

A MANAGERIAL APPROACH OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION DRIVERS IN THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

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Abstract:

More than ever customer satisfaction has become a key factor for all industry and business enterprises. The article explains about the customers satisfaction especially in the textile industry. First part presents the concept of customer satisfaction and its place in current management models and tools. The following are the main theories on customer satisfaction with application on textile sector. The key factors affecting customer satisfaction is considered as: perceived service quality, perceived product quality and brand image. We intend also to explain why the ecological products have a more important role in the costumes perception.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, product quality, perceived value, textile products, quality management, competitive advantage

BACKGROUND

Customer satisfaction has received a great deal of attention for decades but now, more than ever it is became o hot topic in the managerial field. It is in fact one of the most unquestionable concepts of modern management rhetoric. In a competitive marketplace where businesses fight for customers, customer satisfaction is seen as a key differentiator and increasingly has become a key element of business strategy. It is seen as an important performance indicator within business and is part of many managerial models and tools. Customer satisfaction is a significant part of stakeholder theory (Freeman,1984; Post et al, 2002) , is a key element of all quality management systems and standards, such as QCC, ISO 9000, TQM, of Business Excellence models (European Foundation for Quality Management-EFQM, Malcolm Baldrige Award Model etc.) a part of four of a Balanced Scorecard and so on.

In the globalization era, when the textile sector is under various kinds of pressure (large department store

chains, illegal trade, low – cost imported products such as Asian or Nord Africa ones etc.) and the Romanian clothing retail business is going through a crisis, especially as far as the single owner is concerned, this paper can produce important answers as to what factors influence a person during the buy process, what can lead them to buy and what the additional product oriented services they consider essential for a company.

Sales cycle is the concept that everyone knows and uses. It means the sequence of phases that a typical customer goes through when deciding to buy. The first phase of the sales cycle may be either the customer's perception of a product, or a perception of a need that the product might satisfy. The following steps include research and evaluation; the last step is the customer's decision to purchase the product. But more interesting in our evaluation is the buyer's cycle, concept developed by Michael Bosworth, which focuses on the customer and their buying patterns. His model has three phases: need, evaluation and action

and applies in across both B2B and B2C purchase because it uses information about how the customers brain work and how he respond in different situations (Bosworth and Holland,2003) . As competition continues to increase, businesses are forced to find new and innovative ways of creating and keeping new customers. Customer satisfaction increase the existing customer loyalty, repurchase process, awareness of the people about the firm, decrease the price flexibility, the cost of gaining new customers and prevent the customer being affected from competitive company.

In another definition it is “an emotional response to the experiences provided by and associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behaviour such as shopping and buyer behaviour, as well as the overall marketplace [...], an emotional response triggered by a cognitive evaluative process in which the perceptions of (or beliefs about) an object, action, or condition are compared to one’s values (or needs, wants, desires)”. (Westbrook and Reilly, 1983, 257) Westbrook (1987,260) also defines satisfaction as a "global evaluative judgment about product usage/consumption". This definition provides little guidance for developing context-specific measures. Based on this definition, satisfaction was assessed using an item like the following: How do you feel about the product or product usage? (*I feel delighted/terrible*).

THEORIES OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION

A review of the existing literature indicates a wide variance in the definitions of satisfaction. Satisfaction is a phenomenon expressing that the performance and benefits of the products exceed the expectations of the customers (Peter and Olsan, 2005) .

