertisings in German grocery retailing as well as the average advertised discount. As illustrated, more than 40% of all promotions are supported by a display, feature advertising or both, highlighting the importance of promotion communication instruments in grocery retailing.

Feature advertising is the single most important tool for retailers to communicate promotions outside the store. 32% of all promotions are featured with the main goal of inducing

customers to switch from competing stores to the store offering promotions. Feature advertising is still the primary tool for consumers to keep informed on promotions and to compare the prices of retailers. Nearly half of all German consumers use the retailers' weekly store flyers or newspaper inserts to keep informed about prices and promotions (GfK 2012). Hence, retailers mostly feature relatively high discounts to lure consumers into their stores with attractive promotions.

*“Evaluating the success of promotions is one of the most difficult tasks in retailing.”*

However, around 76% of all purchase decisions are made within the store (POPAI 2012). For retailers and manufacturers alike, the point of sale has become the point of truth for success or failure. 23% of all analyzed promotions are supported by in-store displays. In-store displays draw the shopper's attention to the economic benefit of the promotion and thereby significantly increase the impact of promotions. Research shows that even displays alone (without a discount) are effective in increasing sales for the promoted brand, suggesting that consumers use displays as indicators for a price cut

**Fig. 4 Usage of Promotion Communication Instruments to Support Promotions**



\*Average percentage discount for different promotion support instruments

Source: authors' illustration on the basis of scanner data of popular national brands in the 6 categories coffee, margarine, yogurt, shampoo, chocolate bars, cereals across 620 grocery stores in Germany

(Zhang 2006). However, as explained by our interviewed experts, a natural limit of the usage of displays exists since the space for setting up displays in a store is limited and an excessive use of displays in a store may lead to consumer confusion.

**Control**

Evaluating the success of promotions is one of the most difficult tasks in retailing. To analyze the profitability of promotions, retailers have to analyze and quantify the costs associated with promotions, trade allowance granted by manufacturers and the effect of promotion on sales (Gedenk et al. 2010). The large retailers in Germany as well as in most other Western countries have been successful in decreasing costs over the last decades and are usually effective at negotiating promotion funding from manufacturers (Pechtl 2014). In the following we will therefore focus on the evaluation of the effects of promotions on sales, which has turned out to be a continuous challenge for retailers (Ailawadi/Gupta 2014).

For analyzing the effectiveness of a promotion it is not enough to quantify the sales or revenue lift for the promoted brand, since an increase in sales for the promoted brand may result from brand switching, category switching, store switching, new users, stockpiling or increased consumption (Gedenk

et al. 2010). Instead, data on purchase behavior of consumers before, during and after the promotion have to be collected and systematically analyzed (Ailawadi et al. 2006, 2007).

