

THE POWER OF MUSIC AND ITS INFLUENCE ON INTERNATIONAL RETAIL BRANDS AND SHOPPER BEHAVIOUR: A MULTI CASE STUDY APPROACH

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Abstract

Retailers are finding it more and more difficult to differentiate their stores based upon the traditional components of the retail mix. Retail store elements such as colour, lighting and visual merchandising have always been considered as having immediate effects on the buying decision making process. Retail stores need to be much more than just passive places that display merchandise for sale. When shoppers make purchase decisions they may respond to more than just the tangible product or service being offered. Music can be a critical component of store atmosphere and can play an important role in the purchase decision-making process. Published research on the impact of music on retail experience is very limited and a considerable gap in the literature exists. To determine the role that music plays in shaping retail brand and its impact on shopping behaviour, an exploratory study was conducted into several leading retail concepts including Borders Books, FAO Schwarz, Nike Town and Victoria's Secret. Key findings indicated that store atmosphere can influence the perception of the uniqueness of products and service levels, specifically programmed music can play a role in store stay and travel time and a personalised music strategy can support a retail brand and make a connection with specific target markets.

Introduction

Retailers are facing an increasingly competitive market place and as a consequence are finding it more and more difficult to differentiate their stores on the basis of product, place, people, price and promotion. Retail store elements such as colour, lighting and visual merchandising have always been considered as having immediate effects on the buying decision making process. The emphasis has moved away from in-store product displays, towards elements that excite the senses of shoppers such as flat screen videos or graphics, music, smells, lighting and flooring that tend to capture the brand image or personality and help to create a unique environment and shopping experience (McGoldrick, 1990; Marsh, 1999). The atmosphere of the shopping environment can influence customer attitudes and their perceptions in relation to the overall quality of the store in terms of the uniqueness of the product, and service levels (Baker, Grewal and Parasraman, 1994) the purchase price (Areni and Kim, 1993) and purchase volume (Milliman, 1982). Victoria Secret is a good example of this phenomenon. The playing of classical music in their stores, as contributed to a prestigious store atmosphere, leading to a customer perception of higher merchandise and service quality. The specific atmosphere that the retailer creates, can in some cases be more influential in the decision making process than the product itself. It is the power of music that may in fact have the greatest impact on the way people make their purchase decisions. Gardner's study (1985) found that mood states can have an important influence on behaviour. A given mood state within a retail environment can increase the chances that a purchase will be made (Bruner, 1990). Music can be a critical element of a store's atmosphere (Alpert and Alpert, 1990).

The Power of Music

Music communicates with our hearts and minds; it serves as a powerful connection into our emotions. Music is versatile, it has the ability to relax or invigorate. Music is memorable, it can transport us in an instant to places we want to be (Ortiz, 1997). Retailers can use specifically programmed music to create links to past experiences. Music can be a critical component of store atmosphere and plays a role in purchase decision making process (Areni and Kim, 1993; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Smith and Curnow, 1966). A personalised music strategy can support a retail brand and makes a powerful connection with specific target markets by incorporating customer demographics (such as age, gender mix and income levels) and psychographics (such as preferences, lifestyles, personality and attitudes). By understanding the demographics and psychographics of its target market, retailers can create an audio environment where their customers feel comfortable, relaxed and happy to spend time and money. The use of carefully selected music creates an immediate distinction for a retail brand by establishing the right mood. Music can motivate the subconscious and create a first and lasting impression.

The Purpose Of The Study/Methodology

The purpose of this research was to determine the role that music plays in shaping retail brand and its impact on shopping behaviour. The study was exploratory in nature and forms the basis for future research. Zikmond (1991) sees three purposes for exploratory research (i) situation diagnosis, (ii) the screening alternatives and (iii) discovering new ideas (Zikmond, 1991: 103). This study was exploratory in that its aim was to provide greater insight and understanding into the link between music and retail branding. Exploratory research can be conducted into a research problem or issue when there are very few or no earlier studies. The aim of exploratory research is to search for patterns, ideas or hypotheses, rather than testing or confirming a hypothesis (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). A number of key retail brands formed the sample and included Borders Books, FAO Schwarz, Nike Town and Victoria's Secret. Data was collected by face-to-face interviews and in-store observation in the four key USA retail cities of Dallas, Chicago, Las Vegas and Los Angeles. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in-store with sales associates and store management and out-of-store with selected shoppers.

Literature Review

A review of the literature indicates that previous research has examined various aspects of music and its impact on consumer behaviour. The effects of music tempo (Milliman, 1982,) volume (Smith and Curnow, 1966 and Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990) and genre (Baker, Levy and Grewal, 1992). Music can be a critical component of store atmosphere and plays a role in purchase decision making process (Areni and Kim, 1993; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Smith and Curnow, 1966). A personalised music strategy can support a retail brand and makes a powerful connection with specific target markets by incorporating customer demographics (such as age, gender mix and income levels) and psychographics (such as preferences, lifestyles, personality and attitudes). There is much debate as to the affect of music upon the listener. Opinions vary widely whether there is any consistency of listener responses or any tangible way of measuring them. Storr says "music can certainly be regarded as a form of communication between people; but what it communicates is not obvious". (Adams, 1998;

Storr, 1992). By understanding the demographics and psychographics of its target market, retailers can create an audio environment where their customers feel comfortable, relaxed and happy to spend time and money. This supports Grayston's study (1974) which put forward the premise that music must fit the situation in which it is to be used. The use of carefully selected music creates an immediate distinction for a retail brand by establishing the right mood. Music can motivate the subconscious and create a first and lasting impression.