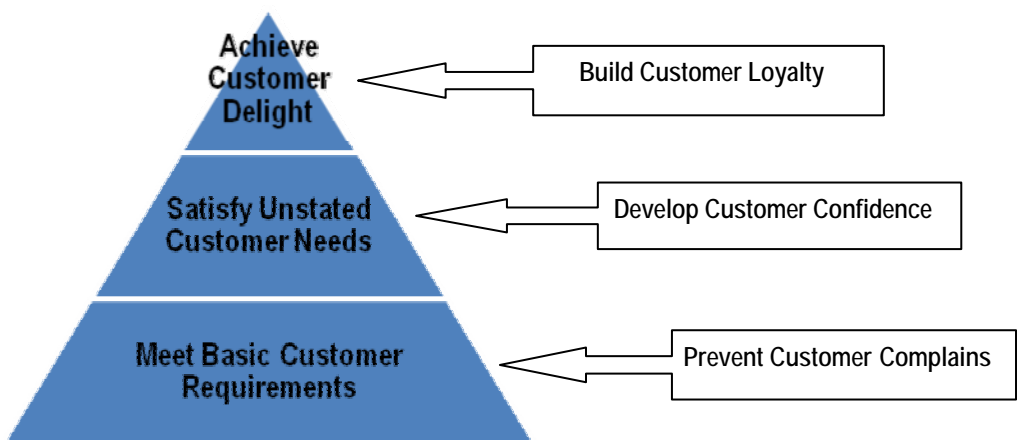


Figure 1. Customer Satisfaction Model

The Kano model

The Kano model is a theory of product development and customer satisfaction developed in the 1980s by Professor Noriaki Kano. In his model, Kano (Kano, 1984) distinguishes between following types of product

requirements which influence customer satisfaction in different ways when met:

- *Must-be requirements*: If these requirements are not fulfilled, the customer will be extremely dissatisfied. On the other hand, as the customer takes these requirements for granted, their fulfilment will not increase his

satisfaction. The must-be requirements are basic criteria of a product. Fulfilling the must-be requirements will only lead to a state of "not dissatisfied". The customer regards the must-be requirements as prerequisites, he takes them for granted and therefore does not explicitly

- *One-dimensional requirements:* With regard to these requirements, customer satisfaction is proportional to the level of realization - the higher the level of realization, the higher the customer's satisfaction and vice versa. One-dimensional requirements are usually explicitly demanded by the customer.

- *Attractive requirements:* These requirements are the product criteria which have the greatest influence on how satisfied a customer will be with a given product. Attractive requirements are neither explicitly expressed nor expected by the customer. Fulfilling these requirements leads to more than proportional satisfaction. If they are not met, however, there is no feeling of dissatisfaction.

- *indifferent requirements:* an attribute whose presence or absence does not cause any satisfaction or dissatisfaction to customers;

- *reverse quality attribute:* an attribute whose presence causes customer dissatisfaction, and whose absence results in customer satisfaction.

The Kano model offers some insight into the product attributes which are perceived to be important to customers. Kano also produced a methodology for mapping consumer responses to questionnaires onto his model.

The two-factor model of customer satisfaction

The essence of this model is the use of two factors to describe customer satisfaction. The two factors are hygiene elements and satisfiers. The hygiene elements are those attributes

that customers expect to be part of the product or service. The absence of these elements generally result in customer dissatisfaction. One key point is that the presence of hygiene elements generally does not contribute to customer satisfaction. One example of a hygiene element would be a

Hygiene elements include: credibility, reliability, accessibility, delivery and accuracy. The satisfiers include: responsiveness, courtesy, empathy, exceptional quality and personnel who are thoroughly trained and knowledgeable.

The conclusion is that while the hygiene elements are a must, the satisfiers are what lead to customer satisfaction and satisfaction levels are only achieved when the hygiene factors meet customer expectations and the satisfiers exceed customer expectations.

The higher level of service quality means higher level of customer satisfaction and results in better customer loyalty and high level of profitability (Ghobadian, et al.,1993) To transfer the quality to service means to satisfy customers' requirements. So that the firms aspiring to adopt the customer oriented approach should determine the customer requirements and associate the customer requirements with service design and capabilities (Chow-Chua and Komaran, 2002). Customer satisfaction usually leads to customer loyalty, and customer loyalty reflects the likelihood of repurchasing products or services.