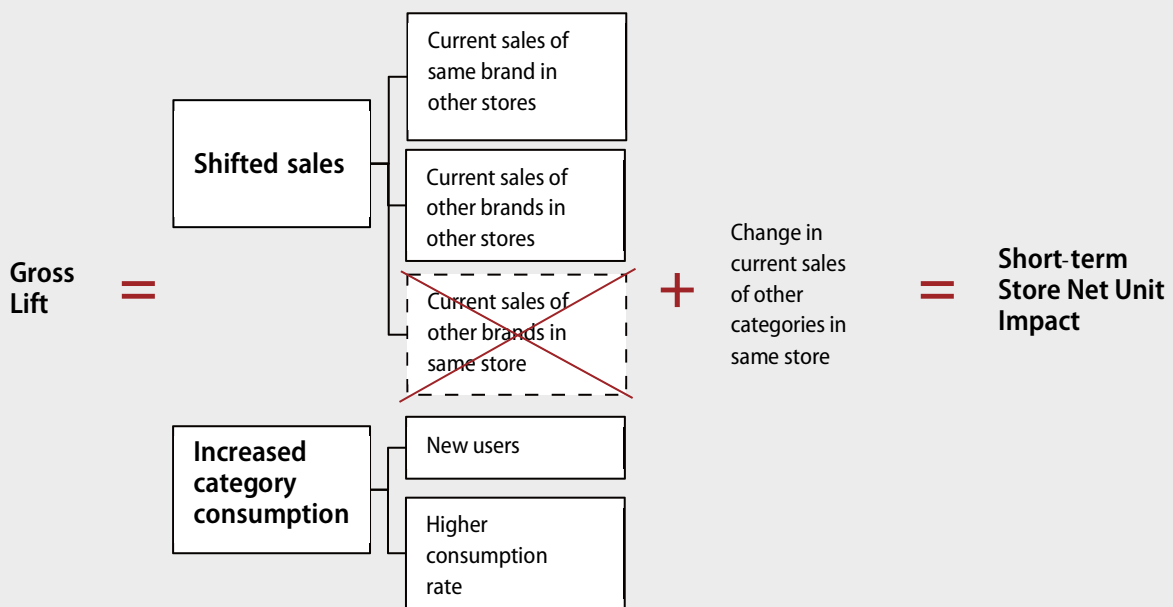
**Database for promotion controlling**

Since the early 1980s scanner cash registers have been implemented at nearly every retailer. Scanner cash registers collect all purchases over time and hence make it possible to analyze the effect of promotions on sales and revenue (Simon/Fassnacht 2009).

Also, most retailers have developed their own loyalty program or are part of a multi-retailer loyalty program such as Payback. Loyalty card data mirrors consumer purchase behavior at the household level and hence allows for a more detailed analysis of customer stockpiling and brand switching behavior (Simon/Fassnacht 2009).

In addition, big market research companies such as GfK provide input via large consumer panels. A key benefit of these consumer panels is that household purchase behavior can be tracked across different retail stores and hence the effect of promotions on store switching can be analyzed more thoroughly than by analyzing loyalty card data from a single retail chain.

**Fig. 5 Short-term Effects of Promotions**



Source: adapted from Ailawadi et al. 2006 (p. 519)



### Promotion effects

Promotions are often very attractive to result-oriented managers, since they have proven to be an effective tool to boost sales for the promoted brand (Neslin 2002). A key measure for analyzing promotion effectiveness is elasticity. Elasticities measure the ratio of the percentage change in output (e.g., sales) to the corresponding change in input (e.g., change in price) (Albers et al. 2010). The average short-term promotional price elasticity is  $-2.62$  (Bijmolt et al. 2005), which is more than twenty times as high as the average short-term advertising elasticity of  $0.12$  (Sethuraman et al. 2011), underlining the strong and immediate effect of price promotions on sales. However, in contrast to the manufacturer, the main goal of the retailer is not to increase the sales of the promoted brand, but to increase the category sales and thus the overall store sales and profitability.

*“According to academic research, 33 % of the gross lift can be attributed to brand switching within a retailer’s assortment.”*

Figure 5 provides an overview over the short-term effects of promotions from the perspective of the retailer. It underlines the importance of understanding and thoroughly analyzing promotion effects by illustrating that the gross sales lift (directly observed increase in sales for the promoted brand) is seldom truly incremental for the retailer, since a significant share of the sales lift results from brand switching, and hence a reduction in sales for other brands in the retailer’s assortment. According to academic research, 33% of the gross lift can be attributed to brand switching within a retailer’s assortment (Van Heerde et al. 2003), highlighting the importance of minimizing cannibalization effects in the assortment.

As displayed in figure 5, a key goal associated with promotions is not only to increase sales in the promoted categories, but also to increase sales in other product categories through cross-selling. A promotion for potato chips, for example, is likely to increase sales in the potato chips category, but also in the dipping sauce category.

However, as illustrated in figure 6, promotions do not only have short-term effects, but usually also show dynamic effects, which may affect sales of the periods before and after the promotion. Pre-promotion dips as illustrated in figure 6 may result from purchase deceleration. Purchase deceleration occurs if shoppers, due to a high promotion frequency,

learn to anticipate future promotions and thus postpone their purchase until the next promotion (Macé/Neslin 2004).

Also, during promotions consumers often take advantage of the reduced price and stock large quantities of the promoted brand for future consumption. Not surprisingly, these consumers are less likely to purchase the brand in the weeks after the promotion, causing post-promotional sales dips (Macé/Neslin 2004). Since retailer margins are usually lower during promotions, deceleration and stockpiling are likely to have a negative effect on the retailer’s profitability, highlighting the importance for the retailer to closely monitor dynamic effects of promotions.

### The Role of New Media in Promotion Management

In research as well as in managerial practice there is a consensus that new media such as social media and mobile applications are, and will continue to be, the driving force of change in marketing. While new media are usually associated more with communication management than with promotion management, they are likely to be the biggest next trend in promotion management.