THE Case Studies

Borders Books

The focus at Borders Books is aimed at maximising the amount of time people stay in the store. On entering a Borders Book store you immediately get the impression that you are invited to relax, choose three or four books from the enormous list of titles on offer, sit down and have a coffee or some food, take in some music and settle down and while away the hours.

The in-store music is designed to maximise customer visit time. Research has shown that if shoppers stay longer and travel more slowly throughout the store, they are likely to purchase more (Areni and Kim, 1993; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Milliman, 1982; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990). The tempo of the music at Borders Books is slow and relaxed. The tempo of the music tended to alter customer perception of elapsed time in the store. This finding supports Milliman's study (1982) that found that the tempo of music can effect shoppers' pace of movement around the store. Shoppers and sales associates indicated that the soothing nature of music also helped to facilitate discussions about products and services.

FAO Schwarz

Las Vegas is home to the world's largest toy store FAO Schwarz. With 57,000 square feet of 'toy heaven,' the store is the number one attraction within the magnificent Forum Shopping Mall. The store provides a showcase for all the major toy manufacturers. The key departments such as the Mattel Barbie range and the dramatic Star Wars offering are very closely monitored to ensure the best possible in-store concepts. Complete with a gigantic three storey high Trojan horse, the store offers a shopping experience full of colour, magic, movement and music. There are three floors fulfilling every child's dream.

The store is composed of specific themes, each with its own unique music; from plush toys to electronic games, arts and crafts to magnificent dolls, an incredible Barbie store and a very exciting Star Wars department that boasts the world's only Star Wars Cantina - and of course a FAO Schweetz extravaganza offering an incredible array of candy and chocolates! Each area demonstrates the power of music in creating the right mood, excitement and atmosphere. For example, the music playing in the Barbie section is up-tempo pop, dance and swing, creating a feeling of fun, fantasy and happiness, whereas, the music in the Star Wars department is awesome and dramatic - one can't help but be spellbound and enthralled. The music drives customers into the store. The music plays a big part in catching peoples' attention. Given the nature of Las Vegas and the focus on gambling, shopping becomes almost an afterthought. Shoppers indicated that they wanted to be enticed, excited and entertained.

NikeTown

At Nike Town, brand is everything and everything is focused at maximising the brand's potential. According to Chernatony and McDonald, (1998) brands can develop different relationships with customers. They see a successful brand as one that develops a high-quality relationship, where customers feel a sense of commitment and belonging, even to the point of passion (p: 27). When you enter the world of Nike you are exposed to total branding. The Nike brand is everywhere, on door handles, elevator buttons, floor tiles, store fittings, video screens, interactive kiosks and even the music. There is no mistaking that you are in NikeTown. Stores were visited in Chicago, Las Vegas and Los Angeles and in each store staff expressed excitement about the current music. Nike stores are multi-sensory retail environments that excite the senses with lighting effects, video monitors, gigantic pictures of famous athletes, interactive displays and powerful music.

The days of having sound effects (tennis balls bouncing or birds chirping) in specific pavilions have long gone, much to the relief of all those people interviewed. The in-store music is high on energy, vibrant, proactive and uplifting. The current music definitely boosts the store's environment and helps to attract the younger urban customer. The current music is friendlier, more inviting, gives Nike a point of differentiation from its competitors and supports the Nike brand. The interest shown in the in-store music has led to the need to provide customers with 'Nike Music' play lists.

Victoria's Secret

The atmosphere of the shopping environment can influence customer attitudes in relation to perceptions of the overall quality of the store in terms of the uniqueness of the product, service levels and price (Baker, Grewal and Parasraman, 1994). Victoria's Secret is a good example of this phenomenon. Within seconds of entering the store, you can feel a sense of elegance and style. The timing of the store visits saw the Valentine's Day promotion in full swing. Lots of red and pink, silks, satin and lace. Very feminine, very sexy! The in-store music provided a perception of richness and grandeur. Since playing classical music in their stores, there is the belief that this has contributed to a prestigious store atmosphere, leading to a customer perception of higher quality in both merchandise and service. This finding is consistent with Yalch and Spangenberg's study (1990). Talking with store staff led to the impression that soothing music is important when engaging in conversations with customers about potential purchases. Therefore, music that facilitates discussion between individuals may be desirable where customers are likely to seek the advice of a sales associate. This is certainly relevant at Victoria's Secret, especially when men decide to enter what was once considered a strictly female only domain.

Limitations Of The Research/Future Research

There are a number of limitations with music related research. They include the collection and capture of meaningful data, isolating other environmental factors and linking music directly to consumer decision making and brand recognition. A series of field experiments need to be conducted to explore the relationship between different types of music and the impacts on retail brand and shopping behaviour. The study ideally should take place over a period of no less than thirty days and during a variety of time periods (morning, afternoon, evenings, weekdays and weekends). Various times need to be selected to meet the belief that shoppers

have different purposes for shopping at different times. The focus of the research ideally should be on store stay time, customer flow and purchase decisions.

Conclusion

Stores' environments provide consumers with informational clues about the uniqueness of the merchandise and service quality and assist in shaping consumer attitudes and perceptions about the global store image. Store image and mood can be changed dramatically by the introduction of music. Music establishes the mood, helps motivate the subconscious and can create a lasting impression on existing and potential customers. The study found that specifically programmed music can play a role in the total shopping experience and can be an important tool in creating a memorable identity for specific retail brands. If the music was specifically designed to fit a particular demographic and psychographic, then customers tended to relax and stayed longer in the store.

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