Understand the drivers of customer satisfaction are difficult and must be done differentiated because they are very different types of textile products. Apparel products are typically classified into broad categories, such as basic commodity products (knit underwear and socks), fashion-basic products (dress shirts, casual slacks, and knit sportswear), "better" fashion (moderately priced dresses and suits), "bridge" fashions (higher priced ready-

to-wear fashion products), designer collections (high quality and expensive ready to-wear fashion products) and custom-made haute couture (Abernathy, et al., 1999). Each of these categories involves needs, requirements and different motivations that can explain customer satisfaction.

We can say that customer satisfaction is a major predictor of repurchase, but is also strongly influenced by explicit performance evaluations of perceived quality, and perceived value.

PERCEIVED QUALITY OF TEXTILE PRODUCTS

It is usually underlined that customer expectations are often represented as dimensions of quality. Customer satisfaction has roots in two ideas about quality that come from an operational/production view of the business. The first idea is that quality can be measured by the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions. This gap-based view of quality says that if you beat customers' expectations you have good quality.

The second idea is that quality is about conformance to a standard or specification. Within this idea is that once the design is set, quality is about ensuring that the end deliverable to the customer meets this design. Consequently from a production/operations point of view, customer satisfaction is about monitoring the quality of delivery of the product and service. A recent research reveals that six out of ten Spanish women find quality to be their main motivation to buy in this sector while 30 percent feel that design is most important.

(www.infomat.com/research/infre0000283.html)

Quality has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature. According to Peter Drucker, "*Quality in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer*

gets out and is willing to pay for."

Consumers often attribute quality to products on the basis of price, brand reputation, store image, market share, product features, and country of manufacture (Lambert, 1980). Garvin's review (1987) of quality definition literature identified eight common themes of product quality: aesthetics, conformance, durability, features, performance, perceived quality, reliability, and serviceability. The consumer's viewpoint of quality is referred to as perceived quality and is defined as the consumer's judgment of the product (Holbrook and Corfinan, 1985) and by extension, it can be defined as the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988).

Perceived quality is often measured through three questions: overall quality, reliability, and the extent to which a product or service meets the customers needs. Finally, customer perceptions of quality are the one of the greatest predictor of customer satisfaction. Some of the factors that influence customers' perception of textile products quality are :

- *Price* - consumer tend to associate quality with higher price. There is some evidence (Lichtenstein, 1993) that price is used by shoppers in quality estimates and that for some products customers estimates of quality are affected by price.

- *Technology* – This indicates factors such as fabric and seam strength, colorfastness, contraction and other proprieties that are affected by the state of technology in the textile industry.

- *Psychology* – A garment can be reasonably priced and the best that the technology can offer, but if it is not attractive in appearance, if it is not fashionable, if it does not meet the aesthetic requirements of the customers, then it is not a quality garment. Aesthetics, especially in the clothes industry, refers to the subjective

experience of a product-how it looks, feels, taste. Valdez and Mehrabian (1994) found that the rousing of the emotions and the provision of pleasure are important components of the buying process of apparel consumers. Fiore and Kimle (1997) consider that, in providing the consumer with a cognitive aesthetic experience, the apparel product has to communicate a message of reality (such as conveying the message that the consumer belongs to a specific cultural or social group) or/and a message of fantasy for the consumer (such as that dainty lingerie reflects the female consumer's inner sexuality).

- *Time Orientation* – This includes durability that's a measure of product life, or the amount of use the product offers before it breaks down. Its importance varies with categories of garments. For example, children's garments are expected to be more durable than ladies high fashion garments.

- *Contractual* – This refers to a product guarantee, the refund policy of a store etc.

- *Ethical* – This refers to honesty of advertising, courtesy of sales personnel etc.