As outlined by our interviewed experts, the role of new media in the promotion management of German retailers is mainly still limited to the communication of deals on the retailer’s Facebook fan page or app. However, a key benefit of new media is that promotions can be targeted in a better, more personalized way. Based on the purchase history of its customers (collected through loyalty cards), the British supermarket chain TESCO, for example, sends out personalized coupons to its customers via email (TESCO 2014). For the retailers the benefits of this strategy are evident. First, consumers are more likely to visit the store because their individual needs are addressed through the targeted promotions. Sec-

#### Main Propositions

- Developing effective promotion strategies becomes an increasingly challenging task for retailers.
- Promotion management in retailing consists of three phases: strategy, implementation, and control.
- Retailers struggle to thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of promotions; new media will help retailers to better accomplish this task.

### Lessons Learned

- Promotion management is complex: retailers need to implement a systematic process structuring the tasks in promotion management.
- Retailers should thoroughly analyze the short- and long-term effects of promotions and closely monitor cannibalization effects.
- Retailers should more strongly exploit the opportunities of new media, such as mobile coupons, to better target consumers.

want to make use of mobile coupons or who want to receive customized promotions via email usually have to take part in the retailer's loyalty program, providing the retailer with further valuable detailed data on consumer purchase behavior at the household level. The increased availability of detailed data provides the opportunity to better monitor promotion effects and hence design more effective promotions.

*“A key benefit of new media is that promotions can be targeted in a better, more personalized way.”*

and, it allows the retailer to use price discrimination between different customer segments.

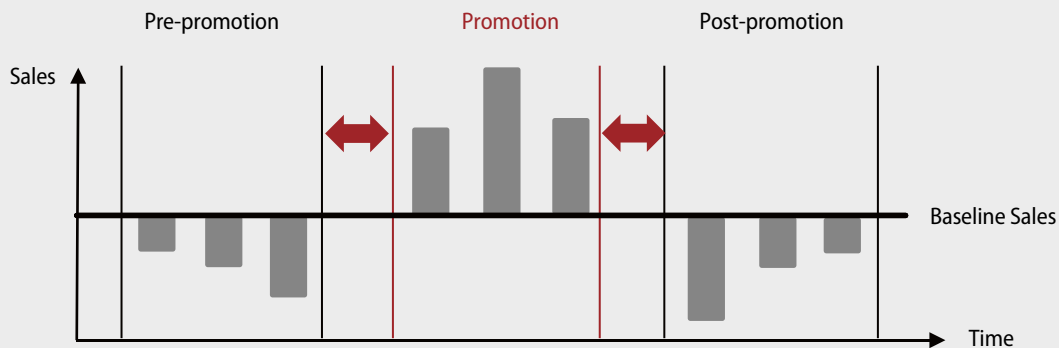
Although nearly 50% of all German consumers already have a smartphone (comScore 2015), the mobile marketing of retailers is still mainly limited to providing an app which informs consumers about the weekly deals and the location of the nearest store. However, in the future we are likely to see a steady growth of mobile applications such as location-based promotions (Grewal et al. 2011). Mobile devices, such as smart phones, will become an essential tool for consumers to keep informed about promotions and redeem mobile coupons.

Last but not least the retailer will generate more detailed information on consumers' purchase behavior. Shoppers who

### Key Takeaways

- Promotion intensity continues to increase in retailing.
- Promotion management is complex: implementing a process that structures the key tasks in promotion management is essential for professional promotion management.
- Promotion management starts with the definition of clear, promotion-specific goals.
- Important promotion decisions are not restricted to choosing the right promotion discount, but are also about selecting the right brand, product category and promotion instrument.
- Promotion communication instruments, especially displays and feature advertising, play an important role in promotion management and have proven to be an effective tool to increase the effectiveness of promotions.

Fig. 6 Dynamic Effects of Promotions: Pre-promotion and Post-promotion Dips



Source: authors' illustration

- A thorough analysis of promotion effects is necessary to detect negative short- and long-term effects of promotions and hence is the starting point for improving the effectiveness of future promotions.
- New media will help retailers in the future to collect more detailed information about consumers' purchase behavior and hence enable them to better target consumers with promotions.

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