A recent survey in India suggests that a quarter of all garment factories are employing under-age labour. Most of the production is for export to Europe. Shame on those fashion houses, fashion brands and fashion retailers who drive this slavery. And shame on those consumers who buy these products without questioning how they were made and how they can be sold so cheaply when so much labour is involved (Neil ,2009). In response to scandals in the fashion industry, companies adopt ethical action, social responsibility. It is well known the Gap scandal. Having survived 1995's accusations of using sweatshop labour, Gap was dragged into a messy row in 2007 for using child labourers in the back streets of New Delhi. The children

reported being beaten with rubber pipes and, having been bought from their parents, being told that they had to work for free to repay the fee. At response, Gap stopped the products made in the New Delhi from being sold and requires its suppliers to guarantee that they will not use child labor to produce garments. The San Francisco-based company has 90 full-time inspectors who make unannounced visits around the world to ensure vendors are abiding by Gap's guidelines. It also said that it will make a \$200,000 grant to help improve working conditions in India. (www.csr-asia.com/index.php?page=3&cat=25)

PERCEIVED VALUE OF TEXTILE PRODUCTS

A value is not a value unless it is perceived to be one. No matter how real a value may be, it has no value at all until the value is perceived. But was it a value? There are more meanings of the concept:

- *Value is high price*- Several authors have demonstrated that the price of products may have a positive role in determining the perception of value (Tellis and Gaeth,1990).

- *Value is low price* - For some customers the lowest price is the best value. Research on consumer reaction to price has been largely confined to examining consumers' price information search, evaluation of price alternatives, and individual purchase behaviours without regard to situational influences (McConnell and Douglas, 2005). A recent study on German consumer behavior highlights that shoppers are focusing more and more on price when it comes to fashion items and are less and less concerned about brand. Almost 10,000 participants aged 14 and over participate in the German market research study "Typology of Desires". Another study, conduct by The Nielsen Co. suggests that consumers have become more prices sensitive in the recession but that that their cost concerns are selective enough that

pressure for broad-based roll backs is not pushing the market toward deflation, at least not yet (Laceky,2009).

- *Value is getting what I want from a product or service* -These customers define value in terms of the benefits they receive, rather than the price they pay. Clothing plays an important role in how people view themselves, helping to define who they are and how they feel. By purchasing clothing that caters to their specific needs and wants, they can feel comfortable and secure with themselves, knowing that they look good.

- *Value is the quality I get for the price I pay* - These customers regard value as a trade off between the price they pay and the quality they experience.

- *Value is all I get for all I sacrifice* - Value is found in the relationship between every benefit customers experience in purchase, ownership, use, consumption and disposal of a product or service, and the various sacrifices they make to enjoy those benefits.

We can say that value is the customer's perception of the balance between benefits received and sacrifices made to experience those benefits, for some customers, value equates to low price, for others it is having their particular requirements met and for another group quality is the dominant concern.

Perceived value may conceptually refer to the overall price given quality or the overall quality given price. Perceived value is measured in many ways including overall evaluation of value, expectations of price that would be paid, and more rigorous methodologies including the Van Westendorp pricing analysis, and conjoint analysis that allows assessing

price in connection with a set of product features. Van Westendorp Price Sensitivity Analysis provides the optimal price point for virtually any product. In addition, this powerful analysis uncovers the points at which customers will perceive your product as “too cheap”, “too expensive” or “price indifferent”.

The consumer behaviour literature shows that price is a primary indicator of quality when other attributes and benefits are relatively unknown. However for repeat purchases in some product categories, price may be reduced in importance. For example, the social and ecological added value is acknowledged by sophisticated consumers by their purchasing decisions in which this represents a decision criterion.

Consumers are becoming more conscious with respect to green activities, non-toxic and environmentally friendly consumer goods. Recent market researchers report identifies a new population segment, the LOHAS or those with lifestyles of health and sustainability (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, 2005) . In addition, there have been a few studies trying to link consumers attitudes toward the environment (Diekmann and Preisendorfer, 2003) and social perception (Meijer and Schuyt, 2005) to how consumers buy products and whether those attitudes can motivate consumers to different spending patterns to reflect their values.

Consumer prefers products which pose no threat either to themselves or the environment. Figure 2 (Back, 2003) presents a part o the customer's criteria when purchasing textiles and the natural and skin friendly products are an important topic in their choice.

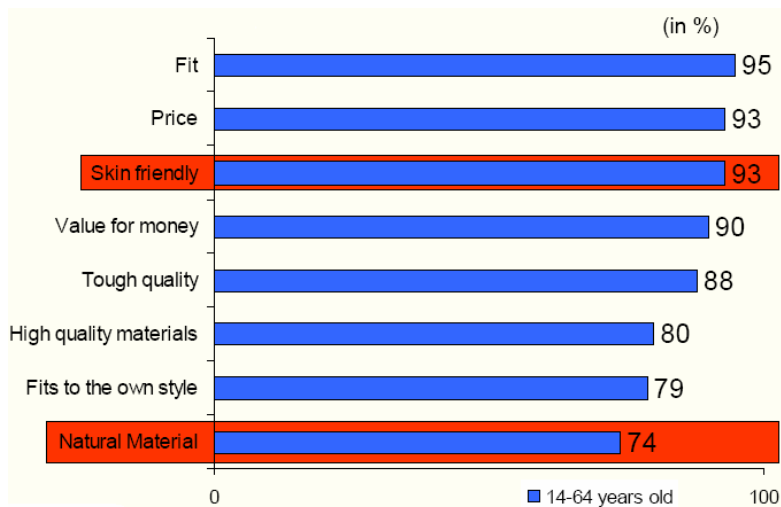


Figure 2. Customer’s criteria when purchasing textiles

Brand Loyalty

Fashion can be defined as public consumption through which people communicate to others the image they wish to project. This definition contains three primarily components: public consumption, communication to others and image. Brands summarize a whole range of communication, learning, history, feeling about a product or company within a simple name and logo. But although the name may be simple, the ideas underpinning brands and the different ways in which brands are used are both complex and multi-faceted.

Brand also help consumers choose. A brand signals to its customers the specific source of product and attempts to protect both the producer and customer from competitors who ultimately attempt to provide products that seem to be identical (Kotler, P and Armstrong, 1996). Brands influence the attitudes and the preferences and buying behaviour. In short, brands have the power to drive change. The fashion industry is a fast change and dynamic sector. The new fashion trends are updated with each passing day. The innovative style satisfied shopping experiences, competitive price, and all

these factors point to a success of a fashion retailer. How to retain customer is an important topic for fashion operators.

However, brand preferences change over time. Some brands become less relevant especially during changing times. Customers who are loyal to one brand either expect more from their current brand than alternatives, or they don't change because of switching barriers. On the other hand, consumers who occasionally buy different brands may change when they are not completely satisfied with the brand they last purchased, or because they have higher expectations for a different brand. Understanding the reasons why consumers either switch brands or repeatedly buy the same brand is critical if marketers are to effectively utilize the concepts of brand loyalty or repeat purchase behaviour. In the last years, fashion providers go through a satisfaction and quality stage and by now most of the clothing produced is fast undifferentiated.

Brand loyalty together with product involvement is important concepts believed to explain a major proportion of consumer purchase choices. The central premise of the literature

examining the relationship between loyalty and product involvement is that consumers who are more involved with a particular brand, are more committed and hence, more loyal to that brand (Traylor, 1983).

CONCLUSIONS

Customers are the most important asset a company has. In a competitive marketplace (offline) and marketspace (online) where businesses fight for customers, for many companies providing textile products, customer satisfaction is seen as a key differentiator and increasingly has become a core element of business strategy. The quality of the apparel product and the social and ecological added value can also ensure brand loyalty.

Customer satisfaction is a topic that concerns not only specialists in

marketing but also the quality management of a company. As a result of Total Quality Management activities, more and more companies are conducting surveys to measure their customer satisfaction. Companies are very proud of their product's customer satisfaction levels because intuitive logic says the higher the satisfaction level, the better product. As result companies are even advertising survey results.

To achieve customer satisfaction, the company has to respond rapidly to customer needs. This implies short product and service introduction cycles. These can be achieved with customer-driven and process-oriented product development because the resulting simplicity and efficiency greatly reduce the time involved. In respect of this, a well-known successful model is the fast fashion promoted by Zara or H&M.